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# Hidden Children: A Short Study on Theatrical Absence

Natascha Siouzouli<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** In 2012, I attended the performance *Max und Moritz. Eine Winterreise* performed by young inmates of the Youth Detention Centre, Berlin. The performance was based on the theatre play *The Stones* by T. Lycos and S. Nanstou (premiered in 1996) enriched with various text fragments (from W. Busch's *Max und Moritz*, published in 1865; E. Jelinek's *Winterreise*, 2011, amongst others) and rap songs (written by the participants with the assistance of J. Hedtke using samples of F. Schubert's *Winterreise*). In 2015, I attended the performance *Evros Walk Water – A Cage Re-enactment* devised and realized by Rimini Protokoll. This performance was based on the stories of young asylum seekers and/or unaccompanied minors stranded in Athens, Greece. These youngsters participated in the play in a rather peculiar way: the audience could hear their voices through headphones telling their stories or whatever they wanted to say and follow their instructions in order for the performance to take place through the actions of the spectators. Their presence and absence were marked by their voices. The two performances demonstrate similarities, the most important and troubling of which is the fact that the protagonists are children/ young adults. The paper seeks to examine in detail the ways in which the performances display the presence/ the absence of (vulnerable) minors and/ or their stories, as well as the dilemmas resulting from these particular representations for the participating audiences.

**Keywords:** presence, absence, minors on stage, aesthetics and ethics

## 1. Introduction: Children on Stage

Performances, in which children appear, are challenging in many ways: they render the spectacle charming since children are, more often than not, cute and likeable and can attract the focus on them (which means that the spectator neglects other parts of the spectacle); they also stimulate a sort of anticipation for a surprising moment, a moment

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<sup>1</sup> University of the Peloponnese, Tripoli, Greece.

which denies the staging directions, a moment that introduces chaos in the plan; they can lastly inflame reflections by the perceiving audience on the ethical ramifications of utilizing children on stage.<sup>2</sup> Performances, in which children appear, exceed the situation of a performance in that they immediately engage their audience in feelings, thoughts and reactions which emanate from their sheer presence, denoting every action and every appearance in the performance. My claim, in this sense, is that children on stage initiate a perception decisively shaped by elements that are (radically) different from those that play a role in a performance carried out by professional artists.

In what follows, I will describe and analyze two productions, in which children and/or young adults are the protagonists. With this I mean that there are no adults on stage – the performances are carried out only by children. The productions I am discussing manifest a crucial difference, which, when interpreted, turns out to be a disturbing similarity: The older one (2012) takes place in a prison and the young inmates present a play in front of an audience coming from outside. The newer one (2015) takes place in a typical theatre but lacks all their protagonists. The prison-performance turns the attention of the audience onto the present bodies of the children, the theatre-performance disperses the attention of the audience, who permanently seek the (absent) young protagonists. Both presence and absence of the children send the audience into a journey of unearthing lives, histories, biographies, configurations etc. of individuals that are, in a sense, not in the power of the adults to unearth. We, as audience, oscillate between the desire to expose and find out more, and a resisting space – this resisting space is the space of the children that present themselves in front of us in a theatrical setting, which we want to enter but at the same time are not allowed to (and we know it). The positioning of the spectator is the most interesting part in these performances and this positioning I am going to explore further. In this context, I will combine the notion of “presence” as explored mainly by theatre theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte with the notion of “absence” as coined by philosopher Jacques Derrida. From this approach, I expect hidden dimensions of both relevant notions to come to light.

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<sup>2</sup> I am referring here to public performances that are presented before a wider, paying audience.

## 2. Children in Prison and Adults Trapped *Max und Moritz. Eine Winterreise, JSA Berlin, 2012*

Entering the premises of the Youth Detention Centre of Berlin suggests a relaxed and friendly atmosphere. In radical opposition to the men jail in Berlin-Tegel, where I was also able to attend performances and where the entry resembled a kind of lengthy and complex ‘ritual’, here, everyone is engaged to make the audience feel welcome and as if we were *at home*: No annoyed looks, no harsh rules, no standing in lines, no examination and above all a cheerful, pleasant and very proud director who introduces the performance emphasizing the kindness of the prison authorities which allow such important events.<sup>3</sup>

We are going to watch *Max und Moritz. Eine Winterreise*, a performance resulting from a long project, which *aufBruch* initiated and carried out in the youth detention centre. *aufBruch* is an initiative by artists and cultural workers in Berlin, which has been working in various Berlin and Brandenburg prisons for a very long time and with sincere interest.<sup>4</sup> Here, the team worked with a professional musician, Jörn Hedtke, and eleven (11) performers, all of them younger inmates of this particular prison. They used the text *The Stones* by Tom Lycos and Stefo Nanstou as a canvas which the participants complemented with original rap songs and other text fragments. The play is based on a true incident, in which two teenage boys killed a motorcycle driver by throwing stones from a bridge over a road in Australia. Alongside, the performance uses extensive excerpts from Wilhelm Busch’ *Max und Moritz*, short stories for children, in which two very naughty boys, Max and Moritz, engage in all kinds of terrible acts and have a cruel and somewhat absurd ending. The songs are loosely based on Franz Schubert’s *Winterreise*, other texts like Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* and Elfriede Jelinek’s *Winterreise* are also in parts included in the dramaturgy of the performance, which is mainly centered around the *Stones*-text, the *Max and Moritz*-stories and the songs, though.<sup>5</sup>

I enter the theatre space as a routinier since I have watched many performances in prisons. “What can go wrong here?”, I am asking myself. I can tell you right now, many things went “wrong” in a very

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<sup>3</sup> I have no intention to criticize the effort made by the authorities in order to facilitate such projects and events, nor reduce their importance for the inmates. I very much criticize though the delusional situation constructed around the public performance for the *ignorant* audience coming from outside.

<sup>4</sup> Find more information here: [https://www.gefaengnistheater.de/home\\_en.html](https://www.gefaengnistheater.de/home_en.html) (retrieved on 2024-07-24).

<sup>5</sup> I already have written about the performance in another context: Warstat et al. (108-112).

interesting, awful, and wonderful way. Some thoughts in advance: The spectator, who is used to go to the theatre, surely awaits exceptional moments in a performance, which are able to shake them to the core; which unsettle them in the sense that seems impossible to return to a familiar normality; which leave them clueless and wondering about their feelings and thoughts; which makes answers sheer impossible. No performance is able to plan those kinds of moments. The spectator experiences such moments without really knowing if they were initiated by the performance or not.<sup>6</sup> As an analyzing spectator, though, one has to justify why and how they felt this or that way, why they thought this or that. I want to do exactly this: I want to describe how I felt and why I think this happened; I want to explore why this performance still haunts me more than ten years later. My hypothesis is that the haunting derives from the fact that this particular performance managed to radically question the place and power of the adult spectator. It denied answering any question posed by the spectator generating a painful void for them to fill somehow. The *prevailing absence* of this performance imposed itself gradually and almost quietly without allowing the spectator to fully grasp and rationalize what happened and why.

Dramaturgy of the performance (I): The team constructed the spectacle and arranged their materials as a sort of puzzle offered to the spectator to play. It was not obvious when a part of the *Stones*-text – the canvas-text – was performed. Not only because the theatre play was shed to pieces and spread throughout the show, but also because there were no discernible actors that played this or that role. The performers played roles interchangeably and it was impossible to identify a specific role with a specific performer. The songs and the *Max und Moritz*-stories were mostly performed by more than one performer. The performance utilized in a very consistent manner choirs by dividing the performers into two groups and assigning specific texts to the one and/or the other.

What we know (I): Basically, we – and by we, I mean the spectators – know nothing. We know that the youth detention centres in Germany accommodate delinquents from 14 to 18/ 21 years, so we can probably guess the ages of the performers. We do not know their names – they appear in the programme with their or a chosen first name, as a group. We do not know who is who. The performers lack individuality – they present themselves as an ensemble, that, nevertheless, does not eradicate their particular characteristics. The specific bodies, the specific voices and enunciations, the specific

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<sup>6</sup> On the emergence of experiences in theatre see for example: Fischer-Lichte (138ff).

movements and gestures are emphatically there, but we cannot associate them with a name, an individuality, a subject.

What we perceive (I): The spectators discern the performers through their bodily appearance and expression: There is, for example, one performer with a broken arm, and I am focusing on the way they play and on the way the others help them act. There are (few) performers who seem to speak German fluently and others who seem to have difficulties with it. The spectator watches all of them engage with rather difficult texts and cannot but feel moved.<sup>7</sup> A very particular element affects me in a profound way: There is one performer, who seems to know every single line of the texts/ songs, even if they are not theirs to voice – the performer moves their lips whispering the words of all the others. This deep engagement in the common task by a child – simply identified as a delinquent otherwise –, the sheer antithesis between what is and what is acted out introduces a chasm of great impact into the perception.

Dramaturgy of the performance (II): The puzzle the performance presented the audience with developed in a way that it increased gradually tension and affects, while it enabled – if not, forced – associations, thoughts, and connotations. The *Stones*-text was interrupted in crucial moments in order for a *Max und Moritz*-story to be presented. It was not possible to make out a textual coherence, instead, the audience was served with short pieces of the text, which only manifested the cruelty of the story at the very end. The associations between the *Stones*-text, which was based on a true incident, and the absurd stories of *Max und Moritz* twisted the situation in that it opposed a *true story*, ending with the very real imprisonment of the two children, with the naughtiness of kids in fairytales – who end up transformed into corn and eaten by ducks. The playful cruelty of the old stories juxtaposed the cruel reality of the *naughty kids* of today. In both cases, adults rule their world. The performance makes a case by suggesting that the absurdity of the punishment of Max and Moritz corresponds to the irrationality of the punishment *in a rational world*. This happens because the children perceive of the world in ways that are radically different from adult logic.

What we know (II): As the performance/ puzzle develops, the audience realizes that there are many more things that they do not

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<sup>7</sup> Stereotypical assumptions play certainly some role here and I am not denying it. I would like to focus on the engagement, though: the children are utterly concerned with being an essential part of the performance which can only function if everyone is utterly engaged!

know: they do not know the names and ages of the performers and they cannot match a presence to a name, nor a presence to a role; they also do not know why and for how long the children/ performers do time. We are not even sure if the names in the programme correspond to the performers, if they are random names and/ or if someone was replaced etc. Essentially, we know nothing about the persons playing, speaking, singing, dancing for us. We are asked to participate in a performance without having the clues.

What we perceive (II): And here is where this particular event becomes genius – because the audience does not know and it cannot find out, it is forced to mobilize other apparatuses of perception. Every rational process bumps into missing parts which are replaced by affects, feelings and imagination: What if the performers play their own story? What if they also committed murder? What if they are innocently accused? These questions may seem naïve, but I would suggest that the performance plays with this kind of somewhat stereotypic questions which mobilize the imagination of the *innocent spectator*. And then the child-factor enters the stage: The spectator realizes – also in process, I would claim – that they have children before them; they watch them make efforts, play, speak, sing, and dance for the adult audience and ask themselves: What if they were our children? What if they made a mistake and/ or just wanted to be naughty for a while? Someone else judged and put them in prison, but I want to hug and forgive them, I want to reassure them that *Max und Moritz* is the way to look at the world, but I am not allowed, I do not have the power to do that.

Gradually the dead-end situation manifests itself in a painful manner. The children we have before us are practically invisible – they present themselves in a play we are watching but that does not serve their visibility, it rather enhances their absence: these no-name children are enclosed in a *non-place* and this life phase must vanish. The children/ performers are going to disappear – for the public gaze – after four performances (they are only allowed to four shows because of the complex logistics); the essential characteristic of the performance being ephemeral and in a process of vanishing doubles here through the absolute vanishing of its participants. But this disappearance is going to haunt the spectator, because it managed to trap them in a condition that questions their place/ subjectivity to the core.

The spectator is trapped in an aporia which forces them to give up their power in order for them to act *as* spectator – which is a rather unfamiliar and paradox position for them. In order to engage with this specific spectacle, they have to abandon familiar patterns and dive into

a performance that demands other perception patterns and guarantees nothing. The simplicity of the finished puzzle – in the sense that it is not rocket science to realize what has been presented, in the end –, instead of introducing a sort of sublation, makes the inner ambivalences even more prominent: I myself felt an increasing physical reaction which started as an overall unease and ended up in a severe headache and hot flashes. I am not suggesting that this was the general outcome of the performance, it is not in my power to claim that. I am claiming however that the performance offered the conditions for such an experience to occur.

### **3. Vanished Children and Wandering Adults**

#### ***Evros Walk Water – A Cage Re-enactment, Deutsches Theater, Berlin, 2015***

*A Journey in the Winter (Eine Winterreise)* was the title of the performance referred to above; another journey – as subject but also as form of the performance – is displayed in the second production I am going to discuss, leading the actors to disappearance and the spectators to action. I am quoting Rimini Protokoll/ Daniel Wetzl here, who initiated the show and very accurately describe the situation:

In 1960 John Cage stood on the set of the television show *I've Got a Secret* in the middle of an obstacle course that featured items all somehow connected to the theme of water and waves, and all familiar to an American household back then – from a rubber duck to a piano. Its title: WATER WALK. Duration: Three Minutes.

In a small house in the centre of Athens live fifteen boys who have survived journeys on foot from Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, the journey by boat to Greece, and the brutal conditions of Greek detention camps. They currently attend school and are busy with their first girlfriends and computer games. They do not speak to each other about the traumas they have experienced. In EVROS WALK WATER Daniel Wetzl (Rimini Protokoll) has collaborated with the boys in Athens to develop a stage set and audio drama in which a three-minute version of WATER WALK is performed six times. The original instruments and sounds have been replaced by the boys' stories as they talk about their reasons for fleeing their home countries, their journey to Europe, and their daily life in Athens. In between, they play the three-minute concert six times – or rather, they have it played: because the boys are prevented by travel regulations from being present on stage, the audience takes their place, listens to their stories at individual audio stations where the instruments are also positioned, and then, following the boys' instructions, performs the concert. Special

headphones allow to clearly hear all sounds that are produced in the space as well.

I watched the performance in Berlin, in 2015, in a rather small sort of Black-Box-space. Every show accommodated a small number of spectators who were assigned tasks in order for the performance to happen. Essentially, there were no spectators in the performance since all of the audience had to act: we moved around, took specific positions, and performed actions according to the instructions coming from the headphones we wore. Other than that, we were asked mainly to listen and hear and much less to engage our gazes. It was difficult if not impossible to refuse to participate because if so, one would ruin the performance for everyone else and who wants to be this person?

On stage we encounter several tools and instruments for us to handle in order to reproduce the Cage-performance as reenacted by the boys and as indicated: plastic ducks and fish, a xylophone, a hair dryer, a plastic gun toy, one or more whistles, a vase with flowers, a watering can etc. In the middle of the stage dominates a lifeboat filled with water, which replaces the bathtub in Cage's performance and refers to the lifeboats used by migrants in order to pass the Evros river leading from Turkey to Greece. The dramaturgy of the performance demands from its audience to stand or sit still and listen to the voices of the absent protagonists telling parts of their story, describing their present, how they feel left alone missing their parents and families, how they built new relationships, how they manage to live their lives as minors in a foreign and sometimes hostile environment. When it is time to change places, the concert intervenes: the spectators follow the instructions in their ears and have to play a part of the concert. As all of the spectators perform their part simultaneously and somehow in accordance with the others, albeit not hearing the same instructions, the result is a very interesting soundscape which replaces one author(ity) (John Cage) through many (voices) (the protagonists, the spectators).

The performance is, thus, a reenactment of a reenactment of lost originals: There exists a recording of the performance by John Cage which is disturbing because the image is bad, and the sound does not really correspond to what is performed. There has been, allegedly, a first reenactment by the boys in Athens, which we, in Berlin, never get to experience. And there is the somewhat awkward second reenactment by us, the spectators in Berlin, in which we are also partly involved.<sup>8</sup> Authorship of the performance is dismantled and distributed to many

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<sup>8</sup> The spectators do not listen to all of the stories and only perform parts of the concert.



subjects – surely, a democratic gesture, but a gesture which came with a price for the spectators to pay.

Something sinister happens in this performance, which emphasizes the absence of the ‘sender’ – the boys who are supposed to be the protagonists of the performance – but also results in the disappearance of the ‘addressee’, since, strictly speaking, there is no audience at the performance. All the spectators have to participate; no one escapes their duty to perform. Jacques Derrida, who has extensively written on the circumstances of representation,<sup>9</sup> reflects upon his status as an author or, more generally, as an ‘absent sender’:

To write [i.e., create, my addition] is to produce a mark that will constitute a sort of machine which is productive in turn, and which my future disappearance will not, in principle, hinder in its functioning, offering things and itself to be read [i.e., received, my addition] and to be rewritten [i.e., reenacted, my addition]. (Derrida 8)

What I would like to emphasize with this quote and in relation to the performance is the radical, gaping absence that emerges and prevails through its specific dramaturgy and practice. The more the audience engaged in performing, the more drastically, painfully, and all-encompassing the absence appeared – and this had much to do with the actual protagonists of the performance, the young refugees with their very real and at the same time very *surreal* stories. As the audience stepped into the act of tracing the ‘original’ performance, its members were increasingly made aware of the impotence and the impossibility of reenactment – but, as a matter of fact, of what exactly? The presence of the boys could not be any remoter, in all possible senses,<sup>10</sup> and the audience, functioning as actors, performed through their reenactment in the most spectacular way what Derrida (9) calls ‘the force of rupture’. This means that every action and every gesture continued to deepen the gap between the audience’s engagement with the reenactment and the point of reference that it was supposed to be approaching.

This force of rupture is tied to the spacing (*espacement*) that constitutes the written sign [the repeating act/ the iteration, my

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<sup>9</sup> On the intricacies of representation in performance see also Siouzouli (29-46).

<sup>10</sup> With this I mean that the paying audience in Berlin had most probably very little to do with the specific situation of the protagonists they had to ‘represent’. Sure we can squeeze some ducks and produce sound, but how is this act related to the acts of the absent boys and their creating process? Let alone realizing their exceptional biographies.

addition]: spacing that separates it from other elements of the internal contextual chain, but also from all forms of present reference, objective or subjective. This spacing is not the simple negativity of a lacuna but rather the emergence of the mark. (Derrida 9-10)

The spectators, by wandering around in the space of the performance and in the stories of its protagonists, produced distance from what they hoped to approach. The remoteness of the hidden children and their lives became increasingly clear and painful because the spectators came to realize that the replacement of the actual actors was not a joyful game to play but the formation of the conscience of what is all about: It is not about ‘walking in their shoes’ and compensating their absence; it is about acknowledging the impossibility of closing the gap between them and us and permitting the abyss to take over.

#### **4. *Journey at a Standstill – An Anti-Epilogue***

The performance *Max und Moritz. Eine Winterreise* ended in a memorable way: The performers, split into two groups, spoke unisono and interchangeably the first part of the first chapter of Elfriede Jelinek’s *Winterreise*. The text is difficult in many ways and it was painfully moving to watch the imprisoned youngsters enunciating brilliantly; the text is deeply moving itself since it is written in first person singular – there is an “I” speaking, which is not unusual in Jelinek’s texts – utilizing images and words from Müller’s/ Schubert’s *Winterreise* to reflect on the ephemerality of the world, within which the “I” is always out of time, *untimely*. The deep pain that results from the collision between the world flying by and the “I” that is never in-sync is what the text brings forth.

The “I” is voiced by multiple subjects on stage, it is a collective “I”. It reflects upon the collective “I” of the spectators whose subjectivity and their status as spectators is radically undermined and fragmented. In that the spectators have to come to terms with all these multiple and centrifugal impulses, which provoke an unruly movement of their imagination, they get displaced spatially and temporarily: the enclosed space of the prison becomes an unlimited territory to explore encompassing all kinds of temporalities. Imagination and affects resulting from the specific situation of the performance force an experience that is not rational. Instead, it takes the form of an adventure, or a struggle, carried out by the spectators whose ‘natural place’ is to control the situation. The constant confrontation with the prevailing absence makes this struggle painful – but at the same time enticing and desirable.

The situation deepens and becomes even more challenging in the second performance. Here, the absence of the ‘senders’ (Derrida) is literal, and the ‘addressees’ assume the responsibility to ‘represent’ them. As we saw, this representation is aesthetically impossible and ethically questionable – this of course is the tool of the performance to dismantle the power of the adult spectator and leave them wondering and helpless. Obviously, this would be then the proper way to experience the absence of the powerless, by ‘re-enacting’ and experiencing the own powerlessness.

In 2011, Elfriede Jelinek was awarded the renowned Mülheimer Dramatikerpreis (Mülheim Playwriting Prize) for her piece *Winterreise* (*A Journey in the Winter*). On this occasion and because she was not able to attend the ceremony in person, she wrote a text expressing her gratitude for the prize that was read out during the event. In this amazing text, Jelinek draws upon her inability to attend the ceremony in order to address a ‘journey at a standstill’ (‘Reise im Stillstand’), a phrase she uses to describe her writing. She wonders if this standstill is a homecoming or the (im)possibility of leaving the place one calls home. She contends that, although movement exists in many forms (the world, the wind, the movement of smoke), the human condition is this standstill.

[...] In my winter journey the landscape passes by the woman speaking here. A woman is speaking in a standstill. [...] What do you experience in the standstill? That which you can see all around from where you are standing? That which you already know? [...] Is the standstill already a homecoming? [...] I think, especially in this standstill from which I am writing, that there are perhaps roots that keep me on the spot, the same ones that everyone notices when they try to flee from a place that they call home. [...] Somebody is standing there, yes, I am standing there, too, and the world passes by, fate passes by someone maladroit [...]. [Y]ou have to turn the fact that you cannot go away into your own fate, and you have to stretch out that moment, doesn’t matter, you have plenty of time, because where others walk, you stand still, and in the passive movement, in this doing-nothing, the water works and melts everything under you away. Everything goes, but not you. You live close by, and this closeness is just you, who is being moved around like wind or smoke, without being able to move. [...] I am describing the journey in standstill. But everything is standstill, even when people seem to be moving. Behind them looms the darkness, like stage scenery that they cannot escape. I have tried to put my own standstill into words of wandering [...]. (Trnsl. Natascha Siouzouli and Lydia J. White)

“...in this doing-nothing, the water works and melts everything under you away.”: One stands on ‘thin ice’ which eventually threatens to pull one under and make them disappear. This fragment can be read in various ways: it could be understood as a metaphor for theatre in general when taking into consideration that a theatrical performance is a situation where actors and spectators engage in journeys while literally not going anywhere; it could be read as an articulation of the ‘hidden children’ of these specific performances who are caught in places and spaces which they try to escape – by performing, for example – but where no actual exits exist; it could be finally read as the painful experience of the spectators as co-creators of the performances who have to acknowledge that, even if they enter the situation in a clear role – as spectators –, they have to experience all kinds of traumas to their subjectivity. The performances seem to be in fact the ‘thin ice’ that eventually swallows everyone. Since the performance disappears and the hidden children have immense trouble to appear, it is only fair and just for the spectator to finally accept their intrinsic deficiency too.

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