

Katarzyna Biela  
Jagiellonian University  
Faculty of Philology

## **Encounters in Theatre and Liberature: B.S. Johnson and Zenon Fajfer**

For the last couple of decades, the book has been changing its function, its materiality gaining significance, setting it apart from other media, especially those that take advantage of digital technology. Following McLuhan's "medium is the message", we are all invited to reconsider what a medium is, what kind of media we surround ourselves with and how we make use of them.

Addressing this, the dissertation discusses liberature – a literary genre defined in 1999 by Zenon Fajfer and Katarzyna Bazarnik, encompassing works whose authors intentionally design the shape of the book, so that it matches their textual message. Aware that the reader's first contact with the book is primarily visual and tactile, for one needs to take the book in their hands to begin reading, they do not leave the shape of the volume, layout, fonts, colours, etc., to the designer, printer and publisher. They rather collaborate with them in the publication process to achieve the effect that is as close to their vision of the book as possible and offers space for the reader to actively engage and participate in the meaning-making process.

Extending beyond the growing literary research on the genre, the dissertation discusses the theatre practice of Fajfer and Bazarnik (*Zenkasi*), as well as the post-war British avant-garde author, B.S. Johnson, whom they see as an author aware of the materiality of the book even before liberature was defined. The thesis demonstrates how imagining the body moving within the theatre space influenced the authors' vision of the book as a body and space to be intentionally designed. It shows affinities between avant-garde literature and other arts, illustrating how the exploration of different media prompts authors to invent unconventional creative solutions. It also discusses the role of the audience and their engagement, as regards both the theatre and the book medium. Examining theatrical ephemerality and suggesting that reading liberature bears performative qualities, the dissertation envisions art as relational and touching, as a meeting point of the author and the audience.

Divided into three parts, the dissertation provides a theoretical reflection on the theatre and the book medium; an analysis of themes the chosen authors discuss in the theatre, especially

the motif of the body; and an examination of their compositional strategies, also as regards the rendition of their ideas on the pages of a drama or score. In this way, after the communication in the two media is examined, I move on to the questions of what the authors wanted to present in the theatre and how they presented it with the help of densely intertextual compositions, intermedia, and the architectural features of the theatre space.

The study is enriched by archival insight. Access to B.S. Johnson's manuscripts, typescripts and correspondence in the British Library as well as the reviews and manifestos collected in Fajfer and Bazarnik's private archive helped to understand the authors' working process, the publication and staging proceedings, but also the reception of their plays at the time when they were composed.

The first, theoretical chapter compares the book medium, as understood by the examined liberatic authors, with the theatre medium. It discusses the functions of language and text in them both, the use of space, as well as the position of subjects involved in the communicative process. It presents differences and similarities between the two media, the chances they give, and possible difficulties, paving the way to tackle the interdisciplinary work of Johnson and Zenkasi.

The second chapter discusses *You're Human Like the Rest of Them*, one of the most recognised plays of Johnson. It was of influence throughout his career, as he wrote it in 1964 and the first staging was possible only in 1971. The chapter introduces the reader to the work: its history, context, and main themes, especially the motif of the body, which constitutes an important part of Johnson's theatrical message and helps to construct parallels between his dramatic sensitivity and the liberatic approach to the book as a physical object. Johnson's troubled understanding of physicality and bodily faults is presented in relation to the biblical story about the creation of a man while his anxious preoccupation with ageing is analysed with reference to studies on the phenomenon. The chapter also situates Johnson's play within the British theatrical tradition, juxtaposing it with themes employed by the Theatre of the Absurd and the Angry Young Men.

The third chapter examines *Madam Eva, Ave Madam* by Zenon Fajfer and Katarzyna Bazarnik, a performance featuring actors with disabilities. It is the story of Zenkasi's discovery that a body with a disability allows to challenge conventions, confront the spectators' habits, expose stereotypes and, as a result, communicate unique truth about the human condition. It is also a study of how Zenkasi drew on Tadeusz Kantor, only to confront his views and establish their own theatrical association. The chapter provides background information about how Fajfer came up with the idea for *Madam Eva, Ave Madam* while working in a care home. It also

presents a survey of concepts and motifs employed by Kantor, which were subsequently revised by Fajfer and Bazarnik, including the Reality of the Lowest Rank, bio-object and themes used in *Dead Class*. It further outlines how Zenkasi's engagement with Kantor's art could be connected with their interest in the objecthood of the book.

The fourth chapter opens with an analysis of liberature in the context of intertextuality. Subsequently, it goes on to explore Johnson's plays from the later stages of his career. *One Sodding Thing After Another* is his completion of the 19th-century drama, *Woyzeck*, which Georg Büchner left unfinished. Since Johnson's play was rejected by the Royal Court Theatre, the author came back to it five years later and transferred its chosen parts to yet another play of his, namely *Compressor*. The chapter unplots this complex intertextual network, demonstrating how Johnson takes inspiration from other texts and makes certain themes flow through his entire *oeuvre*. Moreover, it considers difficulties Johnson faced while writing, publishing and staging his plays. The category of the unstageable, discussed by Karen Quigley, is employed to tackle Johnson's use of ambiguous stage directions and media. The analysis of *One Sodding Thing After Another* touches upon the representation of a medical experiment, which is juxtaposed with Johnson's attitude to the literary experiment, while the discussion on *Compressor* draws on Johnson's approach to play, game and sport, which are also referred to liberature.

The fifth chapter takes a look at Fajfer and Bazarnik's play, *Finnegans Make*, in which dialogues are composed out of quotes from different works written by James Joyce. It discusses how Zenkasi transfer prose onto the stage. It examines the structure of this theatrical collage and what it says about the Irish writer, as seen through Zenkasi's eyes. As the theme of religion comes to the spotlight, Zenkasi's theatre is also read along the studies on ritual i.a. by Richard Schechner and Erika Fischer-Lichte. The exploration of the black box, including the intrusions into the audience space, is considered and juxtaposed with the exploration of the page in the score of the play composed by Zenkasi after the staging. The chapter compares Zenkasi's interest in the unstageable with that traceable in Johnson's works.

Overall, the discussions conducted in the dissertation present Johnson as an author preoccupied with physical faults and deterioration. His plays demonstrate that the body is an ambiguous construct – an organism humans were given to survive, which may fail even in the face of the most basic tasks. Despite the grimness and melancholia, there is no doubt that Johnson does not wish to give up the search for new representations that would do justice to the disturbing content. Similarly, Fajfer and Bazarnik are interested in the body, physical struggles and transformations, which they explore with reference to non-normative bodies. They are not afraid of confronting the spectators with controversial subjects and convoluted, multi-layered

structures. They wish the audience to experience something remarkable and feel prompted to take a new perspective on apparently familiar matters. Both in the case of Johnson and Zenkasi, the themes explored in theatre can be linked with the subjects discussed in their literary works.

Furthermore, all authors in question are interested in communication and connections, which is demonstrated in the content of their plays, but also in intertextuality and audience engagement they aspire to. The extensive use of unconventional solutions that are difficult to stage, or the unstageable, reveals that writers fascinated by physicality and objects may simultaneously be mesmerised by the impossible and the inexpressible. In this way, Johnson, Fajfer and Bazarnik pose questions about the limits of language and prompt a reflection on how the theatre may develop in the face of a challenge.

Finally, the liveness and ephemerality characteristic of the theatre medium, which both Johnson and Zenkasi experienced, may offer an insight into the writer-reader partnership in liberature, and the writer's mediated presence. A liberatic book is designed by an author who can foresee the object being picked up by the reader; who envisions an encounter and intends to make it meaningful. Such a book calls for engaged, performative reading, during which the reader is free to balance between traditional page turning and more dynamic actions, e.g. scattering and assembling fragments. They are at liberty to choose where and for how long they engage with the work, which shows that liberature is personal, portable art that expects completion while staying independent from conventions and timetables. In this way, one of the clues to the genre, crucial for both creators and readers, is being with the Other in a particular moment, with all the comfort, but also difficulties that this brings.