

Adults cut down to size

Review *KID.* - HETPALEIS / BOG. / THEATER ARTEMIS

<https://www.pzazz.theater/nl/recensies/jeugdtheater/volwassenen-op-hun-nummertje>

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Because the performance is now as old as the children in the audience, hetpaleis, BOG. and Theater Artemis decided to restage 'KID.' after eight years. The idea behind this family production remains as simple as it is clever: separate parents from their children, put one group backstage and the other in the auditorium, and show them both what strange creatures 'adults' are. This, it turns out, goes without saying.

We, the adults, are ushered to some benches in a cluttered backstage area. Instead of a level stage, what we get to see is the back of a tall wooden wall with steps, light boxes, cables and metal frames: all the technical elements that make theatre rhyme with machinery rather than with magic.

Even fantasy seems cheap here. Fluffy animal suits straight from the costume shop spill out of trunks: bear, pig, cat, frog, clown, etc. It feels as if we've been thrown, not eight, but fifty years back in children's theatre: everything is ready to make the children squeal with delight at the silly animal characters. From the other side of the wall, we hear them chattering away as they enter. Why are we seated on this side?

BOG. immediately makes clear that it's not only going to play with the machinery of theatre, but above all with the boundaries of children's theatre.

Watching a performance from behind the stage is nothing new. It wasn't so in 2017 either, when BOG., then a young Flemish-Dutch collective, put on 'KID.' as their first show for children. Think also, for example, of 'Noises Off' (1982),

Michael Frayn's comedy with its doors swining open and shut, once hilariously performed by SKaGeN as 'Deurdedeurdeur' (Doordoordoor) and in which spectators get to see the back of a bedroom farce taking place on the front stage (and therefore behind the curtain). De Warme Winkel applied the same principle in 2015 in *De achterkant* (The rear side), a performance set in the wings of the Amsterdam Stadsschouwburg, while Toneelgroep Amsterdam was simultaneously performing 'Lange dagreis naar de nacht' ('Long Day's Journey Into Night').

Backstage performances expose the theatre as an illusion machine and turn everything inside out. Actors on stage are off stage. The essence is to be found elsewhere; like voyeurs, we get to see the leftover waste, as it were: everything that's generally not meant for us to see. There is something comical in itself about that. You get to see the performers in a 'bare' state.

In 'KID.', this is actually literally the case, or at least in a certain sense. When Judith de Joode, Simon Van Buyten and Sanne Vanderbruggen welcome us unclothed, they do so with a hearty grin. It immediately becomes clear that they'll be playing not only with the machinery of theatre, but also with the boundaries of children's theatre: how far can and may they go with our offspring on the other side of the wall, while we, for once, aren't there to 'hover' over them? We're granted the right to leave with our child at any time, but to do so we have to cross the stage ... 'KID.' plays delightfully on what distinguishes adults from children: ingrained barriers put up by social control.

**Humour at the front inevitably produces
silent tragedy at the back.**

The sharp dichotomy that BOG. has driven through its audience like a wall is carried through in the dramaturgy. For the duration of the performance, reality is reduced to just two worlds: 'front' and 'back', and 'child' and 'adult'.

Unlike in many other backstage performances, the real action in 'KID.' actually takes place at the front, on stage. As soon as the three actors have put on their animal costumes and climbed over the wall to loud cheers, we at the back see little of what's happening. We do hear everything, though.

And that's precisely the intention, because the main subject on stage is us, 'the adults'. Like in a biology class, the suited animals explain to our children what adult animals look like ('with a lot of hair, here and here and *here* too, of course!'), how they smell ('bad coffee breath') and what objects they use to affirm their existence ('from pressure washer to folding bike'). The essentialism of the lesson is matched by the colourfulness and specificity of the characteristic examples used to portray a population over 18 to a population over 8.

It is here that BOG. is at its best, with enumerations of everyday details that gradually paint a picture of an entire life, not to mention its fleetingness. Humour at the front naturally leads to quiet tragedy at the back. Work pressure, burnout, adultery, the fight against ageing, the loneliness of responsibility: all kinds of drawbacks to adult life are enumerated as so much trivia, but it is precisely because adults get to hear how children perceive them that these downsides are both put into perspective and made twice as painful.

The hand of Artemis chief director Jetse Batelaan is recognizable in the quiet way in which the roles are increasingly reversed. While children at the front hear things that are usually only intended for adult ears – 'sex' in particular becomes a prominent issue – the adults at the back, like docile children, are called on to sing a jingle during scene changes, hold up numbered signs with adult thoughts or pass their tobacco and smartphones over the wall as items of evidence. Our enthusiasm proves so great that – typical of Jetse Batelaan's performances – it turns into a big mess. Although difference is the spice of this performance, both sides enjoy it equally. Even as adults, we lap it all up.

**Family life is such a wonderful construction, a continuous sliding puzzle
involving young and old!**

Yet 'KID.' is so much more than just fun for all ages. By exploiting the over-socialization of adults and the under-socialization of children to the fullest, the show proves itself to be first-class meta-family theatre: in the guise of classic entertainment, it walks all over the new puritanical atmosphere in much youth theatre. This production proves once again how fruitful it can be to ask creators from the adult circuit to also work for children – a tradition that began in the 1990s with Oda Van Neygen at BRONKS and which Els De Bodt has now been pursuing consistently at hetpaleis for several years.

When 'KID.' ultimately breaks through the dichotomy between young and old at the end, creating space for the nuance that even adults are far from having everything under control, a slight existential atmosphere descends on the performance: family life is such a wonderful construction, a continuous sliding puzzle involving young and old! It has its front and back sides, its animal and human foundations, its ups and downs. But as the cradle of life, it is, far more than a dichotomy, a community in which the inadequacy of one generation is complemented by the competency of another.

Or at least among the kind of children and parents who can come and see such crazy and masterfully constructed productions as 'KID.'. In the past, today, and hopefully again in eight years' time.