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'Age Transvestism' in Contemporary Performance and Live Art with Children

When children play adults onstage: a brief history

Child stars. Young actors. Juvenile performers. Boy players. There is a long history of children appearing on the theatrical stage. Choirboys were playing in public as far back as the late 15th Century in England (McCarthy 2008: 72) and at the beginning of the 16th Century the presence of children in dramatic interludes gained further momentum with the Children of the Chapel (also known as Children of the Queens Revels and Children of the Whitefriars): an all-boys chorister troupe that performed intermittently up until 1616 at court, Blackfriars Theatre, and Whitefriars Theatre. Around the same time, the well-established Children of Paul's also began performing dramas during the 1580s and 1590s and a further boys' troupe the Children of the King's Revels began performing in London for a short time in 1606.

Although the children's troupes of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras fell out of favour for a number of years – with the exception of Christopher Beeston's The King and Queen's Young Company which was set up in 1637 and specialised in plays of the Caroline era – children continued to occupy the theatrical stage. Indeed, child actors performed throughout the Restoration period following the closure of theatres during the English Civil War (McArthur 1995). From male child actors that had previously dominated the stage to the appearance of young female actresses of both child and adolescent ages such as Nell Gwynn and Anne Bracegirdle, restoration audiences slowly began to see the presence of two genders on stage amongst juvenile performers as well as adults during this significant shift in theatre history.

The theatrical world continued its fascination with child performers throughout the 18th Century, for example, with children playing masked animals in John Rich's pantomimes. By the following century young players were featuring in a wide variety of theatrical roles in dramatic plays, ballets, operas, choruses, music hall, and even posing as scenery in some productions (Davis 1986). During this time, audiences saw the rise of famous child actors such as 'The Young Roscius' William Henry West Betty and juvenile pantomime clown Joseph Grisaldi, who made his debut at the age of just two years old in Covent Garden. As one of the theatrical trade papers of the time noted, this was 'an age of juvenile prodigies... juvenile musicians, juvenile acrobats, juvenile reciters, and juvenile actors and actresses' (cited in Gubar 2009:158).

A recurrent feature of this long and varied history of the child as a theatrical performer is children playing adults onstage, a trend that is perhaps no more pronounced than in the Victorian theatre of the 19th Century. Amidst the Victorian fascination with childhood as a separate and antagonistic category to adulthood, there was a renewed interest in all-child productions from as early as the 1840s onwards

(Gubar 2012). The deregulation of the British Theatre in 1843 had increased demand for child performers in a less stringent theatrical environment (Steedman 1995: 130) and ballet troupes such as The Viennoise Children began to emerge, which would later be followed by the popular miniature/Lilliputian operettas of the 1870s. These operettas saw children playing adult roles in productions such as HMS Pinafore and The Pirates of Penzance, with reviews suggesting that it was ‘not the adorable ineptness of these companies’ that was drawing audiences in ‘but their polish and professionalism’ (Gubar 2012: 415).

This practice of children acting like, playing, or otherwise impersonating adults in performance is the key concern of this article. The fascination with children as both performers and collaborators in contemporary performance and live art practices across Europe and the UK, particularly over the past two decades, demands critical attention to address what is politically and ethically at stake in this recent renewed interest in children ‘playing’ adults in performance. Whilst children’s participation in performance does not always read as ‘impersonation’ in the experimental context of contemporary practice, audiences are nevertheless invited to interpret the child performer in relation to their adult ‘equivalent’. In Mammalian Diving Reflex’s Haircuts By Children (2006), for example, child performers between the ages of eight and twelve years old are seen in relation to the profession of the adult hairstylist as they cut the hair of willing spectators. In the recent example of HETPALEIS’s The Hamilton Complex (2016), ‘impersonation’ is more clearly discernable when thirteen teenage girls don brightly coloured wigs and knowingly reference sexualized ‘adults’. The spectator’s knowledge that in such contemporary practices the ‘child performer’ nearly always has some collaborative involvement in the process of making the work, however, distinguishes the performance of these children as adults from historical appearances of children onstage. Acknowledging the spectator’s prior awareness of the child’s participation in the process of making the work thus calls for a more nuanced approach to the questions of legal, educational, and moral responsibilities to the child performer that were so pertinent at the turn of the 19th Century but which are still relevant to contemporary debates.

Building on Marah Gubar’s term ‘age transvestism’ which describes the practice of ‘children impersonating adults’ in Victorian theatre (2012: 411), this article examines how age transvestism operates in the context of contemporary performance practice. It seeks to open up the meaning of the term ‘age transvestism’ to consider it not just a ‘theatrical practice’ but as a performance strategy that exists as a continuum of adult/child crossing. Recognising transvestism as a continuum rather than solely as an act of impersonation acknowledges that transvestism might not always look like children impersonating adults or adults impersonating children. Such a move also attempts to shift the debate beyond the impasse of actor/performer training processes and collaborative processes of contemporary performance making, which often inscribe an anti-theatrical prejudice against children playing adults and adults playing children: rule number one when making work ‘don’t act like children’. In particular, I consider how age transvestism as a performance strategy might work to challenge and undermine contemporary dominant discourses of childhood rather than reiterate a reading of the child performer in terms that rely on the reinforcement of binarisms that still dominate the adult gaze in relation to the child onstage: either they are too trained or not trained enough; professional or amateur; innocent or too knowing. To do this I consider practices that to some extent adopt age transvestism as a strategy in

contemporary performance. More specifically, I draw on Grace Surman's work Film with Hope (2016) to suggest that age transvestism is used to resist a reading of Grace's daughter Hope as well as herself within the confines of these binary terms.

Age Transvestism in an Age of Uncertainty

In her 2012 paper 'Who Watched The Children's Pinafore?: Age Transvestism on the Nineteenth-Century Stage', Marah Gubar asks why Victorian audiences 'loved to see children acting like adults' in miniature Gilbert and Sullivan operettas (ibid: 410). Drawing on critic reviews and marketing materials, she suggests that children fascinated spectators because they signalled a 'category crisis' that troubled rather than shored up perceived differences between adults and children. In this respect, Gubar's response deviates from the well-established assumption by scholars such as Benjamin McArthur (1995) and Anne Varty (2008) that nineteenth century audiences liked to watch children performing because the child's incompetence highlighted the difference between adults and children. Building on Victorian anthropologist Herbert Spencer's assertion that one of the defining features of childhood is children's ability to imitate adults, Varty has previously suggested that the appeal of child actors for Victorian audiences was that their 'childishness' highlighted their distinction from adults (2008: 15).

Gubar, however, insists that audiences were not interested in so-called 'naive' and 'childish' impersonations of adults as an indicator of the child actor's 'otherness' but rather that children onstage were curious to both adult and child spectators because they captured 'how conflicted nineteenth-century Anglo-American culture still was about how to define childhood: as originally sinful or originally innocent, as totally other or really quite similar to adulthood, as competent or incompetent, and so on' (2012: 411). As we will see, this crisis around how we think about childhood is still very much present in both the reception and production of more recent performance practice with children. Indeed, Gubar's observations continue to echo in contemporary viewing experiences of children in performance, particularly outside of the mainstream where relationships between childhood/adulthood and children/adults are often consciously and intentionally problematized through themes, form, or approach to working with children as performers, collaborators or artists.

Gubar's challenge to earlier scholarship concerning how the adult spectator watches children onstage in Victorian theatre, also departs from the idea that seeing the child actor was an act of voyeurism that involved the spectator taking pleasure from recognising the child's innocence whilst paradoxically sexualizing this innocence through their adult gaze (Rose 1992: 98). Instead, Gubar argues:

when we insist that nineteenth-century child prodigies were valued for their essential childishness and primitive inadequacies, we close our eyes to the ways in which these stubbornly strange historical actors trouble the adult-child binary that was itself the subject of intense controversy throughout this period (417).

To describe this practice of destabilizing adult/child distinctions Gubar coins the term 'age transvestism', a term that I am proposing is still significant in a contemporary

context where the relationship between adults and children remains a subject of debate and suspicion, particularly within the UK and Europe from which this article draws the majority of its examples. Gubar's term is particularly useful because it inherits a notion of transvestism from Marjorie Garber that locates its disruptive qualities as a source of anxiety. Garber developed this conceptualization of transvestism in her work on 'gender transvestism' in Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety (1992), where she proposes that gender binaries are challenged through the act of cross-dressing. The book's cultural and sociological interest in the political significance of the transvestite in destabilizing conventional binarised gender identities enables Gubar to shed light on the complexity of spectator-attraction to children impersonating adults on the Anglo-American stage. In contemporary practice where the signifiers of 'adult' and 'child' appear even less stable than Victorian acts of impersonation, it is worth briefly revisiting Garber's original conceptualization as it both frames the transvestite 'not just as a category crisis of male and female but the crisis of category itself' (1992: 17) and permits some recognition of how binaries of age might be constructed in relation to other articulations of subjectivity and identity that are assigned by dominant discourses of childhood (and adulthood), such as gender, class, and race.

For Garber 'transvestism offers a critique of binary sex and gender distinctions' because as a practice it 'denaturalizes, destabilizes and defamiliarizes sex and gender signs' (1992: 185). In other words, the transgressive quality of transvestism, which the author defines predominantly in terms of cross-dressing, lies in its ability to draw attention to the constructedness of gender categories that heteronormativity functions to stabilise. If gender transvestism encourages us to perceive these categories as fluid and therefore subject to change, age transvestism should also have the potential to reveal the categories of 'child' and 'adult' as socially constructed, allowing us to perceive such categories as open or questionable rather than fixed by the limiting enunciations of stereotypes that bolster the perception of these categories as natural and given. Further to this, I am suggesting that age transvestism in performance not only creates the possibility to reveal and destabilize the child/adult binary, but also to challenge the very notion of category itself precisely because the other binaries on which the child/adult distinction relies for its meaning are simultaneously threatened or called into question through the very act of age transvestism.

My approach to developing Gubar's notion of age transvestism in the context of contemporary practice thus relies on Garber's earlier conceptualization of transvestism as a 'space of possibility' (17) that has the potential to signal the crisis of category itself. What Garber means by this is that even though 'gender' may not be the primary thematic content of transvestism in any given text, the marginalized figure of the transvestite often becomes the container for a 'category crisis elsewhere... that destabilizes comfortable binarity' (ibid). As will become apparent in the works considered, 'age' transvestism in performance operates not through the marginalized presence of a single figure -- although it can do -- but instead predominantly in reference to an oppositional, binary logic that is continually threatened by its own constructedness and fluidity.

Children in Contemporary Performance

The growing interest in collaborating with children in contemporary performance and live art across Europe since the late nineties, has given rise to a number of works with children that can be said to be participating in age transvestism. By interpreting this strategy as a continuum of presentation and representation we can begin to appreciate in these works the multiple different ways through which children may ‘impersonate’ but also ‘appropriate’ signifiers that might be recognized as ‘adult’ (and vice versa). A continuum of age transvestism that emerges from this poststructurally-inspired reading of performance, therefore, appreciates the extent to which we, as spectators, may or may not recognize children as impersonating, appropriating, or otherwise undertaking ‘adult’ work. A recent example of an approach that foregrounds the spectator’s vantage point can be found in Kristen Hatch’s (2012) reading of a publicity still of Shirley Temple and Jack Haley for Rebecca of Sunnybrook Farm (1938), which shows Temple with a riding crop sat on Haley’s back while he postures on his hands and knees. Hatch argues that there has been a paradigm shift in the way contemporary audiences view this image (in relation to paedophilia) compared to how early twentieth century audiences would have viewed the image (as affectionate child-loving). Although Hatch’s argument tends to homogenise the experience of both the historic and the contemporary audiences encountering this film still, her reading nevertheless signals an important move towards acknowledging the spectator’s role in the co-production of meaning; a role that although now well established in the fields of theatre and performance studies might otherwise be ignored if we fail to see both children and spectators as makers of meaning in performance.

The child who performs, collaborates or otherwise participates creatively in contemporary performance or live art practice is positioned and/or read in relation to the ‘adult’ in various ways through this continuum of age transvestism. In Josse De Pauw and Victoria Theatre’s Übung (2001), for example, children between nine and fifteen years old occupy the live space ‘playing’ the adults they see on the film screen behind them. They lip-sync, wear the same costumes, and speak the same dialogue as the adult performers but, as Andrew Quick suggests (2006: 155), the children are not participating in the psychological investment of character in the same way as the adults in the film. Within Übung itself then, the notion that the children are simply impersonating the adults is undermined by their improvisation and the unscripted exchanges of glances towards one another. A more subtle example of children acting as adults is Boris Charmatz’s dance performance Enfant (2011). Younger children of about five to nine years old, who first appear lifeless, are dragged, pulled and physically manipulated by adults onstage like ragdolls in a dystopic and bleak setting. As the performance progresses the action is reversed, with the children slowly taking charge. A change in the soundtrack that underscores the movement signals a shift, with the children becoming the puppet masters of the adults’ bodies and their movements. In these examples we can see the subtly different ways in which audiences are encouraged to read child performers in relation to the ‘adult’ behaviours and traits that they mimic and/or execute.

The particular lineage of transvestism I am tracing back to gender studies also echoes the way in which some recent performance works with children -- where the child appropriates what might be considered adult roles, gestures, or mannerisms -- are dealing directly with issues relating to sex, gender or sexuality. In HETPALEIS’s The Hamilton Complex ‘13 teenage girls and a male bodybuilder’ appear onstage together. Age transvestism -- children ‘playing’ adults in this performance -- can be

read in relation to a camp aesthetic here. If camp is ‘a particular kind of performance in which the overt meaning of what is performed is subverted or inverted by drawing attention to the fact it is a performance’ (Thomas 1996: 103) then The Hamilton Complex coheres to the self-knowing nostalgia and kitsch often associated with camp. In particular, the young female performers’ address to the audience draws attention to the quotation marks of excess and failure that ensure we read these adult gestures and impersonations as knowingly grotesque.[{note}]1 However, it is important to remember that neither all acts of age transvestism nor all performances that deal with issues of gender and sexuality are politically transgressive in challenging dominant conceptualisations of childhood. In Fevered Sleep’s Men and Girls Dance (2016), for example, a group of eight to eleven-year-olds take to the stage with male professional contemporary dancers. Undoubtedly this is an important piece of work exploring child/adult relationships and particularly in relation to masculinity in the contemporary context, however it reinforces an image of the child consistent with romantic discourse on the child as inherently innocent. The performance maintains this image of the child by employing choreography that at times privileges the physical strength of the male dancers rather than foregrounding the strength of the female performers; generates images of paternal care; focuses the thematic content towards the suspicion and mistrust often levelled at adult males in relation to young girls through the news media in the UK; and maintains a strong sense of ‘girl’ in the title and casting of bodies that appear pre-pubescent. Whilst the work is successful in highlighting some of the problems that emerge around issues of touch, risk and intimacy with children -- given the safeguarding and policing of children’s bodies in the UK contemporary context -- the category of ‘girls’ remains a dominant means through which we are invited to engage with the children performing in this work,

Nevertheless, age transvestism can still operate to challenge dominant discourses of the child in performances as in the examples of Übung, Enfant and The Hamilton Complex. Even where the ‘adult’ and ‘child’ signifiers are more fluid than in these works, there is potential for performance practice to utilise age transvestism to dismantle the romantic ideal of the child as innocent and in need of protection. In such performances, markers that indicate ‘this is a performance’ are sometimes subtle, absent or less significant to the overall reading of the work than Thomas’ observation of camp attests. Here, it is difficult as a spectator to temporarily ‘fix’ markers of adult or child in order to recognize where these categories are being reversed, challenged or subverted. One such example is Nightwalks with Teenagers, which I saw at the In-Between Time Festival in Bristol in 2015. In this work a group of teenagers local to a housing estate that later becomes the site for the performance, lead a workshop with a group of predominantly adults and then take them on a late night tour of the estate. Whilst the teenagers are perceived as fulfilling adult roles as workshop facilitators, their position in relation to the adult/child binary becomes more ambiguous as the performance unfolds. Their own descriptions of their surroundings are neither ‘childlike’ nor notably scripted by an adult. They begin to climb the scaffolding of an abandoned building, referencing child/teenage play, but as they do so they also command the space as artists who we listen to and whose instructions we follow to the extent that no audience member spoke up to take responsibility for the children’s safety on the scaffolding. I found this ambiguity somewhat unsettling and therefore productive in encouraging me to continually oscillate between adult/child distinctions, even though the teenage boys and girls did not overtly adopt adult signifiers. Similarly, in the recent work of Leeds-based artist Grace Surman and her daughter

Hope, which I now consider, one can observe how ambiguity in the adult/child binary operates through age transvestism to dismantle our dominant conceptualizations of the child.

Performance with Hope

Interviewer: Professor, can Gerald really speak as we would understand it?

Professor: Oh yes, yes. He can speak a few actual words. Of course it was extremely difficult to get him even to this stage [...] there was an awful lot of work to do. He was enormously slow and difficult. I had to do a lot of work with him on a sort of one-to-one basis...

Gerald: [interrupting] Yes, yes, if I might just butt in at this point Tim. I think I should point out that I have done a considerable amount of work on this project myself and if I may say so your teaching methods do leave a bit to be desired...

Professor: That's a bit ungrateful, isn't it?

Gerald: ...and your diction for instance...

Professor: I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Can I put this into some sort of perspective? When I caught Gerald in '68 he was completely wild.

Gerald: Wild? I was absolutely livid!

Without prior knowledge of this comedy sketch, one could be forgiven for thinking, at least at first glance, that Gerald might be a child. From the outset, the scene places Gerald in the position of someone who needs socializing, requires labour, and is slow to grasp things. The original sketch is a well-known interview from the BBC television comedy show, Not the Nine O'Clock News, which features 'Professor Timothy Fielding' (Mel Smith) and a gorilla called Gerald (Rowan Atkinson). The crux of the joke is that Gerald is very obviously a man in a gorilla suit. Sitting with his legs crossed, upright and with impeccable manners Gerald gradually undermines the Professor's authority, taking issue with his teaching methods and increasingly becoming resentful of the Professor speaking on his behalf. His Received Pronunciation and pedantry around the Professor's command of the English language begins to capture some of the issues around power and exploitation in animal-based research, albeit with comedic intent. In this sketch, the human/non-human animal binary and all its foundational assumptions of civility versus incivility, articulate versus inarticulate, linguistic versus non-linguistic begin to unravel.

Interestingly, this sketch became a key text in the making of Surman's Film with Hope in collaboration with filmmaker Clare Dearnaley. Surman notes that she and her daughter had shared this footage very early on in the process and began to play with, rearrange, and rewrite it together (2017). The filmed performance is a movement-based work, interspersed with dialogue from both Hope and Grace, which takes place in a variety of locations, from moorlands and woods to an empty playground and

school sports hall. In Film with Hope, the sketch by Atkinson and Smith brews under the surface of Surman's version as both its comedic and violent partner, at once situating but never fixing adult/child relationships in relation to the human/animal binary. In this moment of recognition of the work's comedic other, the famous theatrical adage, 'never work with children and animals' comes to the fore and reminds us of the closeness of children to animals at least from the perspective of the adult. This proximity between children and animals has been observed in theatre scholarship too where it is more consciously the subject of critique than in the performance itself (Read 2000, Ridout 2006, and Orozco 2010). However, in Film with Hope the relation to the human/non-human animal binary, at least in the filmed version is subtle, almost undetectable. [{ note 2}] Even without prior knowledge of the roots of Grace and Hope's text, the connection between the child and the animal is bubbling under the surface, only in their performance this relation is reversed, albeit temporarily. It is Grace (the adult) who, positioned in the background, is being spoken about as if she were the child/animal by her ten-year-old daughter Hope (the child). Hope occupies the foreground of the shot and speaks to camera:

HOPE: Hello I'd just like to say a few words before we begin. To give you some idea of the realm we've been working in. To let you know who we are and what we're doing here. I'm Hope Surman and this is Grace Surman

[...]

HOPE: Grace is amazing. She's dizzy, nauseous. In terms of personal connection we are incredibly attuned to each other's way of thinking, doing and being. You could say that our natures are complementary whilst maintaining a strong sense of individuality. In short I think we operate in a very similar

GRACE: <interrupts> Frame

HOPE: Realm

GRACE Well that's very nice of Hope to say all those things and I must say she has been a truly integral part of my overall learning and development. And it is in this way that I have looked to Hope as an example of where I want to get to.

HOPE: Thanks Grace. Of course, it was extremely difficult to get her to this point here this evening. If I can remember back to when I first encountered Grace in 2007

GRACE: 2006?

HOPE: <Shakes head> 2007. There was an awful lot of work to do. She was enormously difficult. I had to concentrate a lot of work with her on a sort of one-to-one basis. I had to resort back to fundamental exercises. Naming of Objects. Placing of Objects. Attempts at personas and costumes. You have no right to get emotional over... I hate that bit.

GRACE: If I could just butt in at this point. I'd like to say that I've done a considerable amount of work on this project myself. And if I may say so, your teaching methods do leave a bit to be desired.

HOPE: That's a bit ungrateful isn't it?

GRACE: Well your timing...

HOPE: I'm sorry. Can I put this into some sort of perspective. When I discovered Grace in 2007 she was completely wild...

GRACE: Wild?

Whilst the biological 'age' of the bodies of the performers guarantee a reading of Grace as the adult and Hope as the child, the neutral delivery of the text by both performers begins to challenge an easy assessment of their age on the basis of how their bodies are read as signifiers of youth or adulthood. Both performers sound deliberately 'scripted'-- an element of the work that is even more pronounced because the work is filmed and the performers seem to follow an auto-cue -- which consequently situates both performances on the non-matrixed side of Michael Kirby's well-known continuum (1972). This means that the spectator is denied the temptation to read Hope -- simply because she is the child -- as less versed in contemporary performance technique than Grace because they occupy the same territory. At the same time we are not invited to appreciate Hope's command of this 'technique' in the sense that it does not announce itself as a virtuosic skill.

Although age transvestism is at work in this section, Hope is not simply impersonating Grace and Grace is not impersonating Hope. There is instead a temporary and fluid appropriation of 'adult' signifiers by Hope and 'child' signifiers by Grace and vice versa. Hope does not quite sound like a ten-year-old, with her vocabulary ('incredibly attuned') and turn of phrase ('whilst maintaining a strong sense of individuality') creating a sense of displacement and so challenging our expectation of where such language ordinarily resides i.e. with the adult. Grace similarly hangs her head like a child who has been asked to do something they do not want to do. However, the performers never play these signs of adult and child as self-conscious or self-aware and, therefore, one is reluctant to fix these signs as 'Grace is playing a child and Hope is playing an adult'. There is a slippage in both of their texts, for example, when Hope says what is ordinarily unspoken in a professional context and admits 'I hate that bit'; whilst we are reminded of Grace's status as artist and perhaps as parent when she criticizes Hope's 'timing'. This brief shift into the discursive fields of artist/amateur and parent/child, along with the underlying reversal of the human (adult)--animal (child) binary, denies the spectator the possibility of stabilizing either figure as 'adult' or 'child'.

Importantly, age transvestism is not operating through imitation here. Grace is not acting like a child and Hope is not acting like an adult. Unlike the young performers in The Hamilton Complex who impersonate stereotypes of both adults and children, we are not encouraged to read Hope and Grace as 'failing' to be either an adult or a child. These categories are already subject to destabilization through their fluidity and the slippage between the multiple binaries that would ordinarily work to guarantee the naturalized and normalised adult/child hierarchy (teacher/student, artist/amateur, human/animal, parent/child). A further example of this productive lack of clarity

around so-called adult and child signifiers can be seen when Hope presents herself as the authoritative figure from the outset with Grace acquiescing to Hope's 'teaching methods'. Hope's authority is quickly undermined as Grace refuses to fully occupy the position of 'child' that Hope's dialogue establishes for her when she corrects Hope's memory of when they first met. In much the same way that Gerald the Gorilla resents becoming the subservient animal/student, Grace resists 'playing' the child that is expected and which is anticipated by the film spectator who is positioned as the disinterested interviewer, observing from the outside.

What I am suggesting, therefore, is that in Film with Hope age transvestism operates through the temporary and fluid appropriation of binaries such as teacher/student, artist/amateur, human/animal, parent/child that reference but do not fix the categories of 'adult' and 'child' that are initially made available to the spectator through the 'younger' and 'older' bodies of the performers when they first appear on camera. As I have begun to suggest, the categories of adult and child are subsequently disrupted through the slippage that occurs between each term of these multiple binaries. This begs the question: what is the political efficacy of this disruption and subversion other than to reveal the constructedness of the figure of the child as a discursive category? I propose that one way that the political potential of age transvestism as a practice disrupts taken-for-granted conceptualisations of adult/child differences lies in how an audience perceives and is invited to perceive the child's subjectivity. Age transvestism in the case of this performance situates subjectivity not in relation to the apparent 'agency' that is seen in the child performer who self-consciously 'plays' or 'acts' the role of the adult. After all, the authorial control of the work stays firmly with Surman as the artist and editor, and her collaborator as the maker of the film in the film credits. Instead the child (and the adult's) subjectivity is located in the co-emergence of other ways of reading the child performer/collaborator in relation to prescribed, often more limited terms of child or adult that are propped up by multiple hierarchical oppositions. What this means is that Hope and Grace are read in relation to, but do not fully subscribe to, either teacher or student, artist or amateur, human or animal, parent or child. Or, at times, they occupy both sides of the binary at the same time.

Age transvestism in this work, therefore, is not concerned with erasing these categories of adult and child or performing them consciously to excess/failure, but instead allowing them to coexist as 'categories in crisis' as Garber would say alongside and giving way to the emergence of other ways of knowing and experiencing children as performers or collaborators. In Surman's work, then, we are not encouraged to see and appreciate skill and technique in Hope's performance as we might do when watching a child performer in Billy Elliot or on Britain's Got Talent. Neither are we encouraged to assess Hope's competence or experience in opposition to Grace's. Instead our attention is drawn to what the performers' bodies do when coexisting with one another. This refocusing of our attention does not erase or ask us to be ignorant to the ways in which these bodies move differently from one another. Instead, through the dialogue and movement work, the spectator is asked to consider these bodies alongside binaries that construct a dominant understanding of the child and childhood but which, here, are shown to be fluid and problematic.

The binaries that ordinarily form the oppositional logic that we often bring to our reading of children in performance are, therefore, no longer permitted to dictate how

we might usually make meaning from a work created by a mother and daughter or adult and child. In short we are not asked to essentialise Hope as ‘child’ and Grace as ‘adult’. The difference in their movement is not perceived as a difference between how adult bodies move in comparison to children’s bodies in generalised terms. In the movement work, instead, their bodies create still images of angular shapes that reflect or juxtapose the landscape rather than signify an illustrative narrative of the relationship between mother and daughter. These images are created by Grace physically supporting Hope or vice versa but the framing of the work, in the content and delivery of the text and non-narrative based choreography, discourages any temptation towards narrativising these moments according to preconceived ideas of adult/child, mother/daughter relationships.

Age transvestism in Film with Hope thus troubles categories that create the conditions of possibility for dominant conceptualisations of the child and childhood to be sustained, especially when, as a strategy, we interpret it beyond its limited form of children impersonating adults and vice versa. Contemporary Western discourses of childhood over the last two decades continue to oscillate between the romantic vision of the child as innately innocent, a concept that can be attributed predominantly to the work of Jean Jacques Rousseau in the 18th Century, and the notion of the child as ‘tabula rasa’ (blank slate) as developed by John Locke (Kehily 2004: 5). At a disciplinary level, these historic discourses are still pervasive and, perhaps inevitably, characterise the scholarly debate around how Victorian audiences related to the child performer onstage; from the established assumption that spectators were invested in childhood innocence as proposed by Kincaid (2000) and Rose (1992) to Gubar’s suggestions that it was the child’s personal and professional ‘knowingness’ and skill that was the basis of the audience’s attraction (Gubar 2008: 67). Gubar’s acknowledgement that spectators were fascinated with the ‘prematurely developed’ skills of children onstage (ibid: 64), in this sense, follows Locke’s idea that the child is born as a blank state who can ‘with guidance and training, develop into rational human beings’ (Kehily 2004: 5).

Conceptualisations of the child as both essentially pure (and so potentially corruptible) and ‘always in the process of becoming’ (ibid) are still prevalent and undoubtedly continue to inform our spectatorial tendencies towards reading children in performance as too knowing, precocious, or lacking (or having too much) experience and training. One only needs to look at recent reviews and controversies around child performers in the mainstream to appreciate this continuity of the nostalgic or overly critical gaze. [note 3] However, there is no attempt in Film with Hope to illustrate the ‘innocence’ of the child performer or her persona and whilst the idea of the child as a subject in formation is referenced, it is simultaneously displaced onto Grace when Hope says ‘There was an awful lot of work to do. She was enormously difficult. I had to concentrate a lot of work with her on a sort of one-to-one basis.’ Similarly, Grace’s comment that Hope’s ‘teaching methods do leave a bit to be desired’ also echoes the idea of the child as tabula rasa but because Grace is also judged by Hope according to the same criteria, both adult performer and child performer are positioned as unfinished subjects. In other words, Grace is as much ‘in progress’ as Hope. As Grace admits: ‘[Hope] has been a truly integral part of my overall learning and development’. In this way, age transvestism becomes a means through which we might begin to see the child performer’s/collaborator’s body and subjectivity alongside rather than dictated by dominant discourses of childhood.

Children's Bodies

Gubar's invitation to think about Victorian child actors as disrupting binarised identities of age, along with rising interest in contemporary performance practice with children, urges us to revisit the political potential of age transvestism. Performance's interrogation of the presumed stability of the category of child in both the form and content of contemporary practice with young people reminds us that age transvestism as a strategy has the ability to foreground the spectatorial aspects of reading children in performance as well as to position the child as a vehicle through which meaning is made either by the child herself and/or through adult collaborators and directors. If we fail to acknowledge the idea that the child and the child's body can signify -- because we prefer to think the child is playing, not working onstage like the adult -- then we limit our reading of children who might otherwise appear as political subjects, agents, performance makers, artists, and as anything other than an eternal, innocent child who is in need of adult protection. Similarly, I would argue that we risk underestimating the politics of transvestism in relation to age if we associate children playing at being adults and adults playing at being children solely with pretence and with the dominant mainstream form through which we often see children occupying adult roles.

However, we also need to be mindful of what is at stake in using the language of transvestism to talk about age rather than gender. If as Garber suggests cross-dressing is 'bound up with the story of homosexuality and gay identity' (4) what does it mean to appropriate the language of transvestism to discuss adult/child relations onstage or in performance more generally? Garber's work, along with Butler's work in Gender Trouble (1990) and Bodies That Matter (1993), has been critiqued for using the figure of the transsexual in a way that furthers only the theoretical concept of border-play rather than the 'real' lives of transsexuals and transvestites (Namaste 1996 and Prosser 1998). Does the use of this terminology of age transvestism similarly risk ignoring the material realities of ageism or other potentially exploitative or unequal aspects of children playing adults and vice versa? As a performance strategy, age transvestism does not guarantee insight into the material realities of collaborating with children: the terms of their contract, whether they are paid/unpaid, issues around consent etc. However, by revealing childhood as a social construction it does tend to focus attention towards the child as a subject, co-subject, body and human in such a way that foregrounds the question of the ethics of children's participation in performance practices.

Another strength of considering adult-to-child and child-to-adult crossing practices in relation to gender transvestism is that it urges us to consider how the crossing of identity markers or at least their troubling through the revelation of fluidity and slippage are also inevitably tied up with how the spectator perceives the adult or child to identify with a particular gender category. If male-to-female cross-dressing, such as drag, has at times been critiqued as a misogynistic or patriarchal activity (Garber 239) that reinscribes limited and normative understandings of women and femininity, then thinking about age as a category that can be revealed as socially constructed, allows us to question the adult/child equivalents of misogyny and patriarchy, which here I have begun to examine as (some of) the dominant discourses of childhood in the contemporary context. The scope of this article has meant that the other hierarchical

structures and discourses that manage and sustain the categories of ‘adult’ and ‘child’ have inevitably been left unexamined for the time being.

What age transvestism has the potential to do then is to foreground the body of the child in performance as a body, which does not necessarily have to be defined by: the nostalgic gaze of the spectator who wishes to maintain the figure of the child as ‘innocent’ and in need of protection; the erotic gaze of the voyeur; or the judgemental gaze of the Lockean who polices technique and skill in order to ascribe the child as talented or inexperienced. Whilst the discourses of safeguarding, child protection, and consent that emerge from these dominant conceptualisations of the child are vital to any creative process of working with children, they could potentially limit our engagement with child performers/collaborators so that we fail to see children as both material, biological bodies (Senior 2016) that are raced, classed, and gendered in the act of interpretation *and* political subjects and agents in performance. This article sets forth the potential of age transvestism as a strategy to investigate children’s subjectivities, co-subjectivities and bodies in performance. In doing so, it marks the beginning of a much longer project to redress the current imbalance between the way we read children’s bodies and adult’s bodies in performance. This is as much an issue for theatre and performance scholarship as it is for spectatorship, given that children have often been denied the poststructural, feminist, and queer approaches to reading (and making meaning with) their bodies that are ordinarily afforded to adult bodies onstage.

[{note}]1 See Isis Germano’s article in this issue for further discussion of this work in relation to queer theory.

[{note 2}] In the live version of this work entitled Performance with Hope, Grace and Hope ‘dress up’ as animals which has the effect of referencing but ultimately diluting a reading of their work in terms of this human/non-human animal binary. Instead, their costumes and the way Grace appears to be uncomfortable in her attire seems to situate more authorial control of the work with Hope; as if she has insisted that Grace wear the costume she has chosen for her.

[{note 3}] News media coverage of American dancer fifteen-year-old Maddie Zeigler’s rise to fame on the TV show Dance Moms and then later in the music videos of pop musician Sia is exemplary in demonstrating the perpetuation of these dominant discourses of the child performer. In a Daily Mail article, Zeigler’s training is foregrounded for its gruelling, adult-like commitment, whilst her appearance is scrutinized ‘Maddie appeared older than her years’ (Croffey 2014: n.p.)

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