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Choreography of Oblivion

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MS FELICJA Riffi! Riffi! Riffi!

MR DANGER Ri fi fi fi fi fi!

MR DARLING Ri fi fi fi nie fi fi.

MR SAFETY Ri fi ta fi nie fi fi.

MS FATAL Ta fi ta fi nie fi fi.

Agnieszka Jakimiak¹

Weronika Szczawińska's theatre work can be called radically epic first and foremost because, like epic theatre as defined by Walter Benjamin, it is 'theatre of gesture. The gesture is its raw material and its task is the rational utilization of this material.'² It is precisely in gesture that illumination through simplification occurs. 'The gesture has two advantages over the highly deceptive statements and assertions normally made by people and their many-layered and opaque actions', Benjamin continues:

First, the gesture is falsifiable only up to a point; in fact, the more inconspicuous and habitual it is, the more difficult it is to falsify. Second, unlike people's actions and endeavours, it has a definable beginning and a definable end. Indeed, this strict, frame-like, enclosed nature of each moment of an attitude which, after all, is as a whole in a state of living flux, is one of the basic dialectical characteristics of the gesture. This leads to an important conclusion: the more frequently we interrupt someone engaged in an action, the more gestures we obtain. Hence, the interrupting of action is one of the principal concerns of epic theatre.³

These lines also perfectly describe one of the principal strategies of Szczawińska's theatre: to rip individual gestures out of their 'natural' context and combine them into a whole as distinctive as it is fully transparent, communicative and simple. Not in order to construct recognisable theatrical situations, but to assemble gestures into constellations capable of illuminating our times, whether this happens by means of the deconstruction of a classic text (*Balladyna*, her adaptation of the Kama Sutra or to a certain degree *Białe małżeństwo* [*The White Wedding*]) or a text written specifically for performance (as with *Geniusz w golfie* [*Genius in a Turtleneck*]).

The radicalism of Szczawińska's project lies in her refusal to settle for simple operations of the effect of otherness that have become widespread and fossilised in Polish theatre in recent years. Instead, she tries to go further than Brecht, i.e. to build her compositions from the smallest,

1 Agnieszka Jakimiak, *Jak być kochaną*, *Dialog* 2012, 3, p. 122.

2 Walter Benjamin, 'What Is Epic Theatre?' in *Understanding Brecht* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1966).

3 Ibid.

most simplified elements. Thus the epic nature of her theatre is strictly connected with something that Benjamin called ‘making gestures quotable’,⁴ i.e. with their ability to function in changed contexts and dynamic combinations. The quote allows Szczawińska to be one of those who, to use categories applied by Alain Badiou, tries to create Theatre, not remaining content with ‘theatre’. True Theatre – the kind that brings us new theatrical ideas – is in the philosopher’s opinion something extremely rare, most often dominated by ‘theatre’, meaning an endless circling around the same issues, texts and forms.⁵ For quoting gestures is an action that rescues their power, regardless of how played out and predictable the context is from which they are derived. By putting them together, it reveals something for which ‘theatre’, with its pathetic conviction of its own greatness and mission, is only a more or less decorative screen.

Radically epic theatre as produced by Szczawińska has another characteristic recognized by Badiou, which is certainly already present in Brecht. It is able to theateralize theatre criticism, making it an inspiration for new explorations. ‘We can criticize theatre without demanding that it disappear. We can even – and we must – theateralize the criticism of theatre. I stress: theatre has never stopped producing its own criticism’.⁶ This treatment of criticism of the theatre medium also distinguishes Theatre from ‘theatre’, for the latter always believes in a kind of stable and obvious language of theatre, the questioning of which would mean the end of theatre as such.

Additionally, Szczawińska’s productions are most often radically hybrid in terms of their relation to other fields of art, the degree of awareness that theatre today functions more than ever as a hybrid exposed to influences of various channels of communication of both old and new media. In *Jak być kochaną* [*How to Be Loved*], we are dealing with a theatre adaptation created on the basis of a story by Kazimierz Brandys and its film adaptation by Wojciech Has. At the same time, this particular staging tends strongly toward the forms of a radio play, which we will discuss later. In this, it is based on almost ideally meagre means: sparse, minimalist scenography, just a handful of props, an almost exclusive focus on actors and their gestures.⁷ Thus, this is a staging based on a continual juxtaposition of various media, on citations of them and on their mutual translatability, which finds its reflection in the bodies moving on stage.

In his text on epic theatre, Benjamin constructs a correspondence between quoting (*zitieren*) and trembling (*zittern*), making their phonological similarity a key element of his theory of ideas. Materialistically understood ideas, after all:

relate to genuine ‘conditions’; even when they approximate actual events, the tremulousness of their contours still suggests the far greater and more intimate proximity from which they have been wrenched in order to become visible.⁸

4 Ibid.

5 See Alain Badiou, *Rhapsodie pour le théâtre*, Imprimerie Nationale, Paris 1990, p. 35.

6 Alain Badiou, *Éloge du théâtre. Entretien avec Nicolas Truong*, p. 42.

7 On the subject of writing an adaptation on the basis of two non-theatrical sources, see Justyna Jaworska, ‘Kangur jako odklejenie narracji. Rozmowa z Agnieszka Jakimiak’, *Dialog* 2012, 3, p. 127.

8 Benjamin, p. 21

This same method is used in Szczawińska's productions to carry out the embodiment of ideas described by Badiou. Thought can be united with the body, concept with gesture when, while integrating them into an intense trembling, they are made into the sorts of sounds that resonate with one another. The constellation built in this manner is at once strictly abstract and strictly physical, and it flashes during moments of particularly intense interweaving of its elements, demonstrating something that Benjamin called 'dialectic at a standstill',⁹ meaning the moment at which history flashes before us in its heretofore unknown and thus far ruled-out form.

Radically epic theatre can go even further than Brecht in disassembling the plot, which Szczawińska rejects in its entirety, rather than just interrupting it constantly. As Benjamin wrote:

the dialectic which epic theatre sets out to present is not dependent on a sequence of scenes in time; rather, it declares itself in those gestural elements that form the basis of each sequence in time. (These gestural elements are not elemental in the strict sense of the word but only inasmuch as they are simpler than the sequences based upon them.)¹⁰

Creating a constellation rather than a narrative is possible when one operates using units smaller than units of plot. Szczawińska thus does not construct even a stage situation in her productions, creating instead a montage of individual gestures from every interaction between the actors.

How to Be Loved – both the film and the story it is based on – is an effort to present functional mechanisms of the memory of a woman who recalls her difficult war-time experiences years later. Because of her 'fatal attraction' to a colleague from the theatre, an actor, she dedicates the entire period of the German occupation of Poland to hiding him when he is falsely accused of murdering a person with *Volksdeutsch* status, another former colleague from the theatre company. So we can say that in the very plot of *How to Be Loved* we are dealing with theatre, even before it is played out on any stage. But the war gives new roles to the main characters – the members of a single acting company – with an additional highly symbolic dimension: hero, traitor, dedicated caregiver, later actor-collaborator.

Szczawińska in her staging breaks from psychologism – as is worthy of epic theatre – even in a subtle form such as the quasi-Proustian construction of the Brandys story, or the intricately constructed series of reminiscences in the film by Has. Still, it seems peculiar that this break with psychologism is made somehow 'toward the inside'. The illusions of real emotions are not unmasked through the simple distancing of actors from the characters they play. It's difficult to say precisely whether the actors are playing any characters at all. On stage, a drama of memory

9 Ibid., p. 12. On citation as a historiographical method, see Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland, Kevin McLaughlin, (Cambridge, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 476.

10 Ibid.

plays out, transcribed into individual gestures, echoes, actors calling to one another, associations that set off an avalanche of various elements, each following on from the next, etc. Transgression toward the interior seems not so much to invite the audience into someone's memory as to flip upside-down the opposition of internal and external, on which every theatrical psychologism is founded, even the most subtle. Thanks to the construction of a peculiar space in which interiority and exteriority intermingle; the staging seems to deconstruct the psychology of memory, showing that it is de facto a false interiority, made up of chaotic agglomerations and strata of completely external elements. In Szczawińska's staging, the space is something of a Möbius strip, which, unlike a coin, doesn't have two sides, obverse and reverse, but which enables a transition from internal to external without a change of side.

In any case, transgression never respected borders imposed by psychology. In Georges Bataille, after all, internal experience already signified primarily a confrontation with radical exteriority, a mystical ecstasy.¹¹ It is similar in Szczawińska's production: we do not get inside the head of the heroine, but neither are we in the world that surrounds her, in which she is one of the characters (though the drama is supposedly written for specific characters). So the production takes place in a place not found on a map with orientation points indicated by psychological language. This is also because the drama of memory in *How to Be Loved* spreads beyond the interior of the heroine, being a limit-experience in many possible senses of the term.¹²

This type of upending of the spatial divide can be seen clearly in the case of the kangaroo. In the Brandys story, the kangaroo represents digestive problems caused by alcohol. 'A leap in the heart – the great, strong kangaroo! The kangaroo, camels, fleeing fish: nature avenges itself'.¹³ But in the production, it appears in the form of a costumed actor and, additionally, it closes the performance. So it does not only derive from the internal space of the heroine's psyche, it actually dominates the production: it's the kangaroo, in the final scene, that takes down the hanging window frame, carrying it offstage and thus closing the show. This is key, because – as Iwona Kurz has rightly noted – in both the story and the film, we are dealing with a space that is closed off multiple times¹⁴: The heroine develops her monologue in the airplane, she recalls hiding the man in her home, but she also gives evidence of her fixation on this love story, as well as to many tightly closed stories related to the price she has had to pay for her dedication. The narration of the story (like that of the film) – with numerous ellipses, retracings, and allusions – also shows the fundamental closedness experienced by the heroine.

Going beyond this memory structure in Szczawińska's production means that gestures are not intensified, but 'extensified'. In other words, it is not relations to the gesture of the actor's body or sharpness with which these delineate the profile of the character that are of primary importance, but the connection with other gestures moving around the

11 See Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. by Leslie A. Boldt, (SUNY Press, 1998).

12 On the subject of experience-borders in Bataille, see Maurice Blanchot, 'L'expérience-limite', in Blanchot, *L'entretien infini*, Gallimard, Paris 1969, pp. 300–322.

13 Kazimierz Brandys, 'Jak być kochaną', in *Jak być kochaną i inne opowiadania*, (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1970), p. 165.

14 See Iwona Kurz, 'Ofelia, Felicja, NN', *Dialog*, 2012, 3, p. 102.

stage like a sort of free electrons, seeking ever new resonances. If *How to Be Loved*, from first minute to last, seems a production charged with energy and intensity, this is so precisely because of ever new structures and relationships in which a range of gestures interact with each other, assigned to various bodies and shifting their organizational structure. Szczawińska spatializes and stages that which in the story and the film was still a kind of interiority, but in the director's new perspective this appears as a cloud of signs and intensities which can freely intersect with particular bodies and never come to belong permanently to any of them. Thus, this is the initial theatre-idea of this production: memory as choreography.

The space of the production is thus a space of affect, which is no longer a psychological datum of a given subject, but a certain form of intensity of a world torn away from subjectivity. As Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari wrote:

Affects are no longer feelings or affections; they go beyond the strength of those who undergo them. Sensations, percepts, and affects are beings whose validity lies in themselves and exceeds any lived. They could be said to exist in the absence of man because man, as he is caught in stone, on the canvas, or by words, is himself a compound of percepts and affects.¹⁵

Affect here is not unambiguously identifiable or nameable, for it describes a level of experience at which subjects and objects are not yet radically divorced from each other, where interiority and exteriority still intermingle so completely as to become eventually indistinguishable. Szczawińska does not want to simply externalize a particular affect, projecting it from the heroine onto the entire space. Simultaneous to this gesture, affect becomes something trans-human, trans-subjective. At the same time, it may also be connected with a mood that is equally general and difficult to define, formulated thus by the narrator in the Brandys text:

But a quarter of an hour earlier, behind those doors with the inscription 'Damen', I felt that I had been disgracefully defeated. If you can't let out a wild shout of triumph, it means you've lost. I don't know, maybe not just me, maybe everybody, including that gentleman next to me – but what does that matter to me? I'm furious, because for the first time I felt the disgusting lack of pleasure from my existence; it's a fasting, a nothingness full of holes that I have inside me, this urgent indifference. I guess it's clear: I lost. But who beat me?¹⁶

The spatialization of affect thus ends with the revelation of such a fundamental, existential tenor as 'urgent indifference', the true *Stimmung* of a defeated life.

¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze Felix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (London, New York: Verso, 1994).

¹⁶ Brandys, p. 161.

Szczawińska's production doesn't lay out recollections in a linear narration; it doesn't even treat them as content that's ready for use, concentrating instead on the moment of their genesis. It is a montage of moments where something emerges from the abyss of the past, when we stubbornly attempt to escape from it, to catch some fragment, some scrap that can shine fully before us. These moments of searching where the words, images and scenes are 'on the tip of the tongue' are also described by Bergson:

We become conscious of an act sui generis by which we detach ourselves from the present in order to replace ourselves, first in the past in general, then in a certain region of the past – a work of adjustment, something like the focusing of a camera. But our recollection still remains virtual; we simply prepare ourselves to receive it by adopting the appropriate attitude. Little by little it comes into view like a condensing cloud; from the virtual state it passes into the actual¹⁷

These moments of condensation appear rhythmically in Szczawińska's production. The recollections are born out of repetition; they are an echo and a resonance of the present, its alternation. The beginning of the performance already shows how the plot of the story is born, before our eyes, from the rhythm of the language.

MS FATAL No.

MR SAFETY Certainly not.

MR DANGER No, surely not.

MR DARLING By no means.

MS FATAL No means no.

MR DARLING Not so, not so.

MR SAFETY If not, so.

MS FATAL So what if not so.

MR DANGER Take two!

MR DARLING No way.

MS FATAL Have it your way.

MR DANGER If not so.

MR DARLING Not so, not so.

MR SAFETY If not, so.

MR FATAL So what if not so.

¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism* (New York: Zone Books, 1988), p. 56. In this context, it would also be appropriate to refer to Bergson's thoughts on the subject of déjà vu. See Henri Bergson, *Spiritual Energy*, 1919.

MR DANGER Not so, not so, not that.

MR DARLING None of that.

MS FATAL Not that way.

MR DARLING Not so soon.

MR DANGER Not so in-your-face.

MR SAFETY Not so in the face.

MR DARLING Not so soon.

MR DANGER Not so in-your-face.

MR SAFETY Not so in the face.

MR DARLING Not so soon.

MR DANGER Not so in-your-face.

MR SAFETY Not so in the face.

MS FATAL Not so soon not so in the face like so.

MR DANGER Not so.

MR SAFETYA no-no.

MS FATAL No tone.

MR DARLING Off key, off tone.

MS FATALNo more.

MR DANGER No more.

MR DARLING No more will you forget me.

MR DANGER No more will you forget me once you remember my song.

MR SAFETY No more will you forget me, the song won't let you forget.

MS FATAL And you'll miss me so.

MR DARLING Every day.

MR SAFETY Every night.

MR DANGER Every day.

MS FATAL Every night.

MR DARLING Every day.

MR DANGER Every niiiight.

MS FATAL No way.

MR DARLING And it's all not so.

MR SAFETY You won't for...

MR DANGER ... get me.

MR DARLING No, no, no.

MS FATAL So off, off tone, off the note.

MR SAFETY First note.

MR DANGER First no-no.

MS FATAL He hit Peters.

MR SAFETY He hit Peters in the face.

MR DANGER He hit Peters in the face and killed him dead.¹⁸

This moment of the genesis of the plot and the production is simultaneously a game of association, an attempt to call up events out of collective forgetting. This kind of social game usually comprises guessing film titles or well-known sayings. Here, the actors carry out a reconstruction of events, or attempt to describe the scope of their possible unfolding. So the goal is not the staging of some kind of action, or playing it, but showing it in retrospect, *as if it were already a memory*, even before it is sketched out on stage. To understand what the essence of a staging is for Szczawińska, at least in this production, one must refer to the words of the heroine-narrator from the Brandys story, which in fact are not spoken in the play: 'You have to fill in your time, like a frieze, with known scenes, and live, and live, like the Lord God commanded – amen – amen – amen'.¹⁹ The production can also be made into something of a frieze, filling it up only with unknown, distinctive scenes suspended between perception, reminiscence and illusion. The search for recollections, and their refinement with the use of linguistic associations, calls to mind a sort of sculpting in opaque material for the purpose of achieving some kind of more or less understood shape. Szczawińska's production can also be treated in its entirety as a relief sculpture: it's the filling in of a restricted space with dynamic arrangements of gesture and sound in order to call up a resonance between the present of the stage and the past written in the history of *How to Be Loved*.

Intriguingly, other words from the unnamed heroine of the story which don't appear in the script could confirm this sculptural dimension of the production. The woman refers to her weakness for alcohol, and says:

That's when you physically feel your humanity. After a quarter-litre of good alcohol, I feel like a sculpture. Something streamlined, some kind of interpenetrating forms, out of which I am miraculously cast. Of course, in such moments I become monumental – then I quickly crumble.²⁰

From whence comes this statue-hood, this peculiar physicality of humanity, that's characteristic of sculpted statues? To want to be a statue must mean to no longer want to feel, to allow oneself a complete lack of effort to survive. The production, however, shows a certain paradox in

18 Jakimiak, pp. 114–115

19 Brandys, p. 174.

20 Brandys, p. 161.

which the affect of an unsuccessful life, which wants to change it into stone, is intertwined. After all, every statue – as immobile as they are – came about thanks to thousands of small gestures: living, energetic, significant and possibly entirely prosaic. Though the heroine of the story wants to rid herself of memories and freeze in statue-hood, in the production of *How to Be Loved* the medium of the stage, despite everything, constantly recalls or resembles something, calls something up from who knows where, referring each stillness to the liveliness that accompanies it, circling in the space of gestures.

The words of the story's heroine about how she sometimes 'feels like a sculpture' who additionally 'freezes in statue-hood' may also signify her inability to emancipate herself from roles imposed by history and society – or their momentarily intensive correlation. As a statue, she would meld with the identity granted to her, which does not allow her any behaviours other than those that accord with the general profile of her character. And when the heroine wants to free herself from some of the imposed roles (the fully dedicated lover, or the actress-collaborator), she can do so only through the intermediation of others, no less schematic (the bourgeois housewife). So in the end she is always fated to some kind of acting, of playing her gender and related formats of behaviour. Szczawińska's production, by redrawing these roles and converting them into poses, marvellously reflects the performative character of gender identity.

This is not, however, the sole, isolated case in the work of this director, who made her debut with a production of *Jackie*²¹ based on an Elfriede Jelinek text, and later returned several times to this theme (in, for example, *The White Wedding*²²). Szczawińska is one of just a few who has in her work resisted the too-easy, fundamentally 'wishful' vision of the theatricality of gender as that which in itself contains liberation from imposed and sustained roles. In successive productions she seems to penetrate, on the contrary, ever deeper into the mechanisms of oppression and formatting, recognising it in language, for example, or the visual field or, as in *How to Be Loved*, in mechanisms of memory. Interestingly, in this latter production, women's and men's roles remain fluid, sometimes even exaggerated, cut from the pattern of old-fashioned poses, and are often interchanged, as Iwona Kurz rightly noted.²³ This, however, is because one dimension of the drama that the creators of *How to Be Loved* wish to tell in its original stage language is not only the drama of the performative character of gender, but its interactive character. The bitter words of the narrator in the Brandys text could serve as a source of inspiration for them:

There's a saying that a man chooses a woman to give a face and eyes to his defeat. He didn't even choose me; I fell on him like a ginger cat from a roof. So all the more reason for him to avenge himself on me, it's so simple, I was the only thing he saw for years. I was stupid, I didn't understand anything.²⁴

21 Elfriede Jelinek, *Jackie. Śmierć i księżniczka*, trans. Mateusz Borowski and Małgorzata Sugiera, direction and dramaturgy Weronika Szczawińska, Stefana Jaracza Theatre in Olsztyn.

22 Tadeusz Różewicz, *Białe małżeństwo*, dir. Weronika Szczawińska, Stefana Żeromskiego Theatre in Kielce.

23 See Kurz, p. 108.

24 Brandys, p. 159.

The point here is that the woman is not an imitation, but an imitation of a male projection. In other words, she's not only playing the role of her femininity, but also playing something that in and of itself is torn away from her, that does not belong to her. Furthermore, this idea does not fundamentally belong to the man, who attempts to get rid of his feminine aspects, creating his own masculine identity on the basis of this projection. Thus he is also playing a role, playing his masculinity, but this role is constructed slightly differently. Insofar as the woman tries to identify with the masculine projection, taking it, as the heroine of the Brandys text does, as something that can cement their relationship, so the man grounds his identity in the rejection of femininity in himself, and thus pre-emptively blocks his access to the other side of the gender divide. The woman plays playing, while the man plays disavowal. The game of freezing in the poses of statues thus may also be an element of this strange interaction in which both genders determine, in their own way, their mutual foreignness.

Going deeper into tensions between movement and rest in roles played by the characters, Szczawińska's production constructs something that Ewelina Godlewska-Byliniak called 'radio-logy', in reference to the work of Tymoteusz Karpowicz.²⁵ It is voice and radio resonances that constitute the basic material of the montage of actors' gestures. This seems understandable, considering that the relationship of 'Mr and Mrs Konopek', dramatized in a radio series in which the heroine played her 'role of a lifetime', is meant to constitute the antithesis of and a treatment for reminiscences of her real-life relationship with the actor, which was painful and ended catastrophically. For the heroine of Brandys's prose is an anti-Orpheus figure. First, of course, because she is a woman who rescues a man from the hell of war-time oppression, hiding him simultaneously, though, therefore she condemns him to function in underground regions even deeper – almost hellishly deep – than those of the Polish underground state. Second, at the moment the internal monologue takes shape, she is herself an Orpheus, however, seeking not so much to extract her beloved from the depths of oblivion as, on the contrary, to leave him there forever, to lose contact with any trace of his existence.

Perhaps this anti-Orpheus, which Felicja becomes, ultimately attempts to identify with Eurydice, to switch roles with her in order to remain in a completely isolated sphere, to change into a statue, which can never be brought to life. As in Rilke's poem 'Orpheus, Eurydice, Hermes' – inspired, after all, by a relief presenting Orpheus's descent into hell, which the poet had seen in Naples – where Eurydice manages to forget her husband and his plan to save her.

And when suddenly

the god stopped her and, with anguish in his cry,

uttered the words: 'He has turned round' –

25 See Ewelina Godlewska-Byliniak, *Teatr radio-logiczny Tymoteusza Karpowicza* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 2012).

she comprehended nothing and said softly: 'Who?'²⁶

Thus, the heroine of *How to Be Loved* remains trapped between the still reiterated effort at forgetting and the unwilling, still painful remembering, which may encompass even the most strenuous acts of destruction of memory of the beloved. With Orpheus – particularly in Rilke's version – she is connected by yet another element, fundamental for Szczawińska's staging: listening. For Orpheus, unable to avert his gaze to see whether Euridice is actually following him, listens intently to sounds coming from behind him, attempts to turn back his hearing:

his hearing was left behind like a scent.

Sometimes it seemed to him as if it reached

as far as the going of those other two,

who ought to be following this complete ascent.

Then once more it was only the repeated sound of his climb

and the breeze in his mantle behind him.

But he told himself that they were still coming:

said it aloud and heard it die away.

They were still coming, but they were two

fearfully light in their passage. If only he might

turn once more (if looking back

were not the ruin of all his work,

that first had to be accomplished), then he must see them,

the quiet pair, mutely following him²⁷

In the Brandys story, as in the Has film, the heroine still cannot stop listening, each voice is immediately associated with some element of the past and calls up a painful series of memories. Simultaneously, this listening also contains a determined readiness to understand her own history, as if one of the sounds of the past could ring out loudly enough to free her from the oppression in which she remains mired. Meanwhile, Szczawińska's staging here creates yet another crisis, elevating the heroine's listening, full of vacillation, to the rank of radio-logy governing the entire reality of the theatrical process. In this way, the production becomes an investigation into the space of sounds as traces swollen with history; as signs that in close contact seem to explode and refer to a series of their equivalents in the past.

Thus, in this staging, time is also radio-logical time: it can be frozen or repeated; it can even run backwards, as in the scene where the action runs like a tape in reverse. Some lines are repeated quite mechanically,

26 Rainer Maria Rilke, *Orpheus. Eurydice. Hermes*, http://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/German/MoreRilke.htm#_Toc527606970, [accessed 2 Jan. 2015].

27 Ibid.

as if on a scratched LP record or a faulty recording. The actors imitate various kinds of mechanical noises and hisses characteristic of bad radio recordings. Thus, if Szczawińska in this staging is creating a type of relief, it is most definitely a sound relief. Her radically epic theatre is filled with that truly 'convulsive beauty' praised at one time by André Breton, establishing the criteria for modern art. 'The word "convulsive", which I use to describe the only beauty which should concern us, would lose any meaning in my eyes were it to be conceived in motion and not at the exact expiration of this motion', Breton wrote. 'There can be no beauty at all, as far as I am concerned – convulsive beauty – except at the cost of affirming the reciprocal relations linking the object seen in its motion and in its repose'.²⁸ Thus convulsive beauty describes, first and foremost, objects seen from the perspective of their suspension between motion and motionlessness, the dynamic of change and moments of freezing. This is precisely the sort of investigation to which sounds are subjected in Szczawińska's staging, which is why it can be seen as a series of that which Breton described with the famous formulation *explosante-fixe*, or explosive stability.²⁹

The tension between sound that swiftly spreads through space, defeating time, and motionless sound, halted by painful recollection or by an attempt to resist it, constitutes the basic tool for constructing not only the sound relief of the production, but also the dialectic of history. For this dialectic, as Benjamin argued, germinates when temporal relations are interrupted by a sudden collision of times, appearing in the form of an image, even if this is the image of a voice, as in the case of Szczawińska's staging.

It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is purely temporal, the relation of what-has-been to the now is dialectical: not temporal in nature but figural *bildlich*.³⁰

The radio-logy of the presentation of *How to Be Loved* shows the unceasing impasse in which the dialectic at a standstill finds itself between the 'sometime' of the wartime trauma and the 'now' of its ceaseless recollection and of life under its weight. It can even be said that this life no longer belongs exclusively to Felicja; it is not a problem of her individual history, but it becomes a trait of history itself.

According to Benjamin, the primary place where dialectic images meet is language (*Sprache*).³¹ It may be that this image can emerge not only – as the author of *Arcades* foresaw – from the literary montage that cuts against the grain not only of the narration of the sources whose selections it cites, but also of history itself, and also from the voice of the actor carrying out a similar operation on the material he recites. For in the radio-logical universe of *How to Be Loved*, the protagonist is the voice of the heroine of the story and the film, which in the script for the

28 André Breton, *Mad Love*, trans. M.A. Caws (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1987).

29 André Breton, 'Beauty Will Be Convulsive', *Surrealism. Antologia*, trans. Adam Ważyk (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1973), p. 171.

30 http://monoskop.org/images/e/e4/Benjamin_Walter_The_Arcades_Project.pdf p. 463, [accessed 2 January 2015].

31 Ibid.

play was distinguished as Felicja's Voice and separated from Ms Felicja and Ms Fatal. The line of division, the cut that changes the telling into a dialectic image of a voice, does not run here between the heroine and her role as a perfect housewife on the radio show (thanks to which she achieves a certain fame), but between the voice itself and any character with which it could identify.

Thus, in this staging the voice becomes a figure of de-identification. You cannot recognise yourself in it, or rather you cannot permanently distinguish the moment of recognition from the moment of non-recognition. This distinction between the voice and subjective statement also constitutes the object of reflection of and, certainly, also of literary searching for Elfriede Jelinek.

'The voice is actually on the way to speech (*Sprache*). It cannot allow itself to be restrained, for after all it is self-supporting. And in the end, it has to live somewhere. It lies in the gap of the glottis, where it connects to speech, and finally, hand in hand, they exit through the throat and go out into the world. Speech does not have this consciousness, because it is interested only in what it has to say. And the voice speaks. It speaks itself. It does not pronounce anything, and it is not pronounced.'³²

Thus between voice and speech there is a minimal but significant interval, which can be used to construct a dialectic image of the voice. This is why Felicja's Voice states 'Seventy times my voice' at a certain point in the production, to which Ms Felicja replies 'Seventy times not my voice.'³³

This difference between identification and deidentification, constantly renegotiated and remeasured, permits the sculpting, thanks to the voice, of the memory space of the relief that Szczawińska's *How to Be Loved* is considered to be. After all, Ms Felicja repeats and uncountable number of times, at the beginning of the production, the words 'My tape', somehow changing the entire presentation into a set of variations on the audio performance she wanted to present to the world, rather than that in which she is actually appearing.

Her 'phonogenic voice'³⁴ allows her, after many years of humiliation, to achieve popularity, though the heroine in the Brandys story has a certain distance to this. 'The Thursday performances of *Obiady państwa Konopków* [*The Konopeks' Dinners*], a provincial show for elderly couples, is breaking records! There's a buzz',³⁵ she says at one point. And Szczawińska's production appears to fully exploit the possibility of hearing the ambiguity of this buzz. On one hand, it's talking about fame, or at least certain notoriety. But buzz here is also the buzzing of a spinning, chaotic mass of information, perceptions, and gestures, juxtapositions, which are always recalling something. In this production, Felicja's Voice itself is a buzzing, which drowns out her voice. It tries to muffle the persistently returning memories on one hand, to exchange the feeling of defeat into a triumph induced by fame; on the other, it breaks all communication, calling up as something of an intrusive echo successive elements of the re-experienced trauma. In this way, in any case, this buzz

32 Elfriede Jelinek, *Podrażnienia (o! głosie)*, trans. Karolina Bikont, in: Jelinek, *Moja sztuka protestu* (Warsaw: W.A.B., 2012), p. 101.

33 Jakimiak, p. 117.

34 Brandys, p. 178.

35 Brandys, p. 155.

ultimately becomes citable as a banal voice from a provincial radio show, yet still capable of describing wartime humiliations and sacrifices.

In any case, this is only one of many examples of how Szczawińska's production includes the citation and in a certain sense the salvation of various kinds of lesser types of theatricality. Lower-ranked theatricality includes a stewardess in an airplane demonstrating emergency procedures for passengers; aerobics, in which one must carefully, mindlessly follow movements of the trainer; social games in which people make gestures meant to spur the memories of their companions; forms of children's theatre or mnemonics from early school years, in which what is discussed is shown; finally, sacramental song, full of pathos and provincial ceremoniousness. If Ms Felicja is right when she says 'everything we encounter, we call life at the beginning; it's only after a certain time that it turns out to be country',³⁶ then in this production, history is preserved only by provincial Poland and types of theatre attributed to it. In the end, the heroine enters history only as Felicja, an actress from a lousy radio show, and not as Ophelia from *Hamlet*, auditions for which had presented the chronological beginning of her wartime story. Even when she wants to take the weight of heroic sacrifice on her shoulders, she only sings couplets from *Street Melodies* in the Nazi theatre.

As Jakimiak notes in an interview that accompanied publication of her script in *Dialog*, the heroine of the story decides not to take part in history. 'This decision...is conscious, because it signifies a refusal to be written into its official version, refusal to confirm it. Felicja has a separate world, she is always on the side, as if shifted'.³⁷ It appears, however, that the production goes one step further, showing history as a space in which no one truly participates, though it stamps its mark onto the smallest perception, movement, association, not allowing anything to break free from it. In this way, *How to Be Loved* does not constitute a version of a historical story dedicated, as George Didi-Huberman recently did, to people as extras (*peuples figurants*) who, in history as in film, take on secondary roles, though sometimes it is they who save the honour of politics.³⁸

Rather, the model of history demonstrated by Szczawińska concerns the history of figureheads, meaning those who are not even masters of the story of their own actions. They are eternal extras, though it often seems to them that they're playing leading roles. Thanks to them, however, one can see the coexistence of great and lesser history at the level of the individual gesture. Szczawińska does not completely perform a critique of monumental history, she does not satisfy herself with the evermore popular though everless severe form of revisionism. She does not recall forgotten participants in historical events in order to replace them with protagonists known from school lectures. Rather than a simple reversal of symbols in a monumental comparison of historical identity, Szczawińska attempts to show from the bottom the rise of particular vibrations and rhymes between apparently distant sounds; regularities from which can be born any figures of historical experience, even the most brittle. In this, she attempts to show that in every 'country'

36 Jakimiak, p. 117.

37 Jaworska, pp. 128-129.

38 Cf. Georges Didi-Huberman, *Peuples exposés-peuples figurants. L'œil de l'histoire 4*, (Paris: Édition de Minuit, 2012).

greatness and smallness, hero and extra, intermingle with each other constantly, as do banal word associations and partisan songs.

Translated by Nathaniel Espino

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1. *Jackie. Śmierć i księżniczka* by Elfriede Jelinek, trans. by Mateusz Borowski and Małgorzata Sugiera, dir. and dramaturgy Weronika Szczawińska, Stefana Jaracza Theatre in Olsztyn, premiere: 7 June 2008
2. *Białe małżeństwo* by Tadeusz Różewicz, dir. Weronika Szczawińska, Stefana Żeromskiego Theatre in Kielce, premiere: 4 December 2010
3. *Jak być kochaną* by Agnieszka Jakimiak, dir. Weronika Szczawińska, Baltic Dramatyczny Theatre in Koszalinie, premiere: 8 October 2011