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Citation:

Senior, AM (2016) Beginners on Stage: Arendt, Natality and the Appearance of Children in Contemporary Performance. *Theatre Research International*, 41 (1). 70 - 84. ISSN 0307-8833 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0307883315000620>

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Article (Accepted Version)

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Beginners on Stage: Arendt, Natality and the Appearance of Children in Contemporary Performance

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This paper examines the complex questions that arise around the appearance of children in contemporary performance. Drawing on performances by Nottingham-based theatre company Zoo Indigo and Tim Etchells and the Flemish theatre company Victoria, I consider the extent to which Hannah Arendt's theorisation of natality as 'the new beginning inherent in birth' that gives rise to the political potential to 'begin something anew' can help us to understand the ethico-political dimensions of children's appearance as natal, biological and relational beings in contemporary performance. In particular, I draw on feminist interpretations of Arendt's work to articulate the significance of the embodied aspects and ethical quality of children's relation to adult spectators and performers. I argue that these performances prompt a rethinking of the child's potential to generate political intervention, which moves beyond Arendt's gendered account of political agency in a public sphere from which children are excluded.

Herbert Blau once wrote that 'the theater stinks most of mortality'.¹ The relation between theatre and death outlined by Blau in the early eighties laid the foundations for subsequent claims about theatre and performance having an intimate relationship to mortality and loss, most notably paving the way for Peggy Phelan's much cited ontology of performance as 'becom[ing] itself through disappearance'.² Theatre and

performance scholars' fascination with mortality continued into the 1990s and 2000s, with Elin Diamond claiming that 'performance is always already a site of death'³ and Jill Dolan proposing that theatre 'promotes a necessary and moving confrontation with mortality'.⁴ Such meditations on death and dying facilitated a plethora of important claims about the ontology and epistemology of live performance. However, a different trend, for including children onstage in contemporary experimental performance across Europe, which emerged towards the end of the twentieth century, demands a shift in our attention as performance scholars and makers towards *beginnings* rather than endings in performance. If, as Dolan argues, theatre confronts us with our own and others' mortality, the premise of this article is that the appearance of children in the context of live art and contemporary performance practice instead confronts us with our own and others' *nativity*: the condition of being born and the potential for new beginnings and interventions that that first appearance entails. As performance theory's unspoken other, nativity is a fruitful means through which to address some of the ethico-political issues that emerge from the inclusion of children on the 21st century stage, and elevates birth beyond the marginalised position it currently occupies in performance scholarship.

One twentieth century thinker who gave careful attention to the generative possibilities of nativity was political philosopher Hannah Arendt. In her writings, most notably in *The Human Condition* (1958), she established three meanings of nativity that help shed light on how children appear onstage in contemporary performance: 1) the event of biological birth, 2) the new beginning inherent in birth that means as 'beginners' we can create something new through action, and 3) being

together with others who bear witness to our unique appearance in a political capacity.⁵ These conceptualisations of natality are useful because they help to illustrate the way in which the child in contemporary performance practice is often figured in relation to her biological life, her capacity to generate something new through the unexpected and the unanticipated, and her appearance as a subject in formation who speaks and/or acts amongst others in a public environment. However, the importance Arendt ascribes to natality as the 'actualization' of political action within the public sphere also has its limitations.⁶ Her conceptualization of natality in terms of action in the political realm depends on the exclusion of children from the political arena, because Arendt believes that their newness needs to be protected from the world and, in turn, the world should be protected from their newness.⁷ Natality as the realisation of political action therefore enacts a gendered separation between the public and the private realm, which excludes what Arendt calls 'labour', by which she means activities of biological necessity, from the public realm of action where 'men [sic] exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly'.⁸ Arendt proposes that one can never be politically free if one is limited by such necessity and in doing so she draws heavily on the idea of the Greek *polis* to reinstate the separation of the political sphere of action from the private realm of household labour. Since children onstage in contemporary performance have the capacity to bring both labour (as activities relating to their biological needs) and work (as the skilled making of things in the world through the creative acts of performing and collaborating) into the public realm of the theatrical

event, children set in motion a different notion of 'beginning' than that envisaged by Arendt.

Two performances that explore the potential of children as beginners onstage and provide the focus for this analysis are Nottingham-based Zoo Indigo's *Under the Covers* (2009), and Tim Etchells' collaboration with the Flemish theatre company Victoria, *That Night Follows Day* (2007). In these performances the dynamics between adult audience members and child performers raise complex questions about responsibility, power, protection and authority in adult/child relationships. The foregrounding of the biological life of infants and young children onstage in *Under the Covers* and the appearance of adolescents as collaborators and performers in *That Night Follows Day* puts children's 'newness' under the spotlight and, in doing so, asks to what extent we recognise children as appearing in a political capacity. *Under the Covers* and *That Night Follows Day* are indicative of a growing interest in children as both performers and performance makers of experimental work on the European contemporary performance and live art scene, which emerged with works such as *Genesi: From the Museum of Sleep* (1999) and *Tragedia Endogonia* (2002-2004) by Italian theatre company Società Raffaello Sanzio.⁹ At around the same time, Belgium-based arts organisation CAMPO (formerly Victoria) produced Josse De Pauw's *üBUNG* (2001), the first part of a trilogy of works that included Etchells' *That Night Follows Day* (2007) and Gob Squad's *Before Your Very Eyes* (2011), premiering in Brussels and Ghent, respectively. Other examples include Belgian theatre collective Ontroerend Goed's performances with teenagers in *Once and For All* (2008) and *Teenage Riot* (2010), while works such as Quarantine's *Old People*,

Children and Animals (2008), Bryony Kimming's *Credible Likeable Superstar Role Model* (2013), and Vincent Dance Theatre's *Motherland* (2014) attest to this interest in collaborating with children among British contemporary performance makers.

What many of these performances share is an exploration of the child as a subject in formation, where the relation to the adult audience or adult performers they appear to or with plays a key role in determining how the child is figured and positioned within the work. This interest in the child as relational being is unsurprising at a time when popular or dominant perceptions of children in Europe continue to echo the sentiments of Arendt's cautionary tale in the 1950s of protecting children from the world and protecting the world from children. As Bridget Escolme summarizes it:

Children in Europe are a sensitive issue. Child abuse and pornography are both a genuine problem and a tabloid mainstay: we must protect our children from the real-life monsters that lurk around every corner. Delinquency and disruption hold equal pride of place in popular mythology: we must control and punish our children more effectively, they are the twenty-first century's real-life monsters ...¹⁰

This demonising discourse on young people offers some indication of the socio-political context within which my analysis of *Under the Covers* and *That Night Follows Day* emerges. First, I shall explore how *Under the Covers* positions the child onstage in relation to what Arendt would call 'labour' in order to interrogate some of these dynamics of protection and responsibility in adult/child relationships. I then discuss the child in *That Night Follows Day* as collaborator and performer who, by

undertaking what Arendt would call 'work', paradoxically demonstrates her newness as the potential for action. As such, these performances illustrate labour and work as always already politicized in such a way that children's potential as beginners cannot be separated from their appearance as biological, relational beings who demand an ethical response. It is this ethical relation of response and responsibility that is at stake in Arendt's moral discourse on protection, and is overlooked within the climate of fear around children and adolescents in the contemporary European context. The question of the ethical thus marks the cultural and political significance of further understanding the use of children in contemporary performance in this context.

Nativity and Labour: *Under the Covers*

Arendt defines natality as 'the fact that human beings appear in the world by virtue of birth'.¹¹ It is with this natality, she argues, that humans 'are equipped for the logically paradoxical task of making a new beginning because they themselves are new beginnings and hence beginners'.¹² In acting politically, one is activating this first appearance in birth by 'actively disclos[ing] oneself to a plurality of others by interacting with them through words and deeds' in public and in a way that, therefore, cannot be fully controlled by the person who is speaking and acting.¹³ Yet, Arendt does not consider children politically active 'beginners' because, as Joseph Betz puts it, she believed that children 'need privacy to grow and develop well. They should be kept away from the glare of floodlights, stage lights, camera lights'.¹⁴ How tenable is this distinction between what Arendt calls 'first birth' as the biological event of our birth and 'second birth' as being born into the political realm? And what

is at stake when children are thrust into the spotlight? These are some of the questions explored in *Under the Covers*, which, as the title suggests, sought to retain this sense of protection over children even whilst exposing the private realm of the child to the public realm of the theatre.

Under the Covers was devised and performed by Zoo Indigo's Rosie Garton and Ildiko Rippel and first staged in England in 2009. The show sets out to explore the way 'artists juggle the work they make with the lives they choose to lead'.¹⁵ The makeshift 'homemade' aesthetic in *Under the Covers* reflects this juggling act between work and home life and is realised in the opening of the show when Garton ('Rosie') and Rippel ('Ildiko') reveal that they are unable to get babysitters for their children and so they ask the audience to 'keep an eye on them' while they perform. Autobiographical material from the performers as both mothers and theatre makers is interspersed with reenactments of scenes from *Thelma and Louise* that allow the performers a fictional 'escape' from their parental responsibilities and create a parallel between their own lives and the characters' struggle to manage different versions of themselves. Upstage, a screen shows four of Garton and Rippel's own children asleep in bed via a live Skype transmission from the children's bedrooms. While the performers admit relatively early on in the piece that the children are not alone, and are in fact being looked after by their fathers, their admission is contextualised as a sort of tendency towards being over-protective: 'We're mothers, it's what we do' and 'Better safe than sorry'.¹⁶

Nativity as the event of biological birth is realised in *Under the Covers* through the foregrounding of the biological lives of the children who, sleeping in the

comfort of their own cots and beds at home, are seen as natal beings closer to their own birth than the adults they were with onstage. The elemental need for the infants onstage to stay asleep was explicitly felt in the performance I attended at the Nuffield Theatre in Lancaster in 2013 whenever one of the children stirred and visibly interrupted the flow of the 'performance'. During these moments the audience, as babysitters, were tasked with the responsibility of soothing the children back to sleep via a microphone that feeds sound into their rooms. Following the performers' instruction to use comforting phrases such as 'shh', 'I know I know', 'there there', the audience obliged in their responsibility for the children's biological well-being.¹⁷ Our relation to them as babysitters, the children's genetic resemblances to their mothers onstage, the foetal positions they adopted as they slept and their lack of conscious awareness of the performance happening with and around them all contributed to an interpretation of the child as natal and biological being in *Under the Covers*. The positioning of children as natal beings by virtue of their biological birth was further emphasised in an overarching autobiographical story of a heart-breaking account by one of the company members of their experience of stillbirth at thirty-nine weeks. For me, at least, this dialogue concerning the loss of a child and the loss of feeling the child's movement in pregnancy powerfully situated the children onstage in relation to their own births beyond their virtual presence by heightening even the smallest movements of the children on the two dimensional screens and making their aliveness even more palpable. During this intimate and tender moment the children's appearance onstage was located in relation to their physical emergence from the mother's body.

The appearance of the children in relation to their own birth and biological needs in *Under the Covers* demands that we locate an alternative meaning of natality that is closer to Adriana Cavarero's feminist reconsideration of natality as 'a coming from the mother's womb'.¹⁸ Alison Stone argues that Cavarero's conceptualization takes into consideration 'our condition of being materially born from our mothers' bodies' and resists Arendt's conventionally masculine notion of natality as 'uniqueness, action, politics, and plurality' in the public realm at the expense of actual physical birth which, for Arendt, remains firmly in the private sphere of the home.¹⁹ The children's potential to be politically active beginners in this performance space, therefore, does not depend on being political agents making explicit their appearance in the public realm through speech and action, as Arendt would have it. Instead, the significance of biological birth in *Under the Covers*, and specifically the way the biological lives of the children are intimately tied up with mother-performer and babysitter-spectator interactions, become a necessary part of witnessing the uniqueness of the children in relation to their first other: the mother. As Stone argues, '[t]o be born is still to appear as someone unique amongst others ... but one appears in physically emerging from one's mother's body'.²⁰ A reading of the children onstage as unique beings born of their mother's bodies was reinforced by the performer ending the birth story with a verbal nod to the virtually present children here and 'now', whose uniqueness was underlined by the mention of their individual names. This collapse of the private sphere into the public sphere by means of drawing attention to birth as a biological event is significant because it emphasises the political importance of children's biological lives (as well as the biological lives

of the mothers). In particular, it serves to foreground how contemporary work/life issues affect the parental ability to be physically present with one's children to comfort them and consequently demonstrates how this might impact on the child's biological need to sleep. As Betz notes in his introduction to Arendt's thought, 'all that is life-giving and life-sustaining belongs in the privacy of the home, so does labor, the labor of tending nature as well as the labor of birthing'.²¹ By placing the life-giving act of birth and the life-sustaining acts of sleep in the performance space, *Under the Covers* draws attention to the biological life of the child as always already politicised in their relation to the adult-spectator, mother-performer. The politically-inflected decision to give someone the responsibility to soothe, feed and watch your child, or to be forced into employing a child-minder because of the lack of flexibility in one's working hours, is shown to be intimately linked with the child's biological existence.

By facilitating this interaction between the child and the adult in such a way that the spectator is encouraged to experience the ethical particularities of the need to 'protect' the child, *Under the Covers* importantly moves beyond Arendt's moral discourse of protecting the world from children and protecting children from the world. It does so by enabling asymmetrical relations of power, care, and responsibility to emerge between self and other in this piece. These ethically inflected relations, for example, are played out most notably in a provocative invitation that is extended to the audience during the last third of the performance. The performers stop the show to ask: 'You don't think this is live, do you?'²² This is quickly followed up by a call for volunteer audience members to illustrate that the

feed was indeed live by playing a toy instrument into the microphone: one of the older children stirred in response to the sound. This request from the performers undermined the general assumption that adults have a social duty towards protecting children and provocatively raised the question of parental responsibility, particularly given that the performers' 'authentic' non-scripted responses to the children throughout the show instead demonstrated a great deal of care and concern for their wellbeing. A sense of civic and ethical responsibility for both individual spectators and the audience as a collective was thus foregrounded when the welfare of the children came into focus in this intentional act of disturbing their sleep for the purpose, as it were, of adult play in the theatre.

One of the questions raised by this request to disrupt a child's slumber in this context is how do I act responsibly, ethically and in a way that would be deemed civil and appropriate with an essentially 'vulnerable' group? Whilst the risk of waking a sleeping baby or child, though not particularly desirable, is somewhat harmless, small gasps and nervous giggles amongst members of the audience suggested a collective unease and a general reluctance to participate in disturbing the children. Although the power and control appeared to be completely in the hands of the 'knowing' adult spectator at the expense of the 'unknowing' child performer who had no choice but to be 'stirred' from their sleep, the pressure to answer the request of the performers to generate noise in line with established conventions of audience participation foreclosed, to some extent, the possibility of refusing to participate in making the children react. Whilst nobody actively refused to participate in generating

a response from the children in the performance I saw, an audience member did shout out 'switch it off we're upsetting him' in a previous showing of the work.²³

The capacity for intervention in *Under the Covers* therefore lies with the spectator who, in her relation and response to the child, performers and other audience members, 'can begin something unprecedented' by making explicit her (non-)participation in the act of disrupting the children.²⁴ On the one hand, this explicit appearance can be made through participation, as was the case with the aforementioned audience member who took issue with the act. On the other hand, the action of the spectators who chose to make noise was made explicit as an action that had direct and material consequences through the physical and verbal stirrings of the children. The parallel that Arendt draws between theatre as 'the political art par excellence' and a 'space of appearance' where political action occurs is thus put into practice in *Under the Covers* when the spectator 'acts' among others who bear witness to their participation or refusal.²⁵ As spectators in this moment, we 'appear to others as others appear [us]' and are therefore accountable to and possibly judged by other audience members through our actions.²⁶ However, while the theatre is predominantly a metaphor for the political sphere in Arendt's work, *Under the Covers* foregrounds 'action' as the potential to begin something new, as an embodied practice. As Judith Butler argues, '[Arendt's] view forgets or refuses that action is always supported, and that it is invariably bodily, even in its virtual forms'.²⁷ The embodied aspects of 'action' become evident in this work by drawing the spectator's attention to the biological life of the children and their significant albeit small verbal and physical reactions to audience interaction, as well as when the houselights are

brought up on the bodies of the spectators that shake a rattle or sing a lullaby into the microphone. Illustrating the embodied nature of action highlights the material conditions of children's biological and working 'labour' and begins to shed light on the often private struggle of those who attempt to balance parenthood with careers in the theatre and other creative arts industries.

The embodied aspects of children's appearance in *Under the Covers* situates the issues of 'protection', children's labour, and the child's appearance in public space in relation to the ethical dynamic of responsibility to the other (child) *as well as* the political dynamic of taking action in the face of all the other others (audience and adult performers). In doing so, the performance mobilises a 'space of appearance' akin to what David Williams, drawing on Arendt, describes as a site for 'civic responsibility, collaboration and ethical action'.²⁸ Whereas humans appear as 'equals' in Arendt's space of appearance, children are always in a potentially unequal relation to the adults on whom they depend for, in this case, their biological needs. This is made visible in *Under the Covers* through the inclusion of what Arendt would consider the 'private' realm in a public space, where labour as biological necessity is tied up with work in the theatre to the extent that both work and labour cannot be considered separate from but rather constitutive of 'action'. Shifting our attention to natality and appearance therefore might help us to better understand how children in the theatrical environment have the potential to participate in or affect action that has political significance, by demonstrating the importance of the embodied aspects and ethical quality of their relation to us as both spectators and adults.

Nativity and Work: *That Night Follows Day*

In November 2014, I saw a rehearsed reading of Tim Etchells' and Victoria's *That Night Follows Day* as part of Leeds' Compass Live Art Festival, which was directed by GETINTHEBACKOFTHEVAN's Hester Chillingworth. 16 children between the ages of eight and fourteen years from the Leeds area read out statements that were mainly spoken in unison as a chorus about how adults relate to them: 'You feed us. You dress us. You choose clothes for us. You wash us. You bathe us. You clean our teeth. You sing to us. You watch us when we are sleeping. ... That the sun comes up in the morning and goes down again in the night'.²⁹ Whereas *Under the Covers* teased out questions of responsibility, protection, privacy and care with infants and young children who are largely passive in their state of sleep onstage, *That Night Follows Day* brought young children and adolescents to the stage to voice these adult/child dynamics to an audience that was specifically *not* invited to participate in shaping the form that these dynamics took in the performance. This begs the question: how does the appearance of young children and adolescents as collaborators and skilled performers with an awareness of the theatrical environment in which they are seen affect their status as potential political agents? In other words, to what extent do they appear as 'beginners' in the Arendtian sense and what does this tell us about the child as a 'speaking' and acting being on the contemporary stage?

That Night Follows Day is a show which, in its original context, was made specifically for adults, although the rehearsed reading in Leeds attracted a multi-generational audience. Etchells' text explores parenthood, childhood and 'the frames

(societal, intellectual, educational, familial, physical) that adults construct for young people'.³⁰ The original script was created through a collaborative process beginning with a draft text written by Etchells to which 'new material was added, developed, structured and refined in a workshop process with the 16 young people who perform the piece'.³¹ After its premiere in Brussels, *That Night Follows Day* was first shown in the UK at the Fierce Earth Festival in Birmingham in 2007. Unlike many of its previous productions, however, the rehearsed reading at the Howard Assembly Rooms in Leeds Grand Theatre was performed in English rather than Flemish and was very simple in its staging with only 16 chairs in an end-on configuration.

As creators and collaborators, the children who contributed to Etchells' original text in the Flemish context in which the work was first devised challenge the conservatism that Julia Lupton identifies within Arendt's concept of a natality employed to take control of the threat that is initiated by the newness of the infant.³² In her essay 'The Crisis of Education', Arendt observes a loss of authority among educators in North America in 1950s, which she attributes to their refusal to take responsibility for the world into which children are born.³³ She argues that educators need to recognise the child's natality as radical newness in order to protect and guide them into the world that the adult is responsible for representing. The inclusion of children in the process of making the work suggests that they have some creative input into the way the world is 'represented' in the piece. Reviews of the work corroborate the children's influence on the work, noting that the show 'allow[s] us glimpses into the individuals who have come together to think about how they are being formed as people'.³⁴ The devising process seems, therefore, to generate an

opportunity for the radical newness of the child to express itself by inviting the children as collaborators to contribute to a text that itself draws out the Arendtian dynamics of protecting and being protected from children: 'You say, "it's all going to be ok"' and 'You teach us to choose our words. You tell us to watch our tongues'.³⁵

The event of natality that is enacted in *That Night Follows Day* appears at first glance to be closer to the plurality of acting among others than to the event of biological birth or necessity seen in *Under the Covers*. As older children who speak and act in the theatrical event, there is an increased potential for the children of *That Night Follows Day* to become Arendtian beginners who '[w]ith word and deed...insert [them]selves into the human world'.³⁶ However, it is rather the children's 'onslaught of the new' that is made available through the unexpected and unanticipated contributions of both the absent collaborators who co-authored the text for the premiere, and those performing in the rehearsed reading in Leeds.³⁷ Since all of the statements in the show take on a similar structure, the repetition of the format quickly becomes familiar to the spectator and creates a comfortable expectation that is gradually undermined by the unexpected content and accusatory tone of its delivery: 'You take advantage of our trust' and 'You look at us with expressions that we can't exactly read or properly recognise'.³⁸ The chorus is reminiscent of children chanting in unison in assembly, albeit with an intimidating edge that speaks the unspoken: 'You tell us to shut up ... You tell us to shut our big fucking mouths'.³⁹ Children articulating the words of adults in the presence of adults inevitably bring

novelty to words that the spectators might have used themselves or heard spoken to them as children in a new way that is potentially difficult for them to digest as adults.

In such moments, *That Night Follows Day* creates a space for what Lupton refers to as the infant's 'absolute novelty and futurity' by exploiting the theatrical convention that we, the audience, sit and listen, often in the dark.⁴⁰ The audience is not, in other words, invited to stand up and respond. Instead, these children exercise their authority over them in a way that parallels the authority adults wield over children: 'You tell us that you need a bit of peace. You tell us to keep the noise down'.⁴¹ As one reviewer put it, 'The intensity of adults listening to children in a one-way exchange of such dramatic interpretation has never been more palpable'.⁴² By referring to the child's 'futurity', I do not mean that the children in this performance are containers of an idealised hope for an anticipated future that so often accompanies images of childhood in the popular media. Neither do I mean to suggest that the child onstage is simply a signifier for the future. Here, I agree with Joshua Abrams who, following Giorgio Agamben, suggests that the child is not a 'mere placeholder for futurity' particularly when he observes that 'onstage the child exists without a future, limited to a present as perpetual child'.⁴³ Instead, hearing these adult words echoed back by children onstage has the effect of prompting a different kind of future, much like the unanticipated future of the Derridean 'to come' (*l'avenir*) which, at least for this spectator, pushes me to act, namely to revisit the way I address, instruct, care for and relate to my own child.⁴⁴ The forcefulness of the words 'You tell us to shut our big fucking mouths' puts 'you' as the adult in a

position of responsibility and, in doing so, demands a response that potentially reminds you of your own status as beginner with the possibility of affecting change.

That Night Follows Day as a performance event, therefore, harnesses natality as a relational encounter between spectator as adult and performer as child, and in doing so potentially draws attention to the spectator's own status as a beginner who is prompted to respond and potentially affect change *in his or her relation to the child*. Whether this reflects the 'conceptual moment when one is born into the political as the sphere where acting together can create the truly unexpected' is uncertain.⁴⁵ However, what is evident is that this relational dynamic creates what Jeffrey Champlin recognises as natality's openness to an unknowable future.⁴⁶ *That Night Follows Day* enables something unexpected to occur by paradoxically, as critic Lynn Gardner has summarised, 'creat[ing] a sense of how much of childhood is about being coerced and bullied into doing things that you don't want to do by adults'.⁴⁷ Power is central to generating this relational encounter, as the children onstage seem to be aware. There was a look of delight on some of the child performers' faces at the power they were able to wield by making a handful of spectators gasp when the first expletive was spoken. Later on in the performance, during what appeared to be an improvised moment, one of the children proudly exclaimed to a fellow performer, 'the audience were really shocked by the swearing'. The violence that was so poetically captured onstage by the children's voices inhabiting and repeating the words of an adult telling a child to 'shut up' affected a recognition of the child as other who brings new meaning to these words. The text's warnings about the restrictive nature of the frameworks that adults set up to manage

the behaviour of children suggest their newness in this theatrical moment is not something to be regulated through a moral impulse towards protecting them. Rather the responsibility one is called to assume in this theatrical environment is more akin to an ethical relation of responsibility to the other, failing which, the violence of the words *shut the fuck up* are destined to be repeated by the adult.

For Arendt, speaking and acting together is only political to the extent that it is free from work. However, during moments where it is difficult to distinguish the children's contributions to *That Night Follows Day* as either work or non-work, their potential to intervene in the political comes to the fore.⁴⁸ We can assume that what the children in the rehearsed reading were doing was work to the extent that they were involved creatively in the performing of the piece, and non-work when those moments of them responding to each other or the audience were available to the spectator: a smile, a look, or a gesture that had the feel of having not been directed. The children's status as producers who were 'at work' onstage was emphasised by their collective awareness of the power and responsibility that they held on this public stage to turn adults' words back on them (in a situation where the adult cannot answer back). An older performer, for example, inflected his lines about parental choices and decisions with a judgemental tone for comic effect and thus revealed his awareness of the power dynamic created by the convention that performers speak and act while audience members sit in silence. A younger child struggled to deliver a line and was visibly frustrated by failing in her task. The children revealed in such moments that they were at work to the extent that they had the 'capacity to fabricate and create a world' and as such participate in Arendt's notion of work as the

production of 'artificial' worldly things, which includes the making of art.⁴⁹

However, the uniqueness of their voices in both the solo and choral moments and the extent that the children demonstrate a connection to the material that is performed but does not appear to be scripted, emphasized their novel *appearance* in this professional context by cutting through the normative presence of children onstage, for example, as exhibiting a 'talent' or performing a standard role in a nativity play. An assumed separation between work and non-work is confused because, as Etchells notes, children 'are always exceeding and escaping [the] frames' that we set up for them as adults, including the theatrical frameworks that are set up here by the director and by the spectatorial expectations of some audience members who may have only ever seen their child or grandchild onstage playing a fictional character.⁵⁰

That Night Follows Day is not a performance about children gaining political agency through their appearance as unique beings who '[w]ith word and deed ... insert [them]selves into the human world' by means of what Bonnie Honig calls a 'heroic, agonistic account of political action'.⁵¹ Rather, *That Night Follows Day* makes the political life of the child available to the spectator as someone who can open up the potential for action, in the three ways I have discussed: in the co-authorship and novelty they bring to the stage and the creative process, through a relational connection to the audience that facilitates an ethically-inflected notion of responsibility and by confusing the boundaries between work and non-work. By recognising children's potential for action in the sphere of contemporary performance we can begin to anticipate the kinds of interventions that might be prompted by their future appearance onstage. The children's collaborative

participation, for example, arguably shows the need for increased co-authorship and openness to children's novelty and newness in the creative process in a contemporary performance context, particularly in the UK. As one of the UK Guardian readers notes in the online 'comments' section, in response to theatre critic Lynn Gardner's review of *That Night Follows Day*, 'Thank God for the influx of Ghent-based and other Flemish theatre-makers to our stages- opening up for us the ways that we repress, fear and limit teenage expression in this country'.⁵² However, while the blurring of the boundaries between work and non-work arguably enables the theatrical equivalent of children 'escaping the frames' we provide for them as adults in *That Night Follows Day*, the potential for exploitation within such frames haunts these theatrical works and emphasises the political importance of a consideration of our ethical relation with children. In short, *That Night Follows Day* and *Under the Covers* demand from us, not a moral response to a socially constructed notion of 'child', but an ethical encounter that is closer to a relationship of responsibility between self and other that recognises the child in terms of his or her unique alterity.

Nativity and Performance

A theory of nativity can inform our understanding of the appearance of children in contemporary performance as natal, biological and relational beings who demand ethical attention. To acknowledge the child onstage as a 'beginner' in these terms troubles the gendered assumptions inherent in Arendt's conceptualisation of political agency as a hierarchized and masculinized mode of appearance in the public sphere that is free from work and labour. Rethinking the child onstage as beginner is thus

related to, but has yet to be fully explored in, the emerging scholarship on children in theatre and performance, which has primarily been concerned with issues of exploitation, risk and responsibility, on the one hand, and children's potential as 'harbingers of a new form of politics' on the other.⁵³ Examining the ethico-political dimensions of child performer and adult audience relations is especially important at a time when contemporary performance, particularly in the UK, is increasingly putting children, parenthood, and the idea of birth centre stage. Recent examples include Mammalian Diving Reflex's *Nightwalks with Teenagers* (In Between Time Festival, 2015), Third Angel's *Labour Intensive* (Derby Theatre, 2015), and workshops by The Mums and Babies Ensemble (Gateshead International Festival of Theatre, 2014). In the wider context of dominant representations of children in the UK media, there is a more pressing need to critically reflect on child-adult relationships. This is especially urgent where the ethico-political complexities of these relationships are simplified such as in Lyn Gardner's 2008 discussion of *That Night Follows Day*, where she repeats Shami Chakrabati's comment at the Action on Children's Arts conference that 'we really seem to hate kids in this country'.⁵⁴

Recognising the potential of children in performance to 'begin something unprecedented' gestures towards maintaining an openness to the political and ethical contribution that theatre and performance might make more generally. If we agree with Nicholas Ridout that the ethical potential of theatre can only be realized when 'theatre is approached with uncertainty, with a view to the possibility of surprise, challenge and affront', then refocusing attention towards natality acknowledges the way in which performance itself might enact the event of birth as an 'unforeseeable

novelty that opens [one's] future', without determining what shape that future might take.⁵⁵ The ethico-political efficacy of performance is thus not necessarily predetermined by its disappearance, its 'resistance to commodity form', its 'liveness', or its ability to enact the Levinasian face-to-face relationship.⁵⁶ Instead, the natal appearance of children onstage reminds us that performance is a place for birth and appearance as much as death and disappearance: a place where we might practise, rehearse and imagine the fundamental human condition of 'beginning'. As Arendt argues, humans, 'though they must die, are not born in order to die but in order to begin'.⁵⁷

Biography:

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¹ Herbert Blau, *Take Up the Bodies: Theater at the Vanishing Point*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), p. 83

² Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 146.

³ Elin Diamond, *Unmaking Mimesis: Essays on Feminism and Theatre* (London and New York: Routledge, [1997] 2003), p. 152; Blau, *Take Up the Bodies*, p. 298.

⁴ Jill Dolan, 'Performance, Utopia, and the "Utopian Performative"', *Theatre Journal*, 53, 3 (2001) pp. 455-479, here p. 459.

⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1958). The paper draws on the three meanings of natality that Rosalyn Diprose and Ewa Ponowska Ziarek identify in 'Time For Beginners: Natality, Biopolitics, and Political Theology,' *philoSOPHIA*, 3, 2 (2013) pp. 107-120, here pp. 110-111.

⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 178.

⁷ Hannah Arendt makes her position concerning children's status within the public arena more explicit in a later essay: 'The Crisis of Education' in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*, (New York: Viking Press, [1961] 1993), pp. 173-196.

⁸ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 198-199.

⁹ I refer predominantly to performances made for adults and multi-generational audiences that include children as performers (and sometimes collaborators) and that are presented in the context of live art festivals or programmes of experimental work, as opposed to pantomimes, musicals or applied theatre.

¹⁰ Bridget Escolme, 'Authority, Empowerment and Fairy Tales: Theatre for Young People' in Joe Kelleher and Nicholas Ridout, eds., *Contemporary Theatres in Europe: A Critical Companion* (New York: Routledge, 2006) pp. 163-174, here p.164.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (London: Penguin Books, 1990 [1963]) p. 211.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Alison Stone, 'Natality and Mortality: Rethinking Death with Cavarero', *Contemporary Philosophy Review*, 43 (2010) pp. 353-372, here p. 355.

¹⁴ Joseph Betz, 'An Introduction to the Thought of Hannah Arendt', *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, 28, 3 (1992) pp. 379-422, here pp. 384-385.

¹⁵ Rosie Garton and Ildiko Rippel, 'Under the Covers', <http://www.zooindigo.co.uk/zoo-performance-3/under-the-covers>, accessed 2 October 2015.

¹⁶ Zoo Indigo, 'Under the Covers', unpublished script, pp. 4, 1. Courtesy of Rosie Garton.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

¹⁸ Adriana Cavarero, *In Spite of Plato: A Feminist Rewriting of Ancient Philosophy*, trans. S. Anderlini-D'Onofrio and Aine O'Healy (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995) p. 6.

¹⁹ Stone, 'Nativity and Mortality', pp. 355, 356.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Betz, 'An Introduction to the Thought of Hannah Arendt', p. 385.

²² Zoo Indigo, 'Under the Covers', p. 12.

²³ Garton and Rippel, 'Virtual Infants', p. 2.

²⁴ Diprose and Ziarek, 'Time For Beginners', p. 111.

²⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 188.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

²⁷ Judith Butler, 'Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street',

<http://www.eipcp.net/transversal/1011/butler/en>, accessed 2 October 2015.

²⁸ David Williams, *Collaborative Theatre: The Théâtre du Soleil Sourcebook* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 222.

²⁹ Tim Etchells, *That Night Follows Day* (Gent: Carl Gydé, 2007), pp. 13, 21.

³⁰ Tim Etchells, 'Natural is Not In It',

http://www.timetchells.com/index.php?option=com_tag&tag=performance&limit=30&limitstart=90, accessed 2 October 2015.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Julia Lupton, 'Hannah Arendt's Renaissance: Remarks on Natality', *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, 7, 2 (2006) pp. 7-18, here p. 11-12. Here Lupton is drawing on Viola Kolarov's argument that natality is employed by Arendt to govern the threat of the new that is posed by children.

See Kolarov, 'Gems for Creatures: Care and Natality Between Hannah Arendt and Shakespeare', *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory*, 7, 2 (2006) pp. 47-62.

³³ Hannah Arendt, 'The Crisis of Education', p. 186.

³⁴ Terry O'Donovan, 'That Night Follows Day',

<http://www.britishtheatreguide.info/reviews/thatnightfollows-rev>, accessed 2 October 2015.

³⁵ Etchells, *That Night Follows Day*, pp. 38, 16.

³⁶ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, pp. 176-177.

³⁷ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 186.

³⁸ Etchells, *That Night Follows Day*, pp. 32, 15.

³⁹ Etchells, *That Night Follows Day*, pp. 35, 34.

⁴⁰ Lupton, 'Hannah Arendt's Renaissance', p. 11.

⁴¹ Etchells, *That Night Follows Day*, p. 35.

⁴² Sarah Bloomer, 'That Night Follows Day (Manchester)', *WhatsOnStage*, 3 November 2013, http://www.whatsonstage.com/manchester-theatre/reviews/11-2013/that-night-follows-day-manchester_32528.html, accessed September 2015.

⁴³ Joshua Abrams, 'Effective Presents/Effective Presence: Intensity, Futurity, and the Theatrical Politics of the Child' in Fintan Walsh ed. *Performance, Identity and the Neo-Political Subject* (London: Routledge, 2012) pp. 201-214, here p. 203.

⁴⁴ For Jacques Derrida 'l'avenir' means the unanticipated future 'to come' rather than a future that can be predicted and determined. See, for example, Jacques Derrida (1992) 'Force of Law: The 'Mystical Foundation of Authority'' in Drucilla Cornell, Michel Rosenfeld and David Gray Carlson eds., *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*, New York: Routledge, pp. 3-67, here p. 27.

⁴⁵ Jeffrey Champlin, 'Born Again: Arendt's "Nativity" as Figure and Concept', *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 88, 2 (2013) pp. 150-164.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 150

⁴⁷ Lyn Gardner, 'Theatre for Adults is Child's Play', *The Guardian*, 27 October 2008, <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/theatreblog/2008/oct/27/children-teenagers-theatre>, accessed 2 October 2015.

⁴⁸ See Nicholas Ridout, *Passionate Amateurs: Theatre, Communism, and Love* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2013), p. 17.

⁴⁹ Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, p. 209; Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 7.

⁵⁰ Etchells, 'Natural is Not In It', n.p.

⁵¹ Bonnie Honig, *Feminist Interpretations of Hannah Arendt* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University, 1995), p. 2.

⁵² Anon, 'Comments' in Gardner, 'Theatre for Adults is Child's Play', n.p.

⁵³ Abrams, 'Effective Presents/Effective Presence', p. 212. On exploitation see Nicholas Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals and Other Theatrical Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 98-100. On risk and responsibility see Lourdes Orozco, "'Never Work with Children and Animals': Risk, Mistake and the Real in Performance', *Performance Research: A Journal of Performing Arts*, 15, 2 (2010), pp. 80-85.

⁵⁴ Gardner, 'Theatre for Adults is Child's Play', n.p.

⁵⁵ Nicholas Ridout, *Theatre & Ethics* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 70. Diprose and Ziarek, 'Time For Beginners', p. 111.

⁵⁶ Peggy Phelan, 'Marina Abramović: Witnessing Shadows', *Theatre Journal*, 56, 4, (2004), p. 571.

⁵⁷ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 246.