

## 10. Children Witnessing War: Emotions Embodied in the Theatre Play *Wij/Zij*

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This chapter discusses the war experience of children through the theatre play *Wij/Zij*. I look at emotions embodied as the locus of war experience and ask “how does a theatrical play bear witness to war through the bodies of two actors in movement?” When we look at war as an experience (Sylvester 2012, Butler 2009) war is something that touches us, and in particular, our body. I utilise neurology and developmental psychology to analyse the politics of body movement, and I argue that children are active agents in war and their experiences need to be understood through body and mind together. What follows is an aesthetic analysis which does not attempt to reproduce reality, but as Roland Bleiker (2009) states, it brings out the insight that art’s aesthetics offers through an interaction of sensibilities and thought. That means: sensibilities *and* thought – not one or the other, or preference for one over the other. Seeing emotions as embodied and as movement beyond the threshold of consciousness brings forth an aesthetic insight in which imagination, movement, and the body play the central role in children’s war experience, as depicted by *Wij/Zij*. But let me first tell you how I came to the research questions.

It is early November 2014, a chilly winter day, and I wait outside *Bronks*, a theatre for young audiences, in Brussels, Belgium. I flew in the morning from Switzerland just to see a play, *Wij/Zij* (Us/Them), which is about the horrible events of a hostage crisis that took place over ten years ago in Beslan, Russia. War visited Beslan as the town became the stage for the conflict between Russia and the republic of Chechnya. But war came to Beslan not only for the three days the siege lasted, but as Milana Terloeva (2006) writes, there is “before Beslan” and “after Beslan”.

I have never seen a play about political violence, and especially one for young audiences, and I am intrigued. Before the play begins I sit down to have a chat with the director Carly Wijs who explains to me that the play relates more generally to children witnessing violence through media coverage of conflicts near and far away. The play is not just about Beslan, but it is about children witnessing war. She wants to express a child’s perspective, and that means looking into children’s agency rather than or not only their victimhood. Children then act in their own right and influence their environments, including

social and political realities. Children act upon the world, and they are not merely influenced by the world around them. What is more, they sometimes experience emotions differently from adults.

As I sit down in the theatre as a researcher of emotions, as a mother and as a human being, I am expecting an intense emotional experience, and then bursting into tears or laughing from joy. I have no idea that something else is going to happen. I will feel numb, and empty because emotions seem downplayed by the play. I will only much later realise that emotions are not absent or neglected in the play, but they are *in the body*, pre-discursive – just like recent studies in neuroscience testify.

## Neuropolitics of Emotions

In order to get to the bottom of emotions in war, and emotions (not represented in *Wij/Zij*, I turn to neuroscience. I turn to neuroscience, not because I want to reduce human experience to biology, but because I need to connect emotion with the body more firmly than social science is able to do. The well-known neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (2012) separates the physical reaction which is emotion from the *feeling of emotion*. Emotions are automated programs of actions carried out by our bodies and complemented by facial expressions, postures and visceral changes. Feelings of emotions, instead, are “*perceptions of what happens in our body and mind when we are emoting*” (ibid.: 109; italics in the original). The feeling of emotion consists of images of action taking place in our body when emoting. The brain maps (visually and non-visually) the world outside it (including the body proper). When this mapping enters consciousness as images or memory patterns, changes in the body caused by the emotion become part of consciousness and the self-process (see ibid.: 8–9, 15, 68). Thus, an emotion, the corporeal process, is followed by a feeling of emotion, the conscious process. It is not the other way around.

To be more specific, emotion-triggering regions of the brain are activated leading to chemical molecules being delivered to brain and the body, actions being taken in the body and expressions being assumed. For example, in the case of fear cortisol is released, the individual may flee or freeze and takes certain postures or facial expression (ibid.: 110). The changes in our body states are the necessary mechanisms through which we know how to feel and how to react to that feeling. Feeling of emotion is based on a special relationship between the brain and the body: the capacity to map body processes, others' bodies included (ibid.: 109–111). But what is most interesting to me, is that this assembling of maps of objects takes place in movement and interaction (ibid.:

63–64). The body moves in a relationship to its environment, and in this movement the mapping of internal and external body states takes place.

This separation of emotion and feeling of emotion emphasises the corporeality of emotion, and enables perceiving the body's movement as politically significant. It also explains the pre-discursive nature of emotion and helps to make sense of children's experiences of war in *Wij/Zijas*, which I will explain below. Yet if we wish to avoid separating the body from the brain, we can also rely on Floyd Merrell's (2013: 13) conception of the *bodymind* which is the body and the mind together. The mind always follows the bodymind; the bodymind *does* before the mind becomes aware (*ibid.*). Both Damasio's and Merrell's conception of the human being rely on an understanding already voiced by the poet Walter Whitman on the "body electric" which is *the knowing body*, not only the knowing mind (see Lehrer 2008). So from now on, I will use the concept of bodymind to capture the oneness of emotion and body; the knowing body.

## Children Who Witness

The day when the siege began in Beslan, September 1, 2004, was the traditional 'Day of Knowledge' celebrated in the school by the students with their families and relatives. Thus, from infants to elderly people, families had gathered to celebrate at the school. But the celebration would soon end and change into a siege that would last three days and take many lives and leave scars and traumas for life. Most of the captives at the school were children.

When children witness war, their emotional experience is a result of both 'nature and nurture', that is their biology and their previous experiences together. Every child experiences differently, just like every adult, but it is the developing brain that makes a child's experience differ from an adult's. The younger the child the less accumulated knowledge, experiences and cultural norms there are to influence the experience, and the less developed are the brain structures that deal with feelings of emotions. So, I want to make some remarks based on developmental psychology and trauma-related studies to help situate children's experience into their agency and their embodied emotions.

First, it has to be said that *childhood* is an ambiguous concept with political uses of the conceptions of child, youth and adult (Brocklehurst 2006). Adults are considered to be agents with responsibility whereas the younger the child, the less capable and responsible, and the more innocent, the child is considered to be. Childhood is sometimes represented as feminine with physical and emotional weakness, which Brocklehurst (2006: 12) coins as the "feminization

of childhood", referring to Cynthia Enloe's (2014) term 'womenandchildren' – the unchallenged conception of women in war. Moreover, representations of children's innocence and vulnerability are produced in the aesthetics of images depicting physical qualities, and again especially feminine qualities (Brocklehurst 2006: 16). For Brocklehurst (ibid.: 19) the dichotomy of the child and the adult is also at the root of the notion of the political; even if childhood studies is slowly beginning to recognise children's agency – their ability to participate in and inform social practices.

Moving beyond the representation of children in war through feminisation, weakness and emotionality, I am interested in a child as someone with a maturing brain and body experiencing and witnessing war in her own right; not as an extension of the mother's body but a unique and insightful individual who deals with a traumatic or dramatic experience. The difference between the child and the adult is, thus, not found in a feminised, romanticised and depoliticised image of the child.

Infants' emotional development starts with feelings of pain and pleasure. By eighteen months they will experience anger, fear of social events and unexpected sights and sounds, pride, shame and self-awareness, even though there are cultural differences. Early emotional expressions start with crying, soon followed by the social smile at about six weeks (Berger 2008, 188). Berger (ibid: 189) writes, "By the age of two, children can display the entire spectrum of emotional reactions". Synesthesia – a connection between senses and emotions in brain activation – seems to be common for infants, and it means that the sensory parts of the cortex are less distinct, which leads to brain activation in which a positive emotion can come out as tears, for example (ibid: 191). As we observe infants' and toddlers' emotions we should acknowledge that they are less nuanced, less distinguishable from one another and less controlled than adults'. The way an adult feels and expresses an emotion is not necessarily the way a child does. This makes it hard to interpret what the child is feeling.

Damasio, separating emotion and feeling of emotion, refers to emoting as the unconscious body process while the expression of emotion is controllable and educable (Damasio 2012: 123). Children have less control over their feelings of emotions – the conscious and linguistic – as the brain is maturing. Between the ages of two and six the brain specialises and the cortex gets more mature, and as memory improves, emotional self-regulation develops (Berger 2008: 191, 208, 277). Temperament affects developing emotional self-regulation and so do early childhood experiences and social contacts (ibid: 2008: 197, 200). Thus, expressing emotions is a learning process, and it is culturally influenced (ibid: 2008: 189, 278). Emotions are contagious, but especially to a child whose brain is maturing. If emotional control is learnt during the play years, as the brain matures and as the child interacts with others, in puberty and early

adolescence emotions are influenced by hormonal changes, and vice versa, while the adolescent brain keeps maturing and emotional regulation further develops (ibid: 2008: 410, 439).

Trauma, mistreatment and stress affect children and their emotional development. Normal development can be hindered, even resulting in "trauma-induced developmental pathways" (Coch et al. 2007). Post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms in children include those such as reliving the event in dreams or play, avoidance of thoughts, feelings, and activities and emotional numbing (Salmon and Bryant 2002). In this sense war experience affects the child's development and war is not only transmitted as social heritage but embodied in the child, who grows up with this experience. The behaviour of the child does not clearly reflect the emotional experience, and as much as it does, it is culturally conditioned. Visible reactions can be very much controlled or constrained, and the developmental phase of the particular child, together with social learning, determines the ways in which a child emotes, feels the emotion and how she expresses them. For the representation that is transmitted, through art or media, we might easily lump children's war experience into one category which is defined from the perspective of adult emotions and which has only the role of a feminised victim to offer the child. Such victimisation does not emerge in the play *W'ij/Zij*; there is no humanitarian ethos, and moreover, it represents children with active coping strategies. One such strategy is imagination, and the other one is the central theme of the play: the curious role of factual storytelling as a reaction to the traumatic event. This factual storytelling makes it look as if the children do not feel, as if they are in fact emotionally distanced. Yet reflecting on emotions as pre-discursive and corporeal, and less nuanced in the younger the child, it is not emotional distancing but emotions embodied and emotions not translated to the adult's language.

While it is clear that experiencing a violent siege, and witnessing killing, injury and fear and distress, results in severe trauma and psychological symptoms in both children and adults, as Moscardino et al. (2007) state in their study on caregivers' resilience after the Beslan siege, there can be cultural and social differences. They write, "In North Ossetia, children are socialized from an early age to restrain their emotional expressions in the presence of adults, to be obedient and respectful, to be sincere, and to be modest" (ibid.: 1779). The psychological reactions reported by the interviewed caregivers (out of seventeen caregivers, most were mothers) of the children included "behavioural problems, including increased irritability, aggression, sleep disorders, lack of appetite, separation anxiety, and regressive behaviours" (ibid.). Many of those interviewed also discussed physical symptoms such as headaches, stomach-ache, and ear pain (ibid.: 1781). The pain of war experience, the emoting in the body is also represented in *W'ij/Zij* through a choreography of energetic movement

followed by collapses and the overemphasis on physical needs over feelings of emotions.

### *Wij/Zij* as a Witness

Beslan School Number One, in North-Ossetia, Russia, was attacked by a somewhat disorganised group of about thirty-two Chechen and Ingush attackers. The siege was planned by the Chechen rebel leader Shamil Basayev. Over 1100 people, mostly schoolchildren, were held hostage ending in the death of over 330 people, of which 186 were children (see Scrimin et al. 2006, Moscardino et al. 2007, Ó Tuathail 2009).<sup>14</sup> Hundreds were injured in the siege which ended in the detonation of one of the bombs wired around the gym where people were being held, bringing down the roof and causing a fire. Not only police, secret service and the military took part in the chaotic rescue operation but also armed parents and local inhabitants. Hunger and heat caused additional suffering for the hostages; and in a weak and confused state, the school being shelled and in flames, escaping the school was impossible for many (Burleigh 2008, 430). The reasons for the attack are unclear and Ó Tuathail (2009) explains how there were different interpretations among the people in the region, as some accepted the Kremlin's rhetoric accusing international terrorism while others saw the historical ethnic conflicts between Ingush and Ossetians behind the attack. In fact, less accepted was the explanation of the Chechen cause, even if Basayev took responsibility for the siege and the group made demands for ending the war in Chechnya (ibid.).

Ten years after the siege a theatre play was presented to audiences above the age of nine. *Bronks* has an educative mission and invites school groups to attend to their plays, and for *Wij/Zij* a special information sheet, topics for discussion and exercises were offered as supportive material (Bronks 2014). This way the theatre acknowledges children as witnesses to war and offers them an opportunity for reflection on the war experience. The fact that the play is for children and youth means that it could not be about violence directly and visually. But children do consume images of war through the media. The director of the play, Carly Wijs, believes that we can and should talk with children about the affairs going on the world, to which they are exposed to as spectators. She explains that a theatre must dare to reflect on the world outside itself (Wijs 2014). Wijs discovered that in children's experience there seems to

<sup>14</sup> The numbers vary for the hostage-takers, hostages, injured and killed from one source to the other.

be some emotional distancing which manifests in a static and documentary-like approach to witnessing violence (ibid.). Even if the play is about the terror in Beslan, the director wants to raise questions more broadly about children witnessing war through different media.

My research methodology takes the body, or the bodymind to be more specific, as a witness which interacts with other bodyminds. Performance is alive and pulsating because the body interacts through warmth, sweat, breath, colour, skin, movement and so forth. Emotions are circulating between the performers and the audience, and not only between minds, but the bodymind.<sup>15</sup> Mistakes, imperfections and improvisation are part of the interaction in a performance, as well as the audience's reaction which can fuel excitement, fear or other reactions in the performers. Performance is always unique and as such unreachable after it has ended. I had to rely much on the recorded version to refresh my memory on the specifics of the play, but the original viewing is my first and foremost anchor as a source of insight into the emotional experience as played and performed to me and awakened in me that day. That insight is as much intellectual as it is corporeal.

What are we searching for with our bodies? Unable to speak for children the researcher's body attempts to sense the embodied war experience and find capacities, solutions, voices and silences; glimpses of something that does not quite fit the dominant narratives of war. By searching through art's representation, uncertainty and imperfection in a performance is welcomed because it produces insight. One of the actors in *Wij/Zij* stutters, and instead of ruining the performance it makes it more intense by exposing the vulnerability of the performer's body. Yet, the stuttering is not the voice of a person who experienced the siege in Beslan. It is the actor's as he moves and interacts, as his body communicates a story and creates art. Art, then, is not a reliable interpretation of someone's experience but a source of insight for making sense of experiences, war and agency. Art, including the stuttering, is the bridge between individuals' subjective experiences.

Art presented here takes the form of a theatrical play. The play is not a witness that was present at an event. The play is a witness to visual politics in an age of war photography and film. We all witness war through different means and are affected by war by varying degrees. The children in School Number One experienced and eye-witnessed the events, while *Wij/Zij* moves or mediates between these experiences of war – relying on witnessing witness testimonials – and the more distant witnessing of war by children all over the world. Then there is the researcher who tries to make sense of all this. The connecting thread of experiencing and witnessing is the emotion that the bodymind experiences and expresses.

<sup>15</sup> See Sara Ahmed (2004) for the idea of "circulation of affects".

The play is not a 'window to reality' in the way a film or a photograph is often considered an eyewitness, sometimes even a heroic one. There is no camera through which to testify to events, places and bodies. The play does not rely on images from the war zone, but creates its own version of war experience through the actor's bodies and narratives. What kind of a witness is a theatre play, which relies on some known facts about a terrorist attack on a school, but takes great liberties in interpreting war experience? The play does not even transmit a witness testimonial or attempt to capture the authentic. Rather it reflects on war experience at two levels: 1) the ways in which children *experience war* (differently from adults) and 2) the ways in which children at a distance *witness war* through the media representations of a siege. Thus, experiencing and witnessing are mixed into the art created by the play.

In the aesthetics of *Wij/Zij* one can find the political. The play makes visible that there is a private experience of a child behind the media coverage. It is an inquiry into the human bodymind in which the aesthetic-political agent is a child with a child's developing mind. International politics is being made there where the child meets the violent world. Yet the play is not a performance *about* the political. It makes the bodymind, the child, and the audience participatory *in* the political.

### Social Emotions and the Lack of them

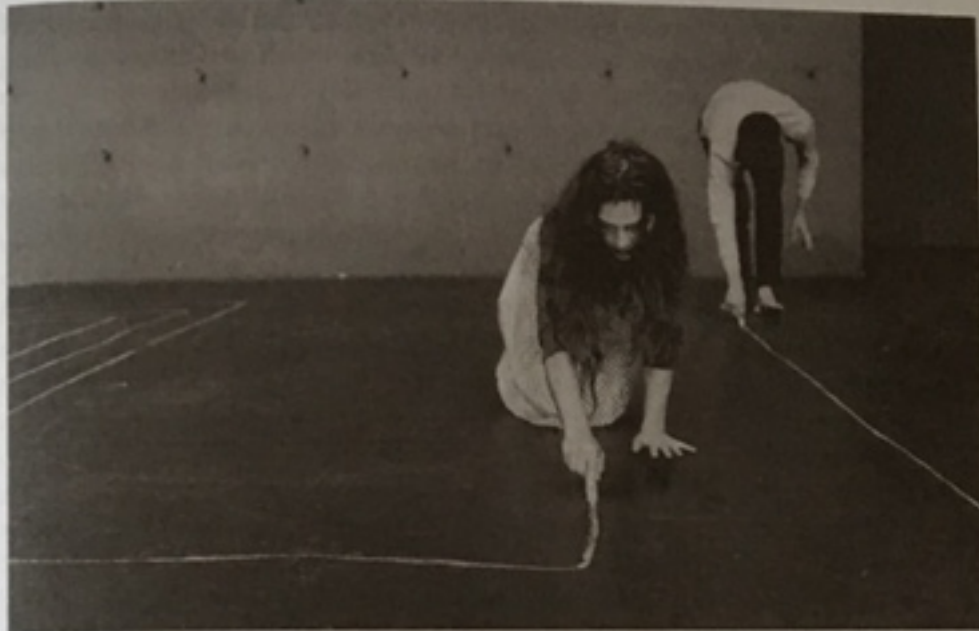
The space feels intimate and the audience feels physically close to the actors. The set up of the play is very simple and bare: Only two actors in an open space with black balloons on the side, chalk to draw with, and later strings attached around the stage. There is a girl, wearing a blue shirt, and a bearded boy, dressed in a yellow shirt. We do not know their ages, but for me the bearded male suggests they are not the youngest children. When the play begins the girl and the boy are kneeling down. They start drawing lines on the floor. They are demarcating the lines of the blueprint of the building where the school siege took place (Fig. 10.1). But they are also drawing the physical space of violence – a space visited by death and suffering. The lines they draw on the floor not only represent the walls of a school, but the walls of a site of violence: walls which would become ruins and rubble, material embodiments of trauma.

But now, the children draw casually, or rather, enthusiastically, because they cannot wait to share their story with the audience. They remember all the little details, and they want you to know all the little details too. Who stood where, what happened, where, and who said what. They share the details of the village, and mention the bordering region of Chechnya and the school system over



there. They tell, because they know and they can inform us. Their approach to the events of Beslan is factual and statistical.

Fig. 10.1: *Wij/Zij*. Actors are demarcating lines. (Photo by Theatre Bronks)



The two narrators are connected. When they draw together they cross each other and they draw in harmony. They move together and talk together, their speech is connected yet independent. They partially talk over each other and at times step back to let the other one do the talking. They also compete for the attention of being the one to give the details. They are energetic, vital and their movement is the only visible human connection to be found in the play.

Emotions are rarely, if ever, fully private experiences. Emotions are shared between the self and the environment even when experienced as inner states. Even if they are two on stage, the social element of emotion is lacking. It is not that the characters are unemotional; quite the opposite. They express plenty and richly, for example, with a sense of hurry and excitement and especially through their physical needs, which I will come back to. They move powerfully, and sometimes express vulnerability – the characters, the actors, are very human. But *them* (*zij*), is missing from the visual field. *The other* is absent. The mourning, suffering, dying, scared victims are missing too; and the interaction between us and them. The roles are being played in a manner which makes it difficult to capture feelings, except for physical exhaustion. When there is imaginary interaction between the terrorists and the victims, it is statistical. Furthermore,

since the terrorists' bodies are nowhere to be seen and felt, their interaction is hard to imagine. Social emotions, those affects that we share and circulate between each other, are excluded from the visual field and the felt sense.

The role of visible bodies, friend and enemy, can be explained with Damasio's (2012) help. According to Damasio the brain is able to both map its own body states but also the body states of others. Enabling the simulation of another organism's body state is found, at least partly, in the mirror neurons. The mirror neurons operate so that we are able to place ourselves in a body state of someone else. As we observe movement, our body states become as if we were moving ourselves (Damasio 2012: 103). Ramachandran and Blakeslee (1998) suggest that perhaps our association of the self with our body is less fixed as we might think, and that we may actually feel as if in another body. As an example they mention a chess game in which you might almost feel like you are in the body of the piece you are moving or defending (Ramachandran and Blakeslee 1998: 250). Thus, the absence of the physical bodies of the victims and the perpetrators makes it more difficult to connect with them. This is not to say that language does not matter, for the spoken or written word triggers powerful emotions too. Yet, there is something unique about the way we interact in the same space, or when we see and feel bodies in movement, that is not present when we only describe these movements or relations. There is something more fundamental in the lack of visible bodies expressing social emotions: when the categorical bodies of 'victim' and 'perpetrator' or 'enemy' are missing the spectators of the play are forced to see – to really see – the two children as they navigate the space with their own bodies, resisting categorisation and resisting dismissing their experience as politically insignificant.

It is not only that the visual register is not excited enough to imagine social emotions in action but also, or perhaps, in particular, the resistance of the typical roles of war experience: the victim-perpetrator dualism, even if the name of the play itself (Us/Them) would suggest the opposite. The characters are as if 'unaffected witnesses' or observers. As if they were documentary filmmakers or photographers who testify and deliver the testimonial, but are not traumatised themselves. If we go back to both Damasio's concepts of emoting and the developing emotional control coupled with social constraints, the seeming lack of emotions such as fear, anger and resentment or compassion in the play does not mean the actors are not representing emotions, or that children experiencing and witnessing war are not experiencing these emotions. The statistical approach in which the girl and the boy express enthusiastically the details of the event without clear signs of trauma or distress could be a coping strategy, it could represent local culture, it could be the workings of the maturing brain. The statistical approach and the lack of feelings of emotions could also be explained through pre-discursive emoting.

When social relations, social emotions and feelings of emotions are invisible, buried under the scientific rigour of the boy and the girl and their moving bodies, there are moments in the play that invite the audience to some pre-discursive emoting. Because these moments are rare, they stand out. They come, at least to me, when music is played loudly and the boy and the girl start moving with speed and intensity, and when the boy starts singing with a powerful voice a song in Russian, *Pofjushkoje Polje*, from the 1930s Soviet Union, about a soldier going to war. Their narration blends with the music and it does not matter anymore what they say. The detail, the statistics of what happened where, is silenced and the music-movement takes over the space and invites the spectator to an exchange of emotions. But again, not *feelings of emotions* (the conscious) but the energy of the music-movement (the bodymind). Not feelings of emotions in the victim-perpetrator framework of judgement and pity, but through the bodies which suddenly speak the language of emotions we recognise viscerally, corporeally, but not intellectually. The embodiment of emotion is found in (*e*)*motion*.

The music ends and the actors utter the word "dead". The girl is physically exhausted from running and moving. The boy lies on the floor slowly dying, making a choking noise. The girl starts choking too. But they correct that the noise is not from death, but from more than a thousand dehydrated people. Their throats are dry, heads hurting, they have cramps, they are hallucinating images of food.

### **The Thirst and the Giraffe**

The play utilises as its source of knowledge a BBC documentary *Children of Beslan* (2005), directed by Ewa Ewart and Leslie Woodhead, and contains many references to it. The film in which children are interviewed is perhaps the closest, right after person-to-person interaction, one can get to being able to see the child's perspective to experiencing war. The documentary shows colourful balloons commemorating the celebration of the Day of Knowledge. The play has balloons too, but they are black and later turn into bombs. In the documentary, children tell about the events in a factual manner, without tears. They are reserved and composed. The difference between the documentary and the play is that in the play the children are more energetic, they are less culturally represented through the value of modesty as the documentary portrays. In order to discuss further the experience of war the play represents I will turn occasionally to the documentary from now on.

Earlier, I quoted Merrell (2003: 13) on how mind follows the *bodymind*. Body and its experiences are exaggerated in the play. It is the bodymind doing – in Damasio's words *emoting* – but without expressing the feeling of emotion, or expressing it so subtly that it is easy to miss. Emotion is not lacking in children's experience of violence, but based on the play and the documentary film, along with the insight from developmental psychology on the maturing brain, *emoting* itself is less social, perhaps, more corporeal, more in-the-flesh than in language. In the documentary film, the children pause and slow their speech when they say something that is difficult, their bodies are still and tense. In the play, the boy and the girl do the opposite, they move, they dance, followed by intense physical reactions like fainting. Both the play and the documentary present children expressing through movement and stillness their emotional states. The calm and composure in the documentary, and the energetic-fainting children of the play, offer insights into emotions as embodied, even if we are unable to understand their experience. The practical application of this insight, I propose, is to pay attention to the body as a site of emotions, and the body as the site of healing, after witnessing and experiencing war.

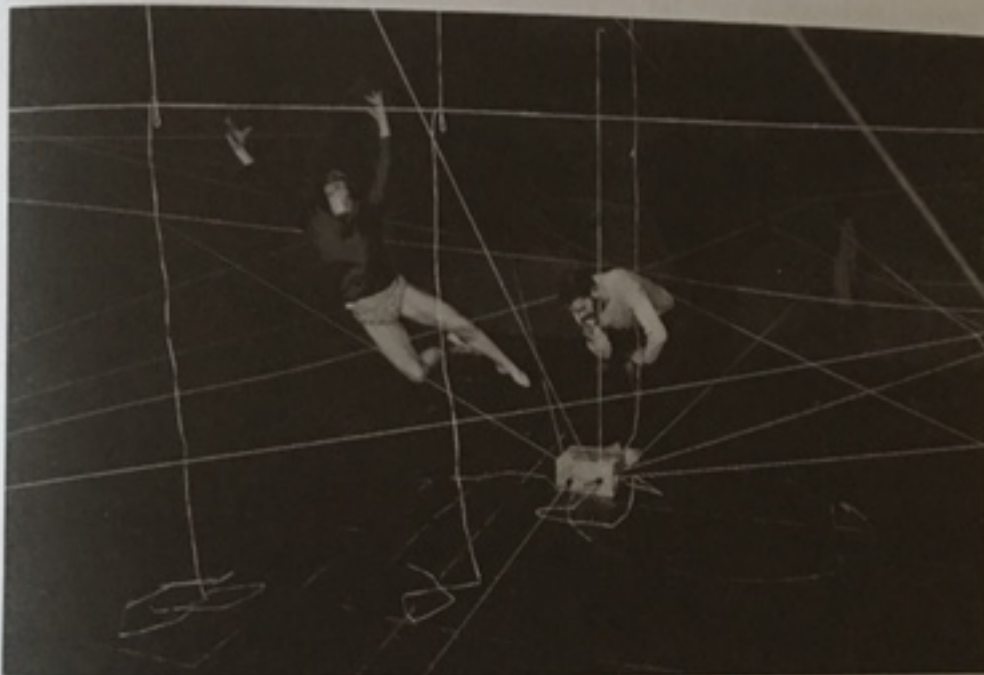
What the body expresses in the play is physical exhaustion, like thirst, which was the most pressing need for the hostages deprived of water for three days. It expresses loss of freedom when being captive in the gymnasium, constrained by the commands of the terrorists. Visually, the boy and the girl are constrained by the wiring of the bombs (white strings crossing the stage) which they try to dodge as they jump and run around. The jumping and the running reminds me of child's innate need to move, which makes it even harder for them to keep still. In the gym, children have lost the freedom to move, to use their voices, to touch, to play. The heat is overwhelming and the girl removes her skirt while the boy is ashamed and unable to undress (see Fig. 10.2; see also plate 13).

I stay with this image: the wiring, the crowded space, and limitation of movement. It is an aspect of war experience not too often acknowledged because we centre around physical violence that visibly 'hurts' and leaves scars. Being unable to move also hurts, not being able to touch, or laugh or speak also hurts. Boredom hurts. So what do the children do when they are hurt by the physical constraints and inability to fulfil their basic needs? In the play, they sing and dance together. But they are not able to sing and dance in the gym, so it must be their imagination. This dance is interrupted as they hit the wiring – the wiring that constrained their movement – as if bringing them back to reality.

The movement of the terrorists is also constrained. We come back to the relationship between the perpetrator and the victim, and the play's resistance of this categorisation as clear-cut. The girl and the boy explain how difficult it was for the terrorists to keep the detonators from activating the bombs by keeping a foot on them, and changing every two hours, slowly, very carefully. The

terrorist on the detonator cannot scratch or move. He cannot play basketball, or think about the purpose of life or his purpose in the gym, or do nothing else but to keep a foot on the detonator and change it carefully every two hours – or else BOOM! The boy and the girl proceed to mathematical calculations about the number of terrorists and how many hostages are still alive. Again they attend to the perspective of the terrorist, by mentioning how one of the terrorist women is killed because she gives water to a child, blurring the victim-perpetrator divide.

Fig. 10.2: *Wij/Zij*. Detonator and wires. (Photo by Theatre Bronks)



The hostages are statistics – dead or alive, they are only numbers. The boy explains the demands of the terrorists and the girl finds it funny that *liberty* is a word that keeps repeating while they are captive in the school. They have the same objective: freedom. Offering the perspective of the terrorist, again as factual, not as emotion, and the figure of the terrorist as physically constrained too, forces the viewer to reflect on the roles we assign to people at war.

But again the children feel exhausted by the heat. In the extreme situation, hungry and thirsty in the heat, trying to keep quiet and still, the children, inventive as they are, utilise their imagination. The play takes us to the world of dreaming – the subliminal – which, I believe, is one key instrument in the play's potential for reflection. It is as if a challenge to the children's factual-statistical

reaction to the violent event, even if the scenes which refer to imagination are not always so evident. What caught my attention as a spectator were dreams of a giraffe, a *Mission Impossible* (the film starring Tom Cruise) rescue, and alternative endings presented for the audience. The girl hallucinates about a giraffe surrounded by a cloud of smoke. The audience can smell the rather strong odour of the smoke and enter the dreamworld as their visual field is clouded. The hallucination makes her excited and agitated. Such excitement of "something is happening!" takes place in between the waiting and boredom of "nothing is happening". For the child such boredom can be excruciating, and the mind is then the only rescue. The *Mission Impossible* theme song accompanies a heroic intervention by "the courageous", eliminating all terrorists. Heroism was detected by Moscardino et al (2007: 1785) as an important cultural value in Beslan affecting local reactions to the siege. This heroism also plays a role in the beginning of the play when the children describe how the fathers race to drive as quickly as possible to the school. Moreover, even if the rescuers come from the outside of the building, the children are heroic too in their perseverance and attempts to help and save others. For the men of this region, in particular, showing vulnerability and emotion is not desirable (ibid.: 1784), thus the heroic male (adult or child) shows strength.

The two children then reveal that the rescue mission did not really go in the Tom Cruise style, but rather, embracing each other in sadness, they discover parents and children dead everywhere in the gym. A third version follows in which everyone is saved and the terrorist leader kneels down, takes off his mask and cries and asks for forgiveness while Aretha Franklin's *Oh Happy Days* plays in the background. Mothers look at the terrorists in the way only mothers can. The mothers say "no big deal", "we forgive you, everyone makes mistakes". They are forgiven, they forgive. The girl is back then with the giraffe, being elevated into the sky, and the boy wakes up in hospital. This storytelling – factual, corporal, imaginative – stands out as children's agency.

## Militarization of Childhood

Let me take a small excursion into the question of the militarisation of childhood as it frames the witnessing of war in the case of Beslan. In *Wij/Zij* there is a connection between the extraordinary direct experience of a hostage crisis and the more distant everyday witnessing of such events as the Beslan school siege. The play demonstrates the linkages between the two spaces where children experience and witness war. This experiencing and witnessing can lead to the militarisation of childhood, that is, facilitating a prioritisation of violent

solutions to insecurity, or military values and ideas being normalised (Basham 2011). It is important to acknowledge that in Beslan the impact of the siege – the impact of terror and the military solution to it – affected the entire community. As Moscardino et al. (2007) write, the attack severed communal ties and customs on a large scale. The attack affected the everyday traditional and cultural customs to the extent that the individual effects were accompanied with communal effects (ibid.: 1784).

Based on the documentary film and the play alike, the children of Beslan have a conception of violence in the form of terrorism. They have a conception of a heroic military, and some even have a conception of how much their life is worth in money, as compensation was offered by the Russian authorities for their suffering. They see terrorists as evil and they have first-hand experience of brutal violence, torture and the use of military force. One boy in the documentary film says they all became grown-ups, serious, after the event. Moscardino et al. (ibid.: 1781) document how a caregiver states “Before they were two very happy boys, but now they have changed radically: S. has become more adult, while A. looks much older. Something inside him has broken”.

The economy of terrorism, militarisation, and a sense of good and evil are all apprehended through the experience of war in the gym of School Number One. If we listen carefully, this means that the line between the adult and the child blurs: “we have grown up, we have become serious”. Their participation in the world of the political is tangible. But it is not only politically significant that the children of Beslan have conceptions and experiences of terrorism and the military. The pressing issue is how they grow into a culture of violence by these experiences, through witnessing war *in their own bodies*. The children of Beslan are not necessarily militarised because of the siege, rather, the experience of the siege can intensify the militarisation of their lives, and even create a turning point in which their interest in and knowledge about organised violence increases dramatically. The children of the documentary film dream of revenge. One young boy is thinking all houses should have missiles on their roofs when he plays with his Legos. One girl is burning pictures she draws of the terrorists. One boy dreams of cutting the throats of the terrorists open. Yet, these stories are only the surface: they are the reactions of the children expressed in words through a camera (perhaps also mediated by adults). There is likely much more the children experience in their bodyminds that they themselves are unable to vocalise. Thus, seeds of violence are planted deep, and the daily presence of armed forces guarding the school after the attack is just one example of how war continues to be lived.

In a study on Chechen suicide terrorism Speckhard and Ahkmedova (2006) found that traumatic experiences and feeling a duty to revenge made individuals more vulnerable to become recruited and self-recruited into terrorist acts. Both perpetrators and targets of violence can have a similar background of exposure

to extreme violence and trauma. This is the breeding ground for cycles of violence which can originate in childhood. Again, the categorisations get blurred as militarisation, and witnessing/experiencing violence, results in victims turning into perpetrators. Anna Politkovskaya's (2010: 269) discusses the killing of three of the terrorists (one man and two women) in Beslan by their leader due to their demands to let the children drink and leave – the same event referred to in the play. Politkovskaya asks are these three victims or fighters? Furthermore Politkovskaya (ibid.: 270) traces the siege in Beslan as one episode in the continuing Chechen slaughter and violation of human rights which creates only more resistance fighters. Nevertheless, when challenging the victim/perpetrator dichotomy (and I would rather use 'target of violence' than 'victim') one has to be mindful of ethical concerns related to it. Sometimes we need to name perpetrators as perpetrators to be clear about agency and responsibility.

Regardless of the extensive loss and trauma caused to the community and all the affected individuals in Beslan, in the same bodymind which imagines revenge and missiles, resides also the capacity to heal, help, support and imagine being lifted up high above all the suffering by a giraffe. Moscardino et al. (2007: 1785) identify resilience and healing strategies among the affected families, such as the reaffirmation of shared cultural values, affection among children and their parents, laughter and simply being together. These healing strategies are extremely important to study and discuss just as are the causes of violence and the means to end violence.

## Conclusion

With regard to photography, Frank Möller (2010) raises the important question of *how* we witness, and proposes that witnessing through art can be an active engagement where the witness becomes a self-critical active observer. The play itself encourages this by media-critical references and pre-discursive emotional representation. Especially towards the end of the play, media criticism is demonstrated humorously by the girl showing the audience how her face after the siege was screened in news around the world. A drop of blood is coming out of her ear, and the image goes global but is accompanied by nationally selected music. "But what a pity they show the less flattering side of my face", she ironically states. More importantly, the play situates the child at the centre of the war stage. The children of the play are by no means ignorant; they are immersed in detailed knowledge of the event, of their surroundings, the blueprint of the school. Children who witness at a distance are not ignorant,



either. It is important that the play is *for* children because this way it promotes children's own active engagement with witnessing, and offers an alternative way to reflect on war experience besides media representations and macabre aesthetics.

The play is an attempt to represent the child, but in the end, adults make the play. There are practical and ethical problems in engaging children in presenting their experiences of violence in the public, so for quite obvious reasons we have the adult as an intermediary between the child-witness and the audience. Even if we are still somehow captives of the child-adult power relation, the play encourages an adult's engagement with the child's world, rather than adults imposing their world upon children. The play does not adhere to the 'womenandchildren' categorisation where the child is a feminised, weak extension to the mother's body. Instead, the children of the play are imaginative, moving, living, breathing – and also dying – human being.

The war experience is heavily mediated by the theatrical format: witnessing takes place through such modalities which prevent meeting the actual individuals, hearing their voices. The audience is not encouraged to feel emotions – that is, *feel for* the victims – but to reflect on children *emoting*. Curiously enough, this is exactly what makes the play invite the spectator to engage as it relies on the aesthetic rather than the authentic, and the emotion rather than the feeling of emotion. The play does not represent trauma, but the siege as a documented event, representing emotions embodied by children. *Wij/Zij* does not tap into the emotions which we typically associate with war. The play does not touch us in the ordinary sense, because we are not offered representations of feelings of emotions, but rather emoting bodies. The body and its needs become the site of the political in war.

*Wij/Zij* sees children with agency both in terms of experiencing and witnessing a violent event through representing the peculiar statistical, yet imaginative, approach to the school siege, and questioning the assumption of children in war as mere powerless victims, feminised, over-emotional, weak, less rational. Perhaps children are able to imagine better futures, like the girl and the boy imagine how they are rescued, how the giraffe lifts the girl up when the world has collapsed. I want to leave the reader with this one insight: the capacity for imagination that sustains and nurtures us all.

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#### **Filmography**

- Children of Beslan* (2005), HBO documentary film, directed by Ewa Ewart and Leslie Woodhead.