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Performativity and the Construction of Children's Citizenship in Backa Theatre's Staging of *Lille Kung Mattias* (2009/2010)¹

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Introduction

Historically, Swedish theatre for children and the young has gone from staged, and morally distinct, literary stories in the beginning of 1900 to contemporary theatre with a mix of art, entertainment and pedagogies (Helander 9). In recent decades, theatre has continuously renegotiated the concept of childhood, with the construct of the child itself often being central to performances. The aim of this article is to investigate and clarify the role of performativity as a central tool in revealing how an adult king and an “ordinary” boy are constructed, and how the democratic child is created in a production of *Lille Kung Mattias* (Little King Matt) by Backa Theatre in Gothenburg, Sweden, during the group's 2009–2010 season. I hope to elucidate how Mattias's failure as a boy to performatively fulfill the roles of adult king and ordinary boy in fact challenges the play's system of power. Through the production's empowerment of the children in the audience, I argue that space is provided for children to practice a specific form of citizenship and democracy.

Backa Theatre was founded by a group of actors, musicians, technicians, and a director working at Gothenburg Civic Theatre who wanted to reach children and young people living in the less privileged suburbs of Gothenburg. In 1978, they began performing as Skolteatergruppen (The School Theatre Group) on smaller stages in Gothenburg and in schools (Lyons 19). The name Backa Theatre, taken in 1982, derives from the western suburb Hisings Backa, where the group was located during a decisive period in their history. Backa Theatre created a unique profile for itself, featuring live music played by six musicians and composers (employed by the group on a full-time basis) onstage with the actors. During the term of their first artistic leader, Eva Bergman, the theatre performed classic plays as well as newly written material. Since then, the theatre has continuously cast a critical eye on contemporary society in its performances, and maintained its commitment to young audiences. Backa Theatre

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has been awarded several prizes through the years and is well known internationally, having toured on four continents and collaborated with, among others, Teatro Avenida in Mozambique and Al-Harah Theater in Palestine. Through collaborations including cultural exchange, combined with a search for a diversity of stories in a number of productions that have been based on interviews with children and young people in Sweden and Europe, Backa Theatre is one of the most prominent TYA companies in Sweden today. The theatre performs for school audiences during the day and for the general public in the evenings, thus reaching broad audiences who choose to visit the theatre for a variety of reasons.

Lille Kung Mattias

Lille Kung Mattias is based on the novel *Król Maciuś Pierwszy* [King Matt the First] by the Polish-Jewish educator, children's author and paediatrician Henryk Goldszmit (1878–1942), writing under the pseudonym Janusz Korczak (Hartman 1). The novel was first published in 1923. In Gothenburg, the novel was adapted for the stage by Mattias Andersson, who also directed the play, which was performed for children aged 11 or older.² Adult actors played all the characters in Backa Theatre's production and the scenography was by Ulla Kassius. The dramatisation centres on the royal child Mattias, who becomes king when his father dies. At first, the adult ministers in the government manipulate Mattias, but then he learns about the unfair world outside the castle from a girl called Felicia. Mattias overthrows the government and gives the ministers' positions to the children in the audience. The entire audience is then invited onstage in groups to draw up financial budgets, which they then present to each other.

The invitation to the children in the audience to act as the government seems to be influenced by Henryk Goldszmit's work. For many years, Goldszmit was director of an orphanage for Jewish children in Warsaw where he, according to Lilia Ratcheva-Stratieva, created "a children's parliament and court, giving children the power to make decisions about their everyday lives and about their destiny" (6). He also promoted children's rights in many of his works. In *Prawo dziecka do szancunku* [How to Love a Child], published in 1928, his loving and respectful attitude towards children was shown to be an important part of his pedagogical work. In several of his literary works, Goldszmit addressed the contemporary use of punishment in bringing up children, and described the cruelty and fear that children suffered simply because they were minors. Goldszmit worked to change this by discussing with his young readers such issues as discrimination and inclusion, friendship, societal improvement, and life and death.

Natalie Davet, scholar of children and youth studies, offers a close reading of *Lille Kung Mattias* in a report for Barnteaterakademin [The Academy of Theatre for Children]. Davet explains that the production is an example of interactive theatre in

² Mattias Andersson has been the Artistic Director of Backa Theatre since 2006 and he received the 2017 ASSITEJ ARTISTIC EXCELLENCE AWARD during the international "Cradle of Creativity" festival in Cape Town, South Africa.

which the children in the audience are able to raise their voices, and that this adds the important dimension of educating the audience in democracy. Nevertheless, she also observes that it is still the adults who decide when the children are given space and how (122–125). In this article, I develop this observation further with reference to performativity and an initial focus on specific scenes. I will then widen the perspective to investigate opportunities offered to young audiences to practise democratic citizenship.

Performance Analysis and Performativity

This article draws upon performance analysis and I investigate how semiotics in text, light, sound, scenography, costume, make-up, and gesture interact and/or conflict with one another. Since my main interest is in linking the performance to performativity theory, this will be my primary focus. I am aware that my use of one specific analytical perspective rules out results that other perspectives would uncover. The material I've analysed is an archived film of a performance of *Lille Kung Mattias* (2009/2010) and the prompter's script of the performance, provided to me by Backa Theatre.

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), American philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler defines performativity as something that “is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained duration” (xv). Butler takes into consideration the whole duration of the body and not merely the oral speech act that British philosopher J.L. Austin's theory of speech act does. Butler also connects the ritual dimension of performativity to Bourdieu's notion of habitus. Butler claims that gender is performative in the sense that what we take to be the eternal essence of gender is actually a set of acts that we produce through our bodies' ways of moving, talking, dressing and desiring: “There is no gender behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler, *Gender* 33). Given that there is no essence of gender, there is the possibility/danger of pushing the boundaries of embodied femininity and masculinity. Here lies the subversive potential: gender is performative, repetitive, and therefore changeable.

Constructing an Adult King

In *Lille Kung Mattias*, the boy Mattias loses his father and, as the only successor to the throne, he has to become king at the age of eleven. To begin with, the scenography consists solely of an empty floor and a large golden backdrop curtain. The stage is framed in gold. The Minister for the Environment and the Ministers of Health, Education, Defence, Finance, and Law are dressed in black coats, trousers, and shoes, with ribbons in different colors on their coats. They wear black high hats and white make-up, emphasising their puppet-like stiffness. Mattias, a white boy with short dark brown hair, wears a blue coat with golden ribbons, blue shorts, and high yellow socks at the outset.

When Mattias is to be crowned, a happy tune with wind instruments is played and the light turns red onstage. The ministers dress him in shoes, a blue and golden crown, a long red cloak and they give him golden paper and a pen to use in his first meeting with them. They cheer him on as the new king and tell him that he's standing in his father's favorite spot. To use Butler's terms, this crowning of the king is supposed to be a "dramatization" of the body, a matter of "ritualized, public performance", where the music and the lighting help to build up the feeling of a performance of "crowning the new King" (qtd. in Loxley 141). The problem is that Mattias doesn't know how to act as an adult king. He stands there lost and stiff, and has no idea what to do. The cloak is too long and he expresses uncertainty by twisting his fingers and glancing at the ministers. He looks uncomfortable. Though he has the position and the title, Mattias doesn't know how to perform as king; at the same time, the construct of the king as a performative act is revealed. The royal ceremony is performed, but Mattias is unable to fulfil expectations, which makes his appearance humorous and heart-breaking in equal measure. It also pinpoints what being king really means. The scene reveals how the expression of bodily power is connected to "performing" adulthood and masculinity, and the ability to "own" the space of performance. Mattias is uncertain as a child and doesn't perform the actions expected of him.

In spite of everything, the ministers pretend to treat Mattias as the new king. They try to guide (or manipulate) him into behaving as a king; for example, by explaining that the king has a meeting every morning with the ministers, who inform him of the situation in each department. While the ministers lie to him and say that everything is fine in the country, a news voice-over is heard saying that the country is experiencing its worst economic crisis in a hundred years. Mattias's coronation is therefore a hollow act in two ways: it doesn't actually make him king, since he doesn't understand how to performatively construct the adult king, and he can't construct the king as long as the ministers neither give him the right information nor involve him in making the decisions.

When the meeting with the ministers is over, they leave the stage, but Mattias stumbles over his cloak. It's too long for him. He takes off the cloak and the crown and proceeds to the royal garden where the light is yellow, green, and warm, and golden leaves float down and fall upon the ground. He bends down to pick up a leaf and suddenly sees a football rolling along the ground. A girl then enters, looking for the ball.

Constructing an Ordinary Boy

The poor girl is called Felicia. She has accidentally kicked the ball into the royal garden and now comes to retrieve it. She is a white girl with long and light brown tousled hair, bare feet and a loosely fitting grey dress.³ Her face and body are grimy, she moves fast and is ready to run. When she discovers Mattias, she is at first frightened, since it is forbidden to be in the royal garden, but is then impressed when she realises that he is

³ In the filmed archive version I'm using for this analysis, Felicia was played by a white actress, but later, when the performance went on tour to Washington DC, Felicia was played by a non-white actress.

actually the king. He doesn't understand when Felicia says that, as the king, he has the power to decide everything in the country.

It is also revealed that Mattias doesn't know how to play football and in this sense he, as a royal child, doesn't know how to performatively construct the actions or appearance of an "ordinary" child. When Felicia asks him what he spends his days doing if he doesn't meet any other children, Mattias answers, "Well, I ... have lectures in different languages and do exercises in mathematics, writing and reading ... And ... I play different instruments. And then I sleep some and play patience with the pack of cards" (Andersson 22; act 1, scene 9).⁴ The ball intrigues him and Felicia becomes his guide, teaching Mattias to play as well as to understand the misery of life in the country outside. When they play, Felicia's fast and nimble moves contrast with Mattias' stiff astonishment, revealing how gender and class are performatively constructed through the use made of bodies. Mattias is used to sitting still, receiving lectures and playing patience. Felicia is used to constant movement — running away from the soldiers, the royal guards, and the police who often chase the impoverished citizens. In her state of poverty, all she gets to eat is carrots. Their contrasting daily lives mean that their bodies and gestures form images of class difference.

In order to gain an understanding of the problems outside the royal castle, Mattias later asks Felicia if he can join her. Felicia answers, "In those clothes, alone as a king? They will mash you!" (Andersson 40; act 1, scene 16).⁵ Mattias then asks, "But I ... If I ... dress up ... ? Like an ordinary ... like you ... ?" and Felicia answers, "You can't speak and move that way!" (Andersson 40; act 1, scene 16).⁶ Mattias ends up begging, "But I can learn ... " and Felicia agrees to pick him up later that evening (Andersson 40; act 1, scene 16).⁷ In this dialogue, Felicia pinpoints how Mattias differs from "the ordinary" people outside the royal castle. It is not only a matter of how he dresses, but also of how he talks and moves. Mattias is royal and belongs to the highest class of all; this is what he embodies. Felicia requires him to change so that he can melt into the crowd and thus be protected from the people's rage. That Mattias then starts to beg Felicia to take him with her, reveals the notion of the "ordinary citizen" as a performative act that is learned, practised and therefore subject to change in the process of being repeatedly performed — in the same way Butler describes gender in the essay "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" as "instituted through a stylized repetition of acts" (178). But gender never comes without class and, in Mattias' case, he needs to learn how to move and talk like an "ordinary" boy. It's interesting that he actually uses the word "learn" instead of "pretend" in this context. This underlines the fact that being an "ordinary"

⁴ "Ja, jag ... har lektioner i olika språk och tränar räkna och skriva och läsa ... och så ... spelar jag lite olika instrument. Sen sover jag en del och lägger patienser med kortleken."

⁵ "I dom där kläderna, ensam som Kung? Dom kommer att mosa dig!"

⁶ "Men jag ... Om jag ... klär ut mig ... ? till vanlig ... som du?" and "Du kan inte prata och röra dig så där!"

⁷ "Men jag kan lära mig ... "

boy is something that you learn and repeat as bodily knowledge; and that Mattias needs to practise in order to be able to acquire that knowledge.

Mattias takes off his blue coat and shorts, under which he wears a grey T-shirt and grey shorts. When Felicia comes to pick him up, she makes him take his socks off and tousles his hair. With bare feet and grey clothes, she brings him to her side of the royal wall. After a blackout, the sound of rain is heard. When the light comes up, there is a pile of plastic sacks and cardboard boxes in the middle of the stage and the light is blue and cold. All other colors seem to be missing. One by one, people emerge from the pile of sacks and boxes, and Mattias learns that people are gambling and drinking and trying to make their lives bearable in the absence of any opportunity to work and earn money. Felicia's mother doesn't speak Swedish and Felicia explains that they came to the country because they couldn't stay in their home country.

In this sense, Mattias finds himself in a twilight zone, where he is neither accepted as king by the government nor as an ordinary boy by the people. He is alienated from the people around him and is constantly trying, unsuccessfully, to figure out how to behave, move and talk in order to fit in. In the process, he constructs an in-between position that leads to the possibility, and perhaps necessity, of creating a new kind of king: a subversive king, who changes the rules of who can decide what and who can be a democratic citizen with voting rights.

The Subversive King

When Mattias, as the king, finally realises that the situation in the country is critical and the population is starving, not to mention lacking both jobs and shelter, he walks to the royal castle and, standing in the middle of the stage, powerfully announces to the government that they have lied and are dismissed. Instead, he wants to create a new government with ministers who are children. The Minister for the Environment and the Ministers of Health, Education, Defence, Finance, and Law stand onstage, stiff and speechless after Mattias' announcement. Through his determined manner of speech and movement, Mattias now, for the first time in the story, takes the lead and acts in a way appropriate to a king. At the same time, he uses his position to carry out a subversive act: as king, he chooses to give the ministers' seats to children. To use Butler's terms, when Mattias gives executive power to children, he fails to repeat "kingship" correctly and thus reconstructs expectations as to what a male king may proclaim.

After Mattias' declaration to the government, the interactive part of the performance takes place. Mattias asks Felicia if she can see a child in the audience who would be suited to the post of Minister of Finance and, one-by-one, children replace the ministers onstage. The new child ministers are encouraged to dismiss the adult ones verbally and the former ministers leave the stage with angry comments. Thus, the children of the audience become elements in the production and are invited to experience the feeling of power associated with the position of ministers in the gov-

ernment within the narrative framework. The former adult ministers exchange the costumes of fairy tale rulers for those of contemporary actors and actresses.

When all the minister posts are appointed, Mattias asks the new ministers: “What is the biggest problem for children in Sweden today?” and he sits down onstage to discuss the question with the new minister group (Andersson 58; act 2, scene 2).⁸ Felicia turns to the remaining audience with the same question and gives everybody one minute to think about it. Mattias is also replaced as king by a child (boy or girl) in the audience. The new king is asked what his/her first decision will be as king.

One of the actors suggests that all the children in the audience should have the opportunity to decide things and the audience is divided into seven different groups, each of which is asked to propose a financial budget for Sweden. They are asked to distribute the budget so as to meet all needs in the areas of defence, health, environment, education, law, employment, and culture. Each of the groups is now assigned a minister and an adult actress or actor in the role of facilitator. They then start to discuss how to distribute the budget in parcels of three, six, or nine million Swedish crowns in different categories in their specific areas. In the area of health, some of the options are, for example: residences for the homeless, more doctors and hospitals, and healthcare for “apathetic” refugee children.⁹ In the area of law, some of the options are: fighting criminal gangs, letting refugees stay in Sweden, and making all downloads from the internet legal. Each group discussion concludes with an internal vote. The facilitator leads the discussion but does not judge the participants’ comments. Whatever they decide is the outcome of the discussion.

Creating Democratic Citizenship

After a while, everyone gathers together again for the outcomes of the group discussions to be presented. In the filmed version, the categories that got nine million Swedish crowns were: aid for poorer countries; healthcare for “apathetic” refugee children; endangered animals; improving food in schools; legalising all downloads from the internet and supporting employment opportunities or education for the unemployed. Once the presentations and follow-up discussions are over, the new government approves the new budget and the actor who previously played Mattias and the actress who played Felicia return to their parts, put the newly determined budget agreement in an envelope, address it to Sweden’s Minister of Finance and stamp the envelope so that it can actually be sent. By this time, the other actors and actresses have put their original costumes back on, and the adult ministers are back on the stage. They claim that the budget doesn’t work and that the children can’t understand things like this, being so young. The adult ministers order the children to leave the stage. They even claim Mattias is crazy and has abused his powers; they say he only

⁸ “Vad är det största problemet för barn i Sverige idag?”

⁹ The discussion concerning “apathetic” refugee children was significant in Sweden during 2009–2010. Some people claimed that these children were faking illness in order to stay in the country, while others stressed the importance of providing them with adequate healthcare.

wants “worthless, ignorant children in his government to be able to decide everything himself!” (Andersson 64; act 2, scene 9).¹⁰

But people's positions in the theatre are not the same after the group discussions. What happens at this point in the filmed version of the performance is that the children talk back to the ministers.¹¹ They try to stay on the stage or, having left, climb back up when the ministers' backs are turned. The children don't construct the act of being children in an audience in the way the ministers find appropriate. Instead, they push the boundaries and resist, since they have the chance to be a part of the story themselves. The fact that they have met the actors and actresses outside their roles as ministers, and have discussed political matters with them, has changed the contract with the audience. The audience members now experience, physically and emotionally, what it is like when a theatre performance includes their own voices and opinions. Furthermore, discussing political matters, including the distribution of the state budget, is an exercise in practising democracy and citizenship. According to J.L. Austin's terminology on performativity, the vote misfires, since legally children are not allowed to vote (Austin 179). But they do practise democratic citizenship by discussing and deciding what they consider to be the most important measures to take in society. Thus, the performance not only explores what it means to construct a king or an ordinary boy, but also the capabilities of children who are given the opportunity to express thoughts on societal priorities.

When the ministers question the minors' understanding of matters and insist that “this is the way things must be! There is no other alternative — it must be like this! It really always must be this way!” — there is a blackout in the room. When the lights come up, the children see that Mattias and Felicia have managed to escape with the budget envelope — and they applaud and cheer them on. Mattias and Felicia leave the room with the envelope and Mattias promises: “I will be back! I will be back! We will be back!” (Andersson 65; act 2, scene 9).¹²

Now, these decisions concerned specific topics that were previously agreed upon after a period of preparatory work with school children in Gothenburg. The choices the children in the audience made were of course influenced by what they had experienced during the course of the performance, but it is interesting to note the kind of choices they made nonetheless. The options formulated represented to a large extent traditional left-wing values, insofar as common resources were to be used to support groups with the greatest needs. Thus, the children felt encouraged to take the position of socially concerned democratic politicians and citizens and to link the act of discussing political matters to the interests of those who lack economic power. The good democratic politician and citizen are oriented toward the political Left. It is also interesting to consider what the outcome would have been if the topics had been created by the children in the audience attending each performance. What if they

¹⁰ “[...] värdelösa, okunniga barn omkring sig i sin regering för att kunna bestämma allting själv!”

¹¹ This was also the case when I watched a live performance in 2010.

¹² “Jag kommer tillbaka! Jag kommer tillbaka! Vi kommer tillbaka!”

had to formulate the agenda? What kind of discussion would that have led to? The children are exploring how to draw up a budget, but their ministerial positions have been chosen for them. They are given the opportunity to make decisions, but there is no freedom of choice concerning topics; the political process is thus presented as a matter of making decisions rather than as the ability to formulate options grounded in a population's specific experiences and to act on those options. The outcome reveals what the children in the audience would vote for if they were given the chance to discuss the subjects on offer — but not what they would choose to prioritise if they were the ones setting the agenda.

Conclusion and a Different Outcome

John Wall, professor in religion and childhood studies, points out that Rousseau's ideas, as well as John Locke's theory on democratic thought, both require a sharp public-private divide in which "responsibility is confined to the private sphere of dependent relations, in contrast with the public sphere of autonomous rights" (95). What children demonstrate, according to Wall, is that this "dichotomy of political independence and familial dependency is a false one" (95). He claims that political philosophy has long defined democracy as belonging principally to the adult realm and children have been considered too incompetent or dependent to be capable of exercising any political power themselves. He articulates how a democracy representing people of all ages requires "a re-examination of the traditional Enlightenment idea that democratic representation is the expression of independent or developed rationality" and "an expanding concept of the political subject and the political terrain", based on "a restructuring of fundamental social norms in response to children's experiences" (86–87). His conclusion is that democracy can only represent children adequately if it is "reconceptualised as a politics of difference" (87).

Wall gives examples of governments in New Zealand, South Africa, Israel, Rwanda, the United Kingdom, and Kazakhstan creating systematic structures for listening to the voices of children. This does not mean that children exercise political power, but they are given a voice that is heard by those who do. At least 30 countries — including India, Norway, Bolivia, Nigeria and Congo — have some kind of children's parliamentary structure. In India and Brazil, for example, children in local children's parliaments have made significant contributions to their communities by suggesting changes in educational policies, improved community services, and the funding of new utilities.

In Korczak's original novel, the children are given power by King Matt, but when he orders the grownups to go to school while children take their jobs, the trains stop running, shops are closed, and factories shut down. This leads to enemy kings invading the country and King Matt losing his throne to them. Matt is sent to a deserted island together with thirty-three officers and soldiers. Ten of his friends will be able to join him after a year. The scenario is an example of how badly things might end up, were children required to maintain the structures built by adults. Applying Wall's theory of the politics of difference, the problem in this scenario is not the relationship

between the king and the children — but that the children are not given the opportunity to create their own structures and agenda. According to publisher and author Lilia Ratcheva-Stratieva, “[t]his failure is a sign of the author’s disappointment with humankind and the political reality in which he lived”, and thus an example of how the problem does not relate to the capabilities of children but to their lack of opportunity to practise a citizenship based on Wall’s notion of a politics of difference (9). Only by restructuring the whole system of society and democracy would Mattias be able to practise such a politics of difference.

In *Lille Kung Mattias*, Mattias constructs neither the adult king nor the ordinary boy and is thus unable to meet the expectations attached to these societal positions. Instead, once he has understood the sorry state of the country, he becomes a subversive king and takes the initiative to create a new kind of government by giving positions of power to the children in the audience. The structure of government remains unchanged, although the rules as to who has access to decision-making processes (and the stage) have been altered. As a result, children in the audience are involved in discussions of specific topics that they are assigned. They can practise making political decisions regarding the allocation of funds. The proposed budgets are then actually sent to the Swedish government; whether they are really read is another question. The children in the audience vote for options made by other children during the preparatory work, not options they make themselves at the theatre. Thus the performance works as a pedagogical gateway to understanding what making a budget is about and what it feels like to access the stage and talk to the characters and the actors and actresses.

Backa Theatre’s *Lille Kung Mattias* does not generate a performatively achieved formulation of a political agenda grounded in children’s own experience of the world. Using Wall’s terminology, the children practise a democratic citizenship grounded in the “politics of adults” rather than the “politics of difference”, since the topics for discussion are already formulated in advance. To work with the suggestions of the actual audience would take time and need a different framework from that used in this production. Perhaps capturing the children’s own priorities would require the duration of the performance. But if we really strive to create theatre for children and young people that involves the audience as authentic citizens with an agency of their own, then perhaps “difference” needs to be the key word. Were difference to be viewed as an asset and an opportunity, then working constructively with children’s experiences of society could become a reality.

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