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ANNA LĀCIS AMONG THE CREATORS OF THE IDEOLOGICAL CHILDREN'S THEATRE

The legacy of Anna Lācis's practice surpasses her actual achievements in theatre pedagogy but reflects perfectly her intention. Understanding the scale she imagined is crucial to talk about the theatre project of Anna Lācis and Walter Benjamin. Proletarian theatre for children that they'd sketched in the paper from 1928 was not meant to be an extra, afterschool, leisure activity. It was supposed to entirely replace the classical education for all the children of the age from four to fourteen.

To replace *entirely*.

Lācis and Benjamin believed that the existing school system that the children were exposed to restricted their imagination and moulded them according to the interests of the ruling class. They grew to be passive and obedient, unaware of their own needs and unable to execute them. In the "Program for a Proletarian Children's Theater" they've argued that children should grow up without being imposed any external moral instance, on the contrary, they should base on their experiences to develop their own moral code and their own identity. Only this way, they can become the independent thinking, self-aware, critical citizens of the democratic state. What Lācis and Benjamin proposed was an emancipatory theatre for children, in which a responsible aware life would be the only ideology. And it's the emancipatory theatre practices that I'm going to focus on in my paper.

All of the persuasions expressed in the programme had their roots in Lācis's experiences with "besprizorniki", orphaned, wild children she took into her care in Orel, after the 1917 revolution [Lācis 1971]. In her practice she'd discovered that imposing any form of control is counter-productive. To overcome their traumas and unleash their suppressed talents, it's better to let them lead the way. Therefore she would encourage them to improvise and follow their best instincts

The program, originally created – as we think – for the education section of the Karl Liebknecht House (Headquarters of the Communist Party of Germany),

was much more than the commissioning officials (Hanns Eisler and Johannes Becher) expected [Zipes 1973].

Instead of offering a series of tasks and exercises to practice with children, it presented a holistic way of reimagining the approach to education. It was a revolutionary critique of art, education and aesthetics. It was supposed to create an alternative for the rotten bourgeois system that aims to castrate the children of their cultural awareness and critical sense, feeding them a false notion that reality is a cohesive conglomerate of events that all can be explained and comprehended.

Authors of the “Program for proletariat children theater” rejected this notion and postulated to immerse children fully in the reality as it is: mysterious, changeable, full of random, unexplainable phenomena. Children theatre wasn’t supposed to be an entertainment but an environment in which children would experience life in its complexity and they would learn to recognize what they could change in the current state of affairs and what was beyond their power [Lācis and Benjamin 1973].

The radical program was never realized in the form that Benjamin and Lācis proposed. Its theses were ridiculed for their bravado and nebular ambiguity.

However the urge to rethink the education system and the way of introducing the minors into the society returned with a surprising impact. What it needed to prevail was a revolution. And the revolution had indeed happened in 1968.

The wave of moral and political upheaval in Western Germany in 1968 brought new ambitions and goals. Suddenly the pillars of an old system like family and educational system were taken under scrutiny. Women and children were recognized as the victims of the existing institutions, therefore it was mainly their lives that were going to be revolutionized and organised in a reimagined way [Zipes, 1973/1].

On every level of the parliamentary and outer parliamentary opposition there were attempts to reorganise education and daily care system, liberating children from the impact of authoritarian upbringing that promotes repression and competition. Organisations like Action for Women Liberation began to create children collectives. Teachers and guardians would meet regularly to discuss their ideas of introducing more liberal methods into their teaching practice. Institutions like orphanages, borstals and special needs schools would also open to the new visions.

The utopian hopes to enlarge the sphere of freedom granted to children and therefore to transform the future society into a community of active, responsible citizens, were very soon criticized for their elitism. Changing the educational techniques in the still few isolated children centres, mostly for the middle class children, couldn’t bring any permanent, noticeable change on a larger scale.

There was a need for more holistic approach and building an alternative system that would include all the social classes.

For this to happen there was an urge of vision and examples. Thus when, in the spring of 1968 a magazine “alternative” published abstracts from Anna Lācis’s and Walter Benjamin’s “Program for a Proletarian Children’s Theatre”, an very soon The Central Council of Crèches and Kindergartens published also Lācis’s autobiography “Profession – Revolutionary”, they were met with an immediate response. Together with the writings of Otto Rühle, Vera Schmidt, Wilhelm Reich and writers of the Frankfurt School, writing of Lācis and Benjamin had become a basis widely read and discussed [Schedler 1972].

The huge interest in the needs of children was quickly spotted by the theatre managers. Many traditional conservative theatres started to introduce into their repertory children’s plays, usually naïve, unchallenging and aim to rather capitalise on the trend than to bring an actual social change.

But there were also artists who after discovering the writings of Anna Lācis totally changed their practice. In 1969 Helme Ebert and Volkhardt Paris established Kindertheater im Märkischen Viertel. It was placed in a poor, working class apartment block district and among all the groups inspired by Lācis it was the only one that followed her suggestions and ideas almost to the letter [Zipes 1976].

Ebert and Paris didn’t want children to be passive spectators, but equal co-creators of all the theatre’s production. They collaborated with a group of pedagogues and educators, mostly focusing on children eight to eleven years old. They would meet them twice a week to work on their sense of observation, to teach them improvisation techniques and to let them express their needs artistically.

They’ve aimed at developing children’s social class awareness, ability to spot social conflicts, to understand their root and to confront them in their future lives. Workshop participants were encouraged to improvise using the examples from their own every day experience. And, what they would come up with, was usually a series of grim, bitter mini-performances, portraying adults in the darkest colours. The stage in Kindertheater im Märkischen Viertel was so often occupied by figures of drunk fathers, cruel teachers, soulless state officials, negligent, helpless parents. Every scene like this would be concluded with a conversation and looking for a way to overcome the situation.

Ebert and Paris didn’t try to antagonise children, or to turn them against the adults. They were too well aware that kids had to get back to their real hostile environment, where such a rebellious behaviour would be severely punished. Teachers and parents were not the natural allies of children’s struggle to express their opinions and realizing their rights. On the contrary their most immediate

interest would be in sedating and controlling children. Creators of Kindertheater wanted not to provoke the kids to risky behaviour but rather to help them develop self-confidence.

In 1976 Ebert and Paris published a handbook "*Warum Ist Bei Schulzes Krach ?/ Rollenspiel / Politisches Lernen*" [Ebert & Paris 1976] in which they described their experiences and gave useful examples of games to be played with children.

However the most successful German theatre group, that emerged from this emancipatory upheaval, is a theatre still in operation, GRIPS, established in 1968 by a cabaret artist and comedian Volker Ludwig. GRIPS, which means REASON, started as a colourful collective of activists and cabaret artists. Their complex, grotesques plays never presented any ready solutions to the outlined problems. Every scene was supposed to resemble a social experiment and test the ways in which society conditions our behavior. Performers always were trying to check together with the viewers if a problematic situation could be arranged differently, giving the characters and the actors themselves more choices and more space for movement [Zipes 1976]. How did they achieve it?

At the beginning the shows were based on Brecht's *Lerhstucke* and performed in a cabaret style. Adult actors would avoid naturalism or pretending to be younger than they were.

The children portrayed in the shows usually suffered from some form of oppression from the adults, who abused and neglected them or jealously tried to limit their imagination and creativity. The story usually concluded before the happy ending, in a moment when the child protagonists discovered how they could fight for their rights.

That was the most important moment in the GRIPS shows. The so-called "moment of hope". Its introduction was to show the young viewers that the current conditions could be changed. That they had agency, that their actions could influence the state of affairs.

This empowering message came together with encouraging children to solidarity with their peers. It's very easy to take the side of the stronger, the one in power, in this case adults. GRIPS promoted anti-conformist values and allowed children to imagine that they could identify themselves with those who are weaker, disempowered and oppressed. That they could stand by their peers even against their immediate interests.

The most famous of the GRIPS shows would be "Mannomann" (1973) in which a brutal, chauvinist factory worker realizes that his anger and explosive, abusive character is an affect of being mistreated by his employers. In "Belle, Boss

und Bulli” a show from 1995 about bullying in school the complex family situation of the aggressive children is revealed and in “Mugnog Kinder” (1971) kids learn to protect their precious Mugnog box, the source of their creative energy that the suspicious and jealous adults try to destroy.

Also in many other Western countries, emancipatory theatre for children started to grow and take on interesting new forms.

In Denmark, where theatres even before the 1968 revolution had been receiving state support and therefore were able to develop interesting aesthetic ideas, many theatres like Teneeter and Artemis started to rewrite myths and Brother Grimms' tales, exposing children's perspective [Water 2012].

In Pauline Mol's “Princes Iphigenia” the story of Aulide house is being told by Iphigenia who is going to be sacrificed for the greater military good. In Artemis Theatre's “Tell, ah, Tell Medea”, sons of Medea express their fears and hopes. The tales of Grimm brothers, previously presented in their sugarcoated versions, usually to warn the children that they have to stay obedient and fearsome, became an inspiration to the new plays about children able to defeat the fears with the power of their imagination – the power equal to the adult's rationality. New topics were explored, like love, conflicts, family issues, sexuality. Theatre groups of that time not only wanted to reach to the young viewer as to a partner of a serious conversation, but also wanted them to become a co-author of the spectacles themselves. Many of the new theatre groups took up a form of a-hierarchical collectives and tried to erase the line between the audience and the stage. In those theatres, children would often give commands to the actors, who on the basis of improvisation techniques would create spontaneous, one-only spectacles. The results were not always glorious – sometimes the only outcome was chaos, like in a case of STAUT theatre, which very quickly lost all the audience and financial base for its existence.

But for many other theatres this strategy has proven to be a useful tool of problem solving. Children could practice the behavioral patterns for difficult situations – like in a show called “The Secret and the Truth” by Teneeter Theatre. In this show, a child protagonist, learns by accident, that his father has a girlfriend. Children in the audience would collectively decide what to do with such an unwanted secret.

Artists like Pauline Mol, Ad de Bont, Hans van den Boom, Stella de Haag, Liesbath Coltod and Roe Adam, created new texts that directly reflected on everyday matters and environment of children's live. Planting their roots in the writings of Maria Montessori, Janusz Korczak, Alexander Neill and Thomas Gordon, they would propose a new way of looking at childhood as such.

For them it was not anymore a simple transition period, leading up to the actual “main phase of life”. They've suggested to perceive childhood as an autonomous,

unique entity, in which the cognitive abilities of a child are being formed without a need of stimulation, education or control.

It was also a time when the ideas of anti-pedagogy took over, and among those, a concept that reason plays a much lesser role in the decision-making process than emotions or intuition. Therefore, to raise moral, independent adults, all the care and attention should be given to the emotional side.

As a consequence of this approach, the language – associated with reason and rationality – ceased to be the main mean of expression. Artists focused more on creating, non-linear narrations, musical and visual landscapes to stimulate emotions and imagination.

Even though not all the groups established in the 70s made it to our times, significant changes have been made in the theatre system in Denmark. The most interesting change was introducing free theatre vouchers for the high school students. Giving the kids a right to decide what theatre speaks to them. Therefore confronting maybe the biggest taboo in the children theatre – the economic taboo that prevents children from making their own choices.

The importance of the economic taboo shouldn't be underestimated, as it affects many forms of political theater, including the theatre for adults. Because, how to speak about emancipatory, empowering theatre if the very subject of this emancipation is not given the fundamental choice – the choice to buy the ticket?

In the Western world the only reason that professional performances for children have ever started being created – was to get their *parents* back to theatre in December. So called “pantos” – thrilling Christmas time shows were initially a trick that allowed to fill the empty theatres in the holiday season. They had nothing to do with focusing on children's needs and were profit-driven, so free choice or free tickets were out of question [Schedler 1972].

The situation in the Soviet Union was radically different but still not liberating. We know about an amazing infrastructure of the Theatre for Young Viewers – so called TIUZES, that were built after the revolution, mainly as an initiative of Natalia Satz, minister of education Lunacharski and artists and theoreticians like Nikolaj Bachtin. Those theatres preserved every pretense of a perfect system that liberates the children from an economic dependence. The shows were free, the theatre management was obliged to consult a body of children representatives – about every repertory choice they'd made. But we also know that the shows were not only free – they were mandatory. So the element of choice was also absent [Morton 1979].

The situation that Anna Lācis experienced in Orel after the revolution was hard in every imaginable way, but she still managed to escape this taboo, simply

by acting on the outskirts of the economical system and structures of the state theatre.

In this context, Danish experiment with the vouchers, seems like an interesting continuation of her thought. But it was only one of many experiments happening all over the Western Europe.

In Sweden groups like *Unga Klara* (Young Klara), established by Suzanne Osten in the 70s experimented with adapting the theatre structure to children's needs. Osten famously opened the rehearsal process to school youth, to involve children and their feedback at every stage of creation: at the stage of research, devising and rehearsing. She also introduced to her plays difficult topics, like anorexia, divorce, domestic abuse or addiction. For example in her "Medea's children" the entire story is rewritten to focus on the situation between the parents and to raise questions about the consequences of a divorce. Osten wanted to treat her viewers seriously. She wrote: There are only two major principles in children theater. 1. We agree that children are as important as we are. 2. We acknowledge that their cognitive skill equal ours [Walter 2012].

What Osten wanted to achieve, was again, similarly to GRIPS and Lācis, to show children that their current conditions can be changed and to empower them with the tools to enter such struggle.

Now, the question that I usually get talking about those groups is "but did it work"? Did the children really feel empowered, did the theatre influence their lives? The answer is there's no way to know. We also don't know exactly what happened to Anna Lācis's "bespizorniki". How did they find their way in the new system?

There's no research showing the direct impact of theatre of the future life decisions. But there's a recurring model that connects works of Anna Lācis with the experiments of creators of experimental, emancipatory, ideological theatre in the 60s and 70s and today. Lācis respected her child collaborator and accepted that their experiences are unique and equally important as hers.

She didn't try to impose on them any moralising, didactic messages. She allowed them to direct her and suggest the topics of the improvisation. She gave them agency. And it seems that this element of agency – showing children that they have an impact on the world, is the most crucial element of theatre whose ambition is to really reflect child's needs.

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Abstract

The moral and political coup d'état in West Germany in 1968 brought new ambitions and goals. Women and children were recognised as victims of existing institutions. In order to change their lives, a vision and examples were necessary. This is why the summary of the Programme of the Proletarian Children's Theatre by Asja Lācis and Walter Benjamin, which appeared in an alternative magazine, and subsequently Asja Lācis's autobiography, entitled "Profession – Revolutionist", caused an immediate reaction and became a new organisational strategic basis for work with children and youngsters. In these works, newly established children's theatres, such as *Teater im Märkischen Viertel*, *Gruppe Spielumwelt*, *Volker Ludwig's Reichskabarett* (subsequently – *Grips*) and *TAT*, found particular inspiration for anti-authoritarian activity. Volker Ludwig saw a way of bridging theatre and emancipation-oriented

education in Asja Lācis's works. The Grips-Theatre, which has existed for over 40 years, has become the most influential ideological theatre for children. Its different kinds of activities are now in use all over the world. The present paper explores the impact of Asja Lācis's ideas on contemporary children's theatre, demonstrating how concrete her discoveries were in the context of the theatre of her time.

Keywords: *children theatre, Asja Lācis, Walter Benjamin, pedagogy of the oppressed, 68' revolution.*