

Staging Princess Plays

The Postdramatic and the Elfriede Jelinek's *Princess Plays*

Hans-Thies Lehmann explained in the paper called *Postdramatic Theatre, a decade later* that even if his text opened the way to deconstructed new styles and practices in theatre, he does not consider the theatre text a marginalized and opposite way, and that we can find a postdramatic within the text. Of course the present day theatre is more diverse, sometimes it does not start from the text, its ways of performing leads to hybridization between different arts, and the intermediality helps the articulation of different expressive means and organizes different structures for the message or the storytelling. But the deconstructed texts written by postdramatic authors started the extension and the bravure to let go of the classical strategies to represent theatre and to overcome the legacy of the classical narrative structure of representation. The staging of Elfriede Jelinek's dramatic texts, that were major productions of important theatre venues in the 1990s, in Germany and Austria, with director names like Claus Peymann or Frank Castorf, advanced the developments of the postdramatic theatre, that years latter is no more marginal, radical or considered unrecognizable.

The difficulty of giving meaningful body to unstable or dense textual work indicates what Jacques Rancière calls the “*dissensus*”¹. The staging techniques function to construct the representation, to give a body in a four dimensional scenic theatrical situation to texts that are in the depths of language, in a post-structuralist way, disarticulated and turned to themselves in terms of meaning and significance, “[...] ‘to render visible what had not been, and to make heard as speakers those who had been perceived as mere noisy animals . . . creating dissensus.’ (Rancière 2009b: 25).”²

As the texts of Elfriede Jelinek lack a dramatic plot and are resistant to the idea of drama and pretense, of saying the character words, the storytelling of the *Princess Plays*, following the popular cultural knowledge of the stories with princesses, is covered by the author own voice, the expressing of the “[...] well Jelinek known ‘*Sprachflächen*’ (surfaces or planes of language), which consist of montages of playfully and deconstructively manipulated quotes from a wide variety of different spheres and genres, including popular culture, the media, philosophy, poetry

1 Cf.: Lavender, Andy: *Performance in the Twenty-First Century. Theatres of Engagement*. London and New York: Routledge 2016, p. 138: “[...] Dissensus is not a confrontation between interests or opinions. It is the demonstration (manifestation) of a gap in the sensible itself” (Rancière 2010: 37).”

2 Lavender, Andy: *Performance in the Twenty-First Century. Theatres of Engagement*, p. 138.

as well as classical dramatic literature, intermixed with what reads like the author's own 'voice'”³

So the idea of the illusion needs to be transposed and filtered using the vessels of language of the dramatic text of the *Princess Plays*, organizing and prioritizing what needs to convey from its radical textuality. But because the text remains the point of departure, like in the classical theatre, the regime and the universe set up by Jelinek's texts have the main level of significance with the language and its speaking words. Regarding this prioritization, Karen Jürs-Munby talking about the resistant texts of postdramatic theater and the directing of the planes of language that Jelinek proposes, says that it exists a special relationship between the written text and the way in which theatre “beyond drama”⁴, beyond mimesis, “[...] indicates new possible relationships between written texts and “performance texts.”⁵

Unlike much postdramatic theatre, Jelinek does not seem to put an end to the ‘primacy of the text’ (Lehmann 2006 [1999]: 21). While this does not make her plays ‘dramas’, as the order of a dramatic story and plot and a closed-off fictional universe have increasingly disappeared in her writing, the ‘no longer dramatic theatre text’ assumes such an importance that no director can avoid it.⁶

This challenging and conflicting proposal for a written text means that every element of the text can have an aesthetic and artistic meaning and the transposition in another medium needs to preserve the same level of significance.

It is a well-known fact that Jelinek rejects the illusion of the traditional way of making theatre, so she doesn't propose a text that can be played naturalistically with characters saying lines or real life situations.

I don't want to play, and I don't want to see others play, either. I also don't want to get others to play. People shouldn't say things, and pretend they are living. I don't want to see that false unity reflected in the faces of actors: the unity of life. I don't want to see that play of forces of this ‘well-greased muscle’ (Roland Barthes) – the play of language and movement, the so-called

3 Jürs-Munby, Karen: *The Resistant Text in Postdramatic Theatre: Performing Elfriede Jelinek's Sprachflächen*. Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts (2009), 14:1, pp. 46-56, p. 46.

4 Lehmann, Hans-Thies: *Postdramatic Theatre*. Translated by Karen Jürs-Munby. London and New York: Routledge 2006, p. 26.

5 Jürs-Munby, Karen: *The Resistant Text in Postdramatic Theatre: Performing Elfriede Jelinek's Sprachflächen*, p. 47.

6 Jürs-Munby, Karen: *The Resistant Text in Postdramatic Theatre: Performing Elfriede Jelinek's Sprachflächen*, p. 47.

‘expression’ of a well-trained actor. I don’t want voice and movement to fit together. (1983: 102)⁷

So the performers become carries of meaning, because the defamiliarized text is the protagonist and “as she stipulates in another essay on acting that ‘[the actors] ARE the speaking. They do not speak’ (Jelinek 1997: 9)”⁸ opens up to corporality, the actual presence of the bodies, the difference between acting and presence, to the modern idea of the non-movement in dance or the poetic transgression of the avant-garde performance that uses the body presence of performers in a radical way, exposed and fragile.

Jan Lauwers an artist of the postdramatic, works with his company called Needcompany, with just about all mediums: dance, music, visual artwork and uses in his strong, controversial work the paradox between acting and performing, in the same way as the Jelinek’s *Princess Plays* are transparent in redefining the relation of language to the linguistic constructs. The crisis of representation that talks about what is theatre, what means to make-believe and what is real, is a strategy that Lauwers uses because it is so relevant for the world we are living in now, where the frame of representation becomes more difficult to be delineated and where the truth usually is demystified. The Jelinek’s texts are:

[...] part of a larger dramaturgy that dismantles dichotomies between inner and outer theatrical frames, individual and society, the real world and the theatrical world (ibid.). While these strategies of the play make it impossible to decipher an unambiguous ‘message’, it obliquely addresses an increasing theatricalisation of public and private life in the context of nationalist populism and the concomitant ‘death’ of theatre as an independent critical institution.⁹

The self-reflexivity of language as a constant flow of discourse needs to be exploited by differentiating the text from the body, the speaking from the speaking actors, to give voice to the feminine "I"s embedded in the planes of language, controversial in the quest for authenticity, for the real.

7 Jürs-Munby, Karen: *The Resistant Text in Postdramatic Theatre: Performing Elfriede Jelinek's Sprachflächen*, p. 48.

8 Jürs-Munby, Karen: *Elfriede Jelinek and Werner Schwab. Heimat critique and dissections of right wing populism and xenophobia*. Contemporary European Playwrights edited by Maria M. Delgado, Bryce Lease and Dan Rebellato, London and New York: Routledge 2020, pp. 44- 65, p. 46.

9 Jürs-Munby, Karen: *Elfriede Jelinek and Werner Schwab. Heimat critique and dissections of right wing populism and xenophobia*, p. 55.

Princess Plays and gender roles

Birgit Tautz, analyzing the ways in which the mythology of the stories of the Brothers Grimm impacted the culture and popularized the ideals of love and gender roles and the creation of female subjectivity in Early Romanticism, says that the *Princess Plays* “[...] are exposing and recreating a gendered dynamic of culture that assigns distinct places to men and women: men produce, whereas women are receptacles and excluded from the creative process.”¹⁰

But this idea ironically delineated as a starting point, with the well-known popular culture that also Disney commodified and legitimized, creating the fascination for this gender constellation, is not abandoned and gets a deconstructive treatment. Because of the need to destroy this simplifying and damaging mythology, Jelinek abandons the all too familiar story and proposes a complex semantic of gender roles, monologues of mental conceptualized results of the fascination of the princess idea.

The woman as a victim of her own status, submersed under the male fascination, accomplice, excluded or exposed, asleep or wide awake. “Our conceptions of reality, knowledge, truth, politics, ethics, and aesthetics are all effects of sexually specific—and thus far in our history, usually male—bodies, and are all thus implicated in the power structures which feminists have described as patriarchal, the structures which govern relations between the sexes.”¹¹

The feminine I’s are in a binary opposition to the male counterpart, an opposition that represents the foundation for the ideal creation of female subjectivity A feminine subjectivity that is silenced in the myth creation, as “[...] women's voices - crucial as mediators and authenticators - remained unrecognized in what would become Grimms' Fairy Tales.”¹²

“Snow White's and Sleeping Beauty's structural similarities are obvious: the heroines end up being silenced for many years, only to be rescued by a male hero. The prince brings the story to its ultimate conclusion and a happy end in marriage.”¹³

As Jelinek states cited by Beatrice Hanssen: “[On love's] battlefield takes place the bloody, sometimes bloodless annihilation of the feminine, which can never become a subject, but

10 Tautz, Birgit: *A Fairy Tale Reality?: Elfriede Jelinek's Snow White, Sleeping Beauty and the Mythologization of Contemporary Society*. Women in German Yearbook: Feminist Studies in German Literature & Culture 24.1 (2008), pp. 165-184, p. 166.

11 Grosz, Elizabeth: *Volatile Bodies Toward a Corporeal Feminism*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press 1994, p. ix.

12 Tautz, Birgit: *A Fairy Tale Reality?: Elfriede Jelinek's Snow White, Sleeping Beauty and the Mythologization of Contemporary Society*, p. 169.

13 Tautz, Birgit: *A Fairy Tale Reality?: Elfriede Jelinek's Snow White, Sleeping Beauty and the Mythologization of Contemporary Society*, p. 169.

forever must remain an object, subjugated to employment contracts not recognized by society, called marriage.”¹⁴

The idea of salvation through romantic love idealizes the narrative of the victim, and proposes a rewarding outcome for the heroine that needs to remain compassionate and dutiful.

In the *Princess Plays* the heroine has a surface image, she is a princess, “the princess is a pre-stage of femininity, [...] and then of a woman [...] something that’s not yet settled”¹⁵

Snow White, without a body, but as a monster stuffed doll, with the voice coming from off stage, as Jelinek proposes in her stage directions, so without a physical presence, is going against the popular idea of Duty and Beauty, she is interested in the searching of Truth. Her drama is more related to the Other Woman, the stepmother, who poisoned her with an apple. “An apple against apple cheeks! Imagine! A battle of Titanias”¹⁶. The one that would have preferred to be a rug, as ironically Jelinek mentions that the castle floor is pretty cold and needs a rug, she has no alternative: “Then tell me: Why is it that I still am and I am not nothing, as it was the plan of my stepmother? [...] I think that is because I had no other alternative but to be just me, just for myself.”¹⁷

In other words, she could not be de-substantiated or acknowledged as a corporeal presence besides her beauty, so she is now in the forest, in the wilderness, searching for the Truth.

But there is no sympathy for this heroine, in her quest for truth, she meets the Hunter, her death, as the final truth. The nothing less comes after acute accumulations of satirical punchlines on life, meaning, truth and beauty, the significance of existence as a feminine “I”, the dwarfs seen as little men Snow White needs to be afraid of, because her mother told her so, and in the end the absolute violence, death, because Time with its uncontrollable flow is another category of immanence and “[...] because beauty, on the other hand, fears nothing more than time”¹⁸

In *Sleeping Beauty*, the idea of binary, the Prince and the Princess, perpetuates the myth of love as salvation, of the feminine subjectivation only as a recognition of the male counterpart. Her coming into existence is determined by the kiss, “I hoped to finally be able to live because of him [...] without him I was nothing but an empty vessel and only he was to fulfill me, and only with love”¹⁹.

14 Hanssen, Beatrice: *Elfriede Jelinek's Language of Violence*. New German Critique, 68 (1996), pp. 79–112, p. 81.

15 Jelinek, Elfriede: *I Am a Trümmerfrau of Language*. *Elfriede Jelinek, Interviewed by Gitta Honegger*. Theater 1 May 2006, 36 (2), pp. 20–37, p. 25.

16 Jelinek, Elfriede : *Princess Plays: Snow White*. Translated by Gitta Honegger. Theater 1 May 2006, 36 (2), pp. 38–45, p. 41.

17 Jelinek, Elfriede: *Princess Plays: Snow White*, p. 42.

18 Jelinek, Elfriede: *Princess Plays: Snow White*, p. 45..

19 Jelinek, Elfriede : *Princess Plays: Sleeping Beauty*. Translated by Gitta Honegger. Theater 1 May 2006, 36 (2): pp. 46–51, p. 48

The unseparated love, the lovers become one, with erotic intensity, in the end they get the costumes of their category of gender, hers is a vulva and for him a penis and start to perform a sex act, reminding of the animal sex as an instinctual drive, as part of the natural cycle of life. “‘If there’s one thing that animals don’t need more information on, it’s sex. That’s because sex holds no mystery.’ (Freedman 1977: 9)”²⁰

The idea of orgasmic pleasure known as the “little death” is humorously referenced by Jelinek: “But now we at least managed to separate ourselves from our bodies and not be dead after all. [...] The comparison will make you feel very safe in the city traffic when you get here.”²¹

Without being dramatical characters, the male and female roles are signifiers, surfaces for the Freudian jokes, the punchlines, the irony and the humor, monologues of hysterical acts trying to dismantle the affected and much credited popular emphasis of what the gender roles should be or what we think they are.

How to stage the plays?

The resisting writing of Jelinek’s texts refers to the non-existing psychological depths that can be disembedded in a performance by constructing theatrical situations that can show emotions and behaviors, specific to humans, and by which mimesis can offer catharsis, releasing strong and repressed emotions.

With the exception of devices for having written words on stage – from written scene indications to multimedia presentations of text in high-tech theatre – the drama as a literary linguistic reality all but vanishes and makes room for ‘something completely different’: for the paralinguistic dimension, for voices and intonation, rhythm, speed and slowness of speech, sexual and gendered auditive information, gesture and the expressivity of body language in general. (Lehmann 2007: 37; see also Lehmann 2006: 145)²²

Staging means scenography, costumes, light design, sound effects, actors or performers and a series of decisions that completely take the authorship from the literary persona by producing a new, different setting, distinctive in its theatrical reality. And Jelinek’s stage directions that leave total freedom to directors, can open space to almost anything. But what I find interesting is that all the productions I read about, based on her plays, continue to contain the autonomy of

20 Grosz, Elizabeth: *Animal sex. Libido as desire and death*. Sexy Bodies, The strange carnalities of feminism edited by Elizabeth Grosz and Elspeth Probyn, London and New York: 1995, pp: 278- 299, p. 278

21 Jelinek, Elfriede : *Princess Plays: Sleeping Beauty*, p.51.

22 Jürs-Munby, Karen: *Text Exposed: Displayed texts as players onstage in contemporary theatre*, Studies in Theatre and Performance (2010), 30:1, pp. 101-114, p. 102.

the estrangement that is reflected by the plays, the abstractions that cause bewilderment but also meaning.

As theatre director on transposing the play for the stage, analyzing the text can lead to ideas and observations. For example, the concept of time in *Snow White* can be a route to use an older beautiful actress to symbolize the part. Or the discussion about fashion, completely incompatible with the forest, can move the scenography in an imaginary space of a fashion photography studio or a fashion atelier.

The modern concepts of surveillance, reality TV, documentary, fabrication, celebrity, influencers are very close to the “*irruption of the real*”²³ that Lehmann talks about in *Postdramatic Theatre*, and can function as a background, for the ways in which Jelinek uses her rhetorical techniques.

Also the theatrical representation needs to derive from the presence of the actors, being there on stage, recognized as a group in an act of performance. In a surprising way Jelinek is leading to this idea with the Hunter humorously playing the Truth, saying in *Snow White* that: “I can perform it too. So that you and even I myself will believe that I am the Truth.”²⁴

Actors starting by saying: we will perform tonight this play that talks about female subjectivity and gender roles, breaking up the convention or competing between them to take the stage is a way of making the ideas that need to be conveyed visible and resonate with Jelinek’s joyful play of words.

Tim Etchells and his company Forced Entertainment uses a lot in their productions this doubleness, the different levels of play and he says that: “Being present is always a kind of construction. Perhaps we could think of presence as something that happens when one attempts to do something, and whilst attempting to do that thing you become visible; visible in not quite succeeding in doing it, visible through the cracks or the gaps.”²⁵

So there is a parallel story of the performers, being present and trying to make light into the language and the Freudian slips and understandings from the *Princess Plays*, taking up their role by exaggerating the characteristics that we know about the character’s costumes or persona. Then another idea of staging comes from the lack of corporeality Jelinek proposes and the correlation to the famous quote of Martha Graham “*The body never lies*”²⁶. The monstrous

23 Lehmann, Hans-Thies: *Postdramatic Theatre*, p. 99.

24 Jelinek, Elfriede: *Princess Plays: Snow White*, p. 42.

25 Etchells, Tim: *Looking back A conversation about presence*, 2006. Interview Tim Etchells, Gabriella Giannachi and Nick Kaye. *Archaeologies of presence. Art, performance and the persistence of being*, edited by Gabriella Giannachi, Nick Kaye and Michael Shanks. London and New York: Routledge 2012, pp. 183-194, pp. 184-185.

26 Martha Graham Quotes. BrainyQuote.com, BrainyMedia Inc, 2022.

https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/martha_graham_380363, accessed July 31, 2022

characters The Hunter, Snow White, The Prince and the Sleeping Princes are enfleshments of the fascination with ideals, and the fluidity of the surfaces of language can be choreographed emotionally and aesthetically by a more abstract type of representation, like dance.

The flesh of lips that say the words, or different parts of the body, can also be magnified with video projections adding a depersonalization of the body image.

In the staging of the Princess Plays, the search for identity is a subject that challenges a provocative fragmentation of the edges of sexuality, and the perfect scenery for this performing search is the landscape of the neoliberalist way of life of the present.