

Framing Dramaturgy and Translation

Some Notes on Backa Teater's Production of Simona Semenič's *5boys.com*

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Simona Semenič's play *5boys.com* (*5fantkov.si*)¹ was staged in Sweden by Anja Suša in 2012, to great critical acclaim; the piece about the violent and cruel games of a group of adolescent boys, named after the Holy Helpers in Catholicism and performed – as stipulated by the script – by female actors, was described as “almost unbearably good”.² Critics responded to its layered, mise en abyme structure, as well as the ways in which the play unmasks the insidious operations of power violence, ideology and judgement through the use of theatricalised children's play. In addition to a run of forty-five performances at Backa Teater in Gothenburg, the production was selected to participate in Sweden's 2013 Theatre Biennial, and it won or was nominated for several prestigious awards. The production also toured to Kranj, Slovenia, for the festival *Week of Slovenian Drama* in 2013.

When I was asked to reflect on the play's reception in Sweden for *Amfiteater's* 2018 symposium “To Each Their Own Sweet Poison” on Semenič's work, my position was merely that of an audience member, deeply struck by this unusual production of what seemed to me an unbearably – yes – good play. Apart from the fact that it had been extraordinarily well received, I did not know much beforehand about the play or the terms or stakes of the production. In what follows, I offer some reflections, developed in part through conversation with the play's translator into Swedish, Lucia Cajchanová, as well as its dramaturg Stefan Åkesson and one of the actors, Emelie Strömberg, and also through revisiting the performance through its video documentation and printed script, on the possible stakes and significances of this production, centring on its use of the frameworks of dramaturgy, as well as acts of translation.

For a bit of context, Backa Teater is a main stage in Sweden for young audiences and has been producing progressive and innovative theatre for children and youth since 1970. The theatre is in Hisingen, a part of Gothenburg on Sweden's west coast, which is traditionally working class and houses docks and industry in the Gothenburg area. Hisingen has a comparatively large immigrant population and is less ethnically

¹ The English translation of the play uses *5boys.si* but it is commonly staged as *5boys.com* in different countries.

² See footnote 3.

homogenous than the inner city – Gothenburg being one of northern Europe’s most segregated cities. The audience at Backa Teater comes primarily from schools in the area as well as other parts of Gothenburg – that is, students who attend the theatre as part of the school curriculum; however, the theatre’s audience also consists of the general public. *5boys.com* was performed for a combination of school and public audiences. Backa Teater has a very strong reputation for advancing theatre and performance for youth, their programming generally garnering media and public attention on a national level.

One critic called Suša’s production “an almost unbearably good performance about trying to find some sense of freedom through play”,³ while another centred on the ensemble: “the collaboration between the actors is phenomenal. They pick up on each other’s every minute movement and shift, in the borderland between playfulness and gravity, between whims and memories. Their ambivalence is transferred onto the audience, which catches itself giggling with exhilaration at scenes that really are unbearable but performed with such precision and joy that it is impossible to resist.”⁴ A third, referencing the “unhealed wounds of the Balkans” described the play as “irresistible” in its staging of simultaneous “pleasure and vulnerability”, and wrote: “one can only assume that the translation is brilliant”.⁵

Children’s imitation of the adult world often results in painful recognition, and the fact that Semenič calls for five adult female actors to play the roles of the five boys, who then role play scenarios they know from the masculinist and patriarchal, misogynist, homophobic, anti-Semitic, xenophobic, abusive and violent adult world – with the seemingly “just” violence committed by superheroes from the JLA (the Justice League of America or the Yugoslav People’s Army, in a clever double entendre)⁶ thrown in – adds a dimension to our understanding and recognition of perpetratorship, victimhood and injury. As the translator into Swedish, Lucia Cajchanová, said to me, for her, ultimately what the play does is to stage and restage the tragic ritual of being alone and subjected to violence in different forms.

Translation as a textual and contextual practice is already at work in Semenič’s dramaturgical organisation of the drama through the ongoing transpositions between

3 “...en närmast outhärdligt bra föreställning om att i leken försöka skapa sig ett slags frihet.” Maria Edström, Sveriges Radio. <https://sverigesradio.se/sida/artikel.aspx?programid=478&artikel=5047494>, accessed 2018 10 01, author’s translation to English.

4 “Ensemblespelet är fenomenalt. Skådespelarna avlyssnar varandras minsta rörelse och skiftning i gränslandet mellan lek och allvar, infall och minne. Deras ambivalens smittar av sig på publiken som kommer på sig själv med att fnissa upprymt åt scener som egentligen är outhärdliga men gestaltade på ett så precist och lustfyllt sätt att man bara inte kan låta bli.” Mikael Löfgren, Dagens Nyheter 2012 03 19. <https://www.dn.se/kultur-noje/scenrecensioner/5boyscom-pa-backa-teater-goteborg/>, accessed 2018 10 02, author’s translation to English.

5 “Balkans oläkta sår visar på ett medryckande sätt hur både lustfylld och utlämnande till exempel superhjätelek och mamma-pappa-barn kan vara när fem killar går loss.” “Att översättningen är briljant kan man bara anta.” Gunilla Brodrej, Expressen 2012 03 20. <https://www.expressen.se/kultur/5boyscom-backa-teater/>, accessed 2018 10 01, author’s translation to English.

6 I thank Maja Šorli for pointing this out to me.

the children's and the adult world, as well as the worlds of meaning attributable to these two separate yet interlocked spheres. But from conversation with Cajchanová, I have surmised that the Swedish production found itself relating to several additional translational concerns, which resulted in a couple of different scenic strategies adding further frameworks and translations to Semenič's text. These had to do with the question of how to recontextualise the play for a Swedish audience and theatrical context, but also how to make this context legible to the theatrical work and its director. Cajchanová, who also works as a dramaturg, related how with work from the Balkan region (in which she takes a special interest), beyond the text itself, she must typically translate the cultural context to a Swedish director and cast. In this case, because the director was Serbian and did not need such situating translational work, the challenge instead became to introduce a Swedish cultural and theatrical context and to orient the production in relation to its anticipated audience.

Firstly, Cajchanová described the risk of the play coming across as misogynist and homophobic, due to the targeting of women, gay men, effeminacy and non-masculinity in its expressions of physical and verbal violence. This concern touched upon the performative potential – or risk – of reinforcing and inscribing norms and values intended for critique through their verbal and corporeal enactment. One actor in the production told me in conversation that during performances the actors realised that homophobia was so entrenched in certain school audiences that some audience members did not perceive the critique of such bigotry enacted in the boys' game of "neo-Nazis and queers", but took it at face value.

Furthermore, the production team found itself facing the risk of Othering – that the violence of the play would be recognisable to the audience only through its displacement and deferral onto another part of Europe, onto Other violence (as potentially evidenced by the vague reference in the review to "the unhealed wounds of the Balkans"). The critique inscribed in the play would then potentially counteract itself and work to secure the Swedish audience as removed from this violence enacted by and against Other children's bodies and identities, Other masculinities, Other cultural norms. Cajchanová worried that the existential core of the play – that there is an excess of violence involved in shaping children's presumed identities regarding boy- and girlhood, heteronormativity, and social regulatory ideals – were regionally or culturally situated, and fixated.

Moreover, while Swedish theatre for children and youth has a history of broaching difficult subjects such as death, divorce, violence, and mental illness, arguably the embodied manifestation of pleasure and glee in relation to violent perpetratorship, as well as the unleashing of ambiguity that takes place in *5boys.com*, posed a challenge to the conventions and self-conceptions of theatre practitioners and audiences alike. In

Sweden, the corporeal punishment of children is illegal, and the society prides itself on its self-perception as egalitarian, anti-discriminatory, and pro equal rights when it comes to gender, sexuality and ethnicity. Homophobia is considered unacceptable within the establishment, as are anti-Semitic and neo-Nazi political stances (although that is unfortunately changing with the present political climate, in which rightist nationalism is gaining ground and the “Sweden Democrats”, a racist party with neo-Nazi roots, has quickly become a major political actor). Part of the strength of affect in at least the adults’ and critics’ responses may have to do with the perception of the violence in the boys’ games as so particularly transgressive.

A complicating factor also had to do with a possibly limiting understanding of the Swedish context and audience as such. While the white Swedish majority population can be assumed to have a certain amount of knowledge and awareness pertaining to the Balkan Wars, and, moreover, a substantial number of refugees from that atrocity arrived in Sweden in the years surrounding the war, the Swedish nation itself has not experienced war first hand for over two centuries. Thus, the white, middle class population dominating the theatre audiences tends to have little to no personal memories or embodied histories of war. However, a significant number of the children and youth who attend Backa Teater’s performances have experienced the traumas of armed conflict or have inherited such experiences and narratives from parents and grandparents. A final challenge for the production team was to reconcile these levels of experience in the *mise en scène* and audience address.

One central scenic decision by Suša and her team made it possible to address these challenges and concerns: to extend the play’s Brechtian framework by adding a second *mise en abyme* layer to Semenič’s call for female actors to play the boys, centring specifically on the position of these female actors carrying out the work of performing the play (rather than subsuming the actors into the characters). As such, the play and the performance were brought into one more instance of the simultaneous “as-if” and “here-and-now” of theatre’s reality-producing dimension – only to render that framing reality ambiguous as well. The new framing made it possible to stage and embody an additional layer of ambivalence regarding the suspension of disbelief that characterises so much text-based performance – that we know and understand what we are watching to be a fiction and an illusion, while simultaneously agreeing to accept it as real.

Firstly, the actors were involved in the process of casting the play, each choosing which character they wanted to portray. Secondly, they were asked to choose their own costume. However, this choice was to be personal to them and not intended to represent the character, the boy, to the audience. Instead, the starting point for the performance really was the self-staging of the women as female bodies, who then

role play as boys. Thirdly, a twenty-minute prologue was added to the play, created through improvisation and scripted by Åkesson.

Here, in direct audience address, the cast members introduce themselves as actors, explaining their costume choices. Maria Hedborg explains how she chose a red, 1950s dress that felt beautiful to her personally; Emelie Strömberg describes her request for an outfit of relaxed, androgynous pants and t-shirt inspired by Patti Smith; Gunilla Johansson Gyllenspetz narrates how her floor length, 1970s “hippie” dress is a manifestation of anti-war sentiment that she wanted to espouse in response to the content and language of the play; Sandra Stojiljkovic relates how when the theatre called to offer her the part, her small baby had just thrown up on her and she thought about what the exact opposite of her current clothes and predicament would be – hence the silken “geisha” outfit we see her wearing; and Josefin Neldén explains her decision to don a nun’s habit in that she thinks of herself as a good girl, and, to her, nuns are “the essence of being good”.

The actors also crack jokes and engage in sometimes friendly, but sometimes passive-aggressive banter. There is an unpleasant undertone to some of their exchanges, as when, in a seemingly light humorous tone, they compare their experience and success as actors (reflecting on real-life achievements); additionally, they highlight one actor’s Serbian heritage and repeatedly compliment her on the level of her spoken Swedish, although she makes it clear that she was born and raised in Sweden. The actors also claim some obviously untrue things about themselves and are challenged by the others. In addition to framing the play and its interior world, this prologue was intended to make the theatrical space itself into a zone of ambivalence. Rather than assure the young audience that the actors’ self-presentations belonged in a reality unlike or separate from the world of the play, rather the cruelty and underhandedness of that world was allowed to seep into, or even be introduced by, the actors’ interactions.

Once the actors have introduced their characters and announced the title of the play, as well as the names of the translators and director, they launch into the action. However, in a continuation of the work initiated in the prologue, they allow themselves a series of interruptions and metatheatrical comments in the course of the performance. For example, at one point rather early in the play, one actor stops the performance and turns to the audience, announcing her discomfort with uttering certain lines and performing some actions called for in the play. The actors then go on to comment, each in their turn, on how they feel about the language and the actions they perform. One explains how she is the kind of person who has never been able to utter foul language before and that it has been a good exercise for her, while another says she really enjoys getting to say “cock” and “pussy” so much. Then they agree to continue and get on with the scene. In this manner the actors replicate the stopping

and commenting that the five boys undertake in the course of their game – correcting each other’s choices and impulses, egging each other on, or protesting the turn that the role-playing is taking. However, this interruption came about because one member of the cast, who has worked at Backa since its beginning in 1970, brought up in rehearsals that the language and the actions of the play went against her ethos of performing for children. The discussion that her sentiment gave rise to was then incorporated into the performance, allowing the actors to critique what they are doing in the course of doing it.

When the character Jurij, played by Stojiljkovic, gets the opportunity to role play the drunk father who comes home to have sex with his wife, he/she stumbles in, relishing the opportunity to pretend to be wasted, and collapses on the floor next to the “wife”. One of the other boys stops Jurij, saying, “bro, that’s not how you play drunk, let me show you” and then makes the same entrance with more subtle expertise. At that point yet another voice pipes up – “that was good, you can tell she’s been acting for nineteen years!” This reference to the prologue and the banter about the actors’ professional experience, causes Stojiljkovic to protest: “I have only been acting for five years, what am I supposed to do, I can’t compete!” And as she makes her drunken entrance one more time, she gets the audience to applaud and egg her on. Finally, when she says to the others, following script, “what about that, was that better?” there is a double presence of an adult actor and a playing child seeking approval from her/his peers.

The colliding of these fictions, these multiple strata or layers of reality, acting and play, were thus key to the production that Suša staged at Backa Teater. Situating the work in this way was central to an act of translation, which may have been part of the appeal that the show had for audiences in Sweden. Taking its cue from the dramaturgical structure devised by Semenič, this production – in my opinion – really succeeded in showing the simultaneous separation and non-separation between actor and character, reality and fiction, deadly games and deadly realities.

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