

Welcome to a jungle of Children

On Welcome to the Jungle by Andros Zins-Browne

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A weird and lonely Jungle

"Welcome to the Jungle", an installation-performance by choreographer Andros Zins-Browne, is an ambitious project: it aims to tackle the burning subject of the earth's future. The installation revolves around the theme of 'global weirding'. The term, which echoes 'global warming', suggests that one of the effects of the environmental catastrophe will be – read, is – not only an increase in global temperature but also an increase in the unpredictability of the behaviour of nature. In the midst of heated political debates about climate change and the subsequent development of new fields of scientific research such as geo-engineering, Zins-Browne is interested in the aesthetic potentials of the earth gone weird and very very lonely. His main concern is to represent an autonomous nature after the extinction of mankind on stage; in "Welcome to the Jungle" Zins-Browne deals with human absence in this very warm and very weird future world. This immediately raises the question of how to make a theatre piece about the 'world without us', when the theatre's main constituent is, exactly, human presence? The question was pressing and "Welcome to the Jungle" was an attempt to answer it.

Twelve Children

In order to raise the problematic of the 'post-human' as the core problematic of his installation, Zins-Browne chooses to work with twelve children, from the ages of eight to thirteen. The children inhabit the "Jungle", an ethereal labyrinth made up of mirror foils, wind and rain machines, subwoofers and intense perfume. Nature is presented here as the result of carefully engineered machinery, largely suspended from the ceiling. Inside this Jungle the visitors, a few at a time, are expected to wander and get lost, since it's dark, there are mirrors everywhere, and the little light there is constantly shifts direction. This nature is, indeed, erratic but also self referential: the perceived sound of wind or thunder is actually the result of a deep and subtle base sounds originating from the 'subs' that are positioned behind the mirror foils, causing them to pulsate. On the level of sound it becomes most explicit that the stage machinery is not referencing a 'nature' outside of itself anymore, but is instead, itself becoming nature.

In this Jungle of conflicting perceptual impulses representing the earth gone weird, the children have three main roles, between which they alternate. Firstly, Zins-Browne creates dances inspired by natural phenomena such as the hurricane, hail or lightning, for the children to perform. These phenomena are turned into movement quite literally and straightforwardly: the direction of wind currents, water, or ice is used as a score in "the breeze", "the flood" or "the hail", though the children's movements should show no intention to imitate or represent. What these weather choreographies are concerned with, Zins-Browne insists, is precision and intensity. This intensity reaches its peak in "the hurricane", where the children appear gradually as if from nowhere and start circling around one member of the audience, who, for a moment, represents the eye of the storm. With a sudden scream and a swift passing through the centre, the children disappear as mysteriously as they appeared. The goal of choreographies like the hurricane, is for the children to overwhelm the audience with their sudden and forceful presence, only to disappear a moment later into invisibility and silence.

Games like tag, hide & seek, or hot & cold also appear during the "Jungle's" 55-minute score, though slightly altered. During the last, simple and quite effective game of "Warm-Cold", the children should follow closely one member of the audience, sometimes even mirroring his or her movements, while trying to avoid another. Or in 'hide&seek' the children enter the stage one by one shortly after the game begins and gradually leave it before the game ends, so that the seeker is often left alone on stage. The goal of the games is to set loose the children's energy and show that they are at home in the 'Jungle', having fun amongst themselves and also with the audience. 'Technician', is the children's last and preferred role. Two 'technicians' at a time follow a strict script, with an action or task to be performed almost every minute of the performance. Actions include, among others, controlling the stage lights by changing their direction and intensity, turning on and off the wind and rain machines, dispersing perfume. Because the score is so complex and the space so dark, the technicians use a pair of (dimmed) flashlights to read their tasks off a sheet of paper on the technicians' table.

These three different roles or tasks are based on the assumption that children are 'wild'. Just as the weather is forceful and unpredictable, children's playing by definition explodes with energy. It almost goes without saying that anybody seeing children controlling the light and sound board in a theatre piece – the technician's table was placed at the centre of the installation – would be worried, to say the least. And indeed, what the child-technicians could really control in terms of light and sound, was only a small part of the overall light and sound program of the "Jungle". While these 'technicians' are

present most of the time, seemingly pulling the strings of the performance, the rest of the children appear and disappear. Apart from the few 'explosions' of presence as they are staged in the "hurricane", the audience should rather sense the children than actually see them. Zins-Browne imagined their presence on stage as moments in which the audience could only catch a fleeting glimpse of them through their reflections in the mirrors, hearing the sounds of their running feet or loud screams, and feeling the breeze created by their passing. His goal was to create a doubt around the children's presence on stage and thus to cover the question of a human presence in the "Jungle" in a veil of mystery.

Representation and its discrepancies

However, underlying the children's performance at all times is a discrepancy between what it is that they are meant to represent, and what it is that they actually are, on stage: tired after school, some clumsy and forgetful of the choreography, some nervous or bewildered, some bored and impatient, some absent-minded. This does not mean that they are not responsible, or that they disregard their role as performers. On the contrary, they are extremely conscious of the fact that an important task has been appointed to them and are eager to do their job well, with an eagerness that comes from doing well at school and being praised for it. It is rather the awareness of a 'performance mode' that the children lack. This 'performance mode' assumes a certain seriousness and concentration, a 'neutrality' that precedes all action on stage, asserting the performer's presence as a performer and making him or her stand out from just another member of the audience. It is the fact that their behaviour is too childish that, curiously enough, stands in the way of their performing the score 'well'. Consequently, their screaming is often not forceful enough, the hiding not consistent enough, the circling around the audience not precise enough, the running not delicate enough, the silences not silent enough for the choreographies to 'work'. And thus a paradox makes itself apparent here: the children are failing to be what they are expected to be: namely, 'children'. This discrepancy between the ideal and the actual being-child makes itself apparent again and again, in different occasions during the performance.

It could be argued that the failure of the children to embody their role is caused by the usual problems during a production process: too few and too short rehearsals, too many open rehearsals required by the venues before the actual premiere, lack of performing experience of the children. These arguments, however, seem to slightly miss the point. After all, Zins-Browne cast children and not trained professionals, therefore delivering a flawless

performance cannot have been his goal. The problem lies instead with the fact that Zins-Browne assumes he can control what the children represent, namely 'forcefulness', or 'unpredictability'. He pictures them as loud and erratic and wants to use those traits for the purposes of the piece. Yet, the children's lack of concentration fails to produce an image. The wildness that Zins-Browne wants to stage in the "Jungle", seems to turn against him in the end.

In fact, the friction between controlled and the uncontrollable is the main theme of "Welcome to the Jungle". After all, the piece seeks to create the impression of an environment in disarray – by means of carefully programmed machinery. The failure of the children to embody their role(s) makes apparent the paradox inherent in the "Jungle" from the very beginning: the attempt to stage the unpredictable and therefore to let utter control pose for utter uncontrollability. The unpredictable cannot be represented; a sign implies the predictability of its meaning, otherwise it could not be read. The failure here is not the children but, rather representation and its politics. The children disclaim their role of the 'child-as-a-sign' in a brilliant way, at every point in the performance. Therefore, no matter how often they hear the staff calling out to them "The mirrors are taboo!" during rehearsals, they still run into them – and into each other – in the dark, leaving their hand- and footprints all over their shiny and sleek surfaces.