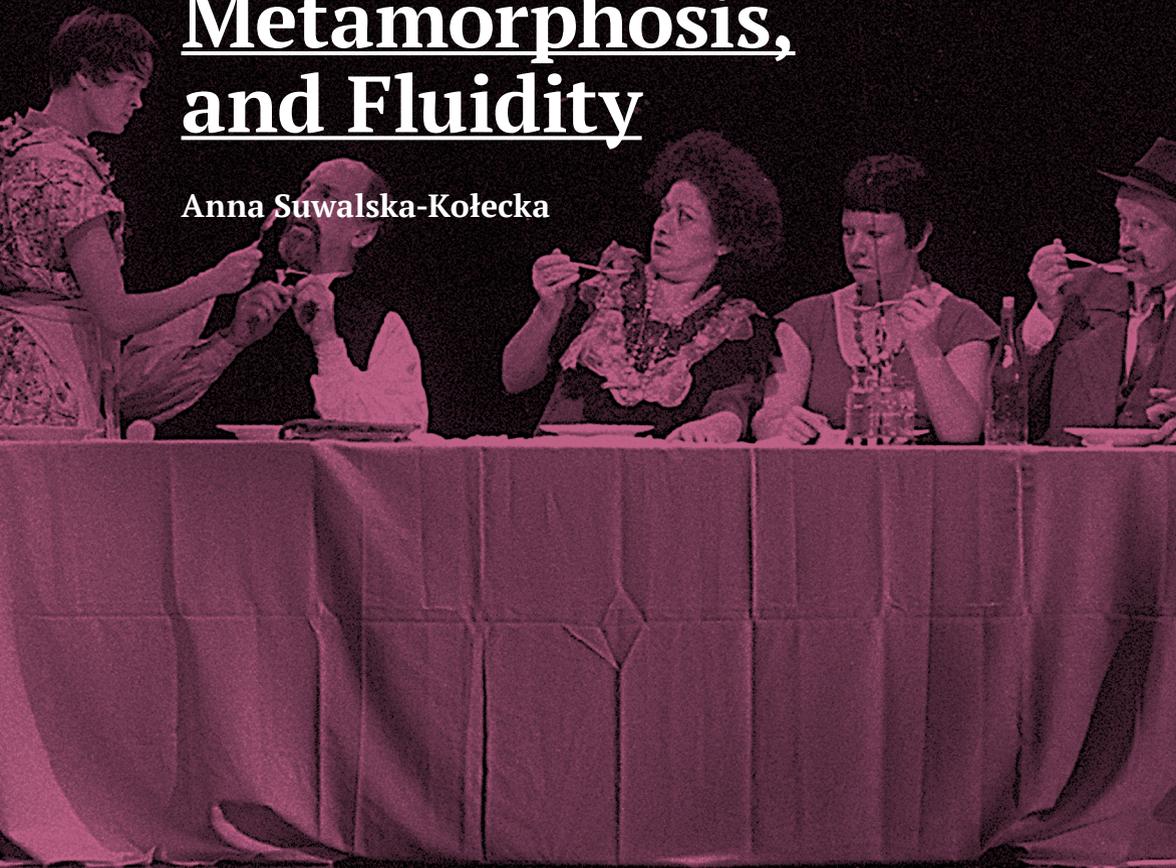


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Schulz According to Complicite. Instability, Metamorphosis, and Fluidity

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Writing in the *Guardian*, Lyn Gardner proclaimed that in her 20 years of going to the theater, seeing thousands of plays, it was the images created onstage by Complicite that stayed in her memory. Gardner is also the author of probably the shortest, and certainly the most eloquent definition of Complicite. Asked by a friend from Peru who had never heard of the group, “What is Complicite?” Gardner answered: “It’s why I go to the theater.”

So what does Complicite have to do with Bruno Schulz? Here some elaboration of Gardner’s definition and explanation of the group’s genesis and artistic principles seems crucial. The group was formed in London in 1983 by Annabel Arden, Simon McBurney, and Marcello Mag-

ni, under the name Théâtre de Complicité. The name itself was gradually simplified until it became the currently functioning Complicite. The French pedigree of the name appears to be inspired by the founders' having graduated from the Parisian theatrical school of Jacques Lecoq, who exerted tremendous influence on their theatrical philosophy. Lecoq stressed the actor's imagination and creativity in order to thereby free him from the tyranny of the text. Through pantomime and improvisation, he sought to bring out the physical aspect of performance, as he believed that the actor's body, not the text, is the key generator of meaning in the theatre. Lecoq developed three basic skills in his students: playfulness, complicité (involvement) and openness.¹ His students in the Complicite group have scrupulously maintained those skills, astonishing audiences worldwide for over 30 years with performances that present a unique interaction of text, movement, and visual and sound effects.

The group's repertoire includes theatrical adaptations of prose works, contemporary interpretations of the classics, and original works developed in workshops by the collective, not to mention what they have been showing recently: multimedia performances incorporating contemporary technology innovatively.

¹ Among others, Maria Shevstova and Christopher Innes write about this in *The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre Directing*, Cambridge 2013, p. 221. One of the latest works on Lecoq is Simon Murray's *Jacques Lecoq*, London 2003, in which a whole chapter is devoted to Complicite's *The Street of Crocodiles* as an example of collaborative theatre inspired by the French teacher. Lecoq's *Le corps poétique*, written in the last years of his life, was published in English as *The Moving Body: Teaching Creative Theatre*, trans. David Hanby, New York 2002.

Though Complicite's repertoire includes classics from Shakespeare to Ionesco, it is the company's dramatic adaptations of prose works previously seen as unstageable that have established its renown and astonished critics on both sides of the Atlantic. The group's first venture into this type of production, and thus a breakthrough in its history, was the production of *The Street of Crocodiles* inspired by the two collections of Bruno Schulz's short stories, *The Cinnamon Shops* and *Sanatorium Under the Sign of the Hourglass* as well as Schulz's biography. Presented in a co-production with the National Theatre in London in August 1992, the play was revived twice, in 1994 and, with a new cast, in 1998. It was seen by audiences on many continents, in such cities as Sydney, Tokyo, Moscow, Wrocław, Jerusalem, Montreal, New York and Barcelona, and showered with awards by critics.² The Complicite anthology volume *Plays: 1* lists, alongside cast and crew, the people and institutions that have made the production possible. A special place among them belongs to Jakub Schulz, to whom thanks are offered on the book's dedication page. As Simon McBurney and Mark Wheatley write in the preface, Jakub described his uncle to them and thus helped them find the connection between the present and the living past.³

The dedication to Jakub Schulz and the long list of people involved in the entire undertaking indicate the truly collective process through which the group's productions

2 A full record of all of the festivals at which Crocodile Streets was performed, and a list of all the awards it received, can be found in: Complicite, *Plays: 1*, London 2003, pp. 6–7.

3 Complicite, *Plays: 1*, p. 4.

take shape. Though director and artistic director Simon McBurney and writer Mark Wheatley are seen as responsible for the adaptation of Schulz's prose, the play is the fruit of the entire group's work.⁴ This is both a tribute to the master, Lecoq, and the enactment of a fundamental principle encoded in the name *complicité* – involvement. It encompasses both the process of collaboration among the creators of the play while they are preparing it, and the process of collaboration with the audience, who co-create the meaning of a play with the cast on any given night.

In describing how they work on a play, McBurney and Wheatley invoke the example of adapting Schulz's prose: since it does not follow a traditional narrative pattern, the group's work entailed more invention than adaptation. To bring the reader closer to the source that provided the artists' inspiration for particular scenes, the scenes were sprinkled with quotations from Schulz's stories. In addition to these quotations, they made use of the author's letters and essays, as well as reminiscences provided by Jakub. In improvising, they attempted to activate memory processes, which play a crucial role in his work, in order to feel the atmosphere of his era, to surrender to the mechanics of his dreams and the rhythm of his nightmares. Out of that reading, these improvisations, and the arguments they prompted, a book was formed which, in the authors' view, presents rather a record of the process

4 E. Govan, H. Nicholson, K. Normington, *Making a Performance: Devising Histories and Contemporary Practices*, Oxon–New York 2007, p. 99.

than a text or a road map that presents a choice of possible routes.⁵

Robert Butler describes the rehearsals for *The Street of Crocodiles*, in which he participated, in a tone of unequivocal amazement and disbelief. Three weeks before opening night, the actors do not have lines prepared, only quotations written out on cream-colored cue cards, which can (but don't have to) serve as the inspiration for a series of improvisations. He observes how a family having lunch together gradually become transformed, together with the table and chairs, into steps leading to the attic, into a balustrade, into a flock of birds, only to return to the table with their cackling and flutter of wings replaced by the scraping of a spoon against a soup-dish. The sequence is repeated multiple times over the course of an hour, until complete fluidity of movement has been achieved. He declares that where other actors learn how to deliver their lines without falling over the furniture, the actors of *Complicite* practice how to turn into furniture. What impresses Butler most is the fact that this spirit of artistic anarchy came to reign over the National Theatre in London, whose long administrative corridors demand advance warning about whatever happens on their stage.⁶ The recording of those rehearsals lets us hear the views of McBurney, director of most of *Complicite's* plays: "A piece

5 S. McBurney, M. Wheatley, *Note on the Script*, in *Complicite, Plays: 1*, pp. 4–5.

6 R. Butler, *Just don't bump into the actors: Theatre de Complicite make it up as they go along, all the way to an Olivier Award*, *The Independent*, 2.08.1992, <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/theatre--just-dont-bump-into-the-actors-theatre-de-complicite-make-it-up-as-they-go-along-all-the-way-to-an-olivier-award-robert-butler-follows-them-1537729.html> [accessed 10.09.2015].

of theatre is, ultimately, in the hands of those who are performing it. The actors. It is they not the director who must have the whole piece in their every gesture, hearing the meaning in each word. And to do that I think, as an actor, you have to feel that you possess the piece. And to possess the piece you have to be part of its creation. Involved intimately in the process of its making.”⁷

Ric Knowles uses the words “questioning” and “collaborative” to describe both the training that the actors undergo and their work in preparing a play.⁸ This refers not only to the physical and conceptual effort of a play’s co-creation, as discussed above, but also a number of activities undertaken toward the goal of penetrating the very essence of the subject matter. The group conducts research and gathers material relating to the play it is working on with surprising thoroughness, and *The Street of Crocodiles* was no exception in this regard. Wiśniewski reports that in Complicite’s archive, in addition to correspondence conducted in the course of research into Schulz’s life and work, there are also English summaries of Polish scholarly works on the subject.⁹

The result of these intensive preparations is a play that, according to critical consensus, conveys the Schulz universe, undulating and pulsating with the inscrutable rhythm of creeping metamorphoses. The audience

7 S. McBurney, “On Directing.” Theatre Salpuri: Inter Cultural Theater Labour, http://www.theater-salpuri.de/sites/default/files/pdf/on_directing.pdf [accessed 10.09.2015].

8 R. Knowles, *Reading the Material Theatre*, Cambridge 2004, p. 48.

9 T. Wiśniewski, “Poezja sceny w teatrze Complicite: przykład Ulicy Krokodyli według Brunona Schulza”, *Tekstualia* 1(28)/2012, pp. 60–61.

responded with rapture and amazement to the actors' ability, despite being trapped in their own bodies, to bring to life on stage what one critic called "a restless ocean of unending flux" in which "[s]hadow and substance bleed and intermingle, and even the most fixed-seeming forms refuse to hold onto their shapes."¹⁰

The play has a sharply defined compositional frame, with the prologue and epilogue taking place on November 19, 1942 in Drohobych, the date and place of Schulz's death. In the prologue, Joseph is doing some work assigned to him by the Nazis in a warehouse on the outskirts of Drohobych. He is sorting books, marking those that contradict the Fascist ideology for destruction. Orders heard being given in German in the distance add an ominous note to the scene, as does the sound of troops marching, foreshadowing the story's tragic dénouement. As Joseph catalogues the books and arranges them in piles, he is unable to resist their power. He picks up and reads from one, sniffing the scent of its pages. The book's smell and feel stir sensations that take him back to the world of childhood memories and thus develop as the play's internal action. It is curious to note that this compositional shape is based on the structure of Schulz's *The Cinnamon Shops*, consisting of the narrator-protagonist's retrospective return to the days of his childhood. This form is to some extent the catalyst of multifarious deformations of reality, whose elements the child's memory magnifies or shrinks.

10 B. Brantley, "A Haunting Vision Untainted by Order or Logic," *The New York Times*, 18.07.1998, <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/07/18/theater/festival-review-theater-a-haunting-vision-untainted-by-order-or-logic.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm> [accessed 16.10.2015].

Here it is instructive to consider a statement by Jarzębski, who defined the fundamental aspect of Schulz's prose thus: "When we say that something 'happens' in the world of Schulz's stories, we are at the same time aware of the ambiguity that accompanies this formulation, since the plots of the stories do not always permit us to differentiate what are facts external to the protagonist's consciousness and what are his fantastic daydreams or visions [...] The protagonist creates his world no less than he cognizes it."¹¹ And the same thing takes place in *Complicite's* stage presentation; the initial stage directions of *The Street of Crocodiles*, for example inform us that "the cast gradually appear on stage as if called up by Joseph's imagination,"¹² so that this opening scene already bears the mark of Schulz's phantasmagorical ambiance. Family members and workers practically come popping out of the stage scenery, defying the laws of physics: one of Father's helpers comes walking along the wall at a right angle to the audience, another emerges by flowing out of a small bucket standing on the floor, while Maria the maid steps out of a box of books. Karol, Emil and Agata appear from behind bookcases, while Mother slides across the stage on her knees with a book wrapped in a scarf. At that point Father appears, discoursing about forgotten rooms left unvisited for several months and revealed to be overgrown with grass and trees that burst magnificently into bloom before his eyes, only to then surrender to the processes of disintegration and decay. The next morning, no trace of the trees remain and Father concludes that it must have been a mirage that merely resembled living forms.

11 J. Jarzębski, *Wstęp* [in:] B. Schulz, *Opowiadania. Wybór esejów i listów*, Wrocław 1989, p. XX.

12 *Complicite, Plays: 1*, p. 11.

This description demonstrates how the text refers to its Schulzian original in an open, non-literal way; it shows the protagonist's house with its innumerable rooms and also captures their unparalleled, expanded vitality. In "A Treatise on Mannequins" (Traktat o manekinach) the narrator speaks of the incomparable luxuriance of flora and fauna that materialize in apartments to feed on both dreams and the barrenness of boredom within those walls. After a period of effusive growth and flourishing there inevitably comes decomposition and petrification.

In addition to this recurring series of references, the play also features a distinct attempt to create a reality with a similar degree of ontological frustration. There is no way to distinguish the dream from the waking world; it is impossible to draw a boundary between what is real and what is imagined. Reality is in a state of permanent instability, matter seems to seethe beneath an outwardly stable form, ready at any moment to fluidly change shape. Space is marked by a frankly unusual plasticity, shrinking and stretching out, undergoing an endless process of transformation. Similarly, time can either speed up or slow down, get tied up in knots or branch out into side-streams. The oneiric nature of Schulz's imagery is very much on display in Complicite's *The Street of Crocodiles*. Here the principles of reality's creation are also subject to the mechanics of the dream, breaking away from both chronological sequence and the logic of cause and effect. The play is composed of a series of loosely connected scenes, in which the flow of action is disrupted by the

common reference point of Joseph's psyche, as he sleeps and remembers his childhood.

The most spectacular aspect in Complicite's performance is perhaps this attempt to convey the fluidity of Schulz's universe. Many critics agree that there is a direct link with the abundance of Schulz's poetic language, with its proliferation of metaphors, epithets, and hyperbole. In Jarzębski's words, "this aesthetic of excess"¹³ allows successive, new fluid and whimsical incarnations to be uncovered in its metamorphoses of things. One device Schulz frequently uses is turning inanimate objects, natural phenomena or abstract concepts into living creatures. In the story "August" (Sierpień), windows, blinded by the sun "sleep," sunflowers are in (yellow) mourning, and the vivacity of the garden unrestrainedly seizes the earth with "ebullient tongues of fleshy verdure." In the "Treatise on Mannequins," lamps "wither" and hang dejectedly, while the narrator, unable to stir himself into action, lies "on the furry belly of darkness." One can get the impression that all objects are endowed with the functions of life, like the furniture, chairs and cabinets that suffer the agony of crucifixion and staining in the "Treatise," to name only one set of examples. Curiously, at the same time, animate creatures take on the features of surrounding objects, such as for example in the description of the sufferings of the furniture grouped around Father, where the lines of wrinkles on his face begin to resemble the knots and rings in wood, and stiffen, for a moment becoming like the surface

13 J. Jarzębski, *Wstęp*, p. XXXIII.

of a wooden board. On the stage, matter likewise trembles and pulsates with its own rhythm, yielding to a series of transformations. In a scene inspired by the problems just discussed, chairs lifted up become a forest, and a piece of timber dropped by Emil on the floor bounces back and lands in his hands.¹⁴ Not only do members of the family turn into birds, but so do books, fluttering their pages like wings, floating upward and flying before the eyes of dumbfounded audience members. Just as a train looms out of the twilight into the midst of streets in Schulz's *The Street of Crocodiles*, so during the play the characters use their chairs to form train compartments, and their words recreate the rhythmic clatter of the locomotive's wheels. During a sequence of scenes based on the story "The Gale" (Wichura), tables move, seemingly animated by a magic breath of life, and a gust of wind removes the tablecloth, snatching it with the hand left behind by Father as Emil and Karol wrestle with it and the fabric bellies out like a sail. When Father sums up the changes taking place, his lines strike tones highly reminiscent of Schulz: "Matter can change in an instant, Joseph. [...] In the wink of an eye we may no longer be who we think we are."¹⁵

In Complicite's stage production we also see Schulz's tendency to turn human beings into animals; as in the original text, here too this is mainly true of Father. He goes through a series of transformations on stage, from a fly to a condor, to a puppet with wooden limbs.

¹⁴ Complicite, *Plays*: 1, p. 19.

¹⁵ Complicite, *Plays*: 1, p. 39.

With all of these devices, the resulting play has been described by more than one observer as “Polish” in form, like something directly out of Tadeusz Kantor’s imagination, where the physical swirls next to the metaphysical and unreal on the stage, attempting in this oneiric dance of despair to summon back irretrievably lost moments and people.¹⁶

Markowski has written about how in Schulz’s prose, reality bears the marks of a theatrical spectacle that, in joining together real and artificial elements, beckons us toward an unusual kind of sensual perception.¹⁷ To go further down this path, we might note that the Schulz universe is inherently reminiscent of the theatrical sign, described by the Prague Structuralists as dynamic, mobile, and variable, extraordinarily capacious in its potential for generating meanings.¹⁸ We have but to recall the *Hamlet* directed by Peter Brook, in which lusciously colored satin pillows functioned as both castle walls and banquet table. “The effect of theatricality becomes manifest in the ‘shimmering’ or oscillation of all elements presented on the stage: it is alternately real and fictional.”¹⁹

Complicite, using a whole arsenal of theatrical tools, captures this theatrical mutability of Schulz’s prose, in which not only forms and shapes fluidly pass into each other,

16 I. Shuttleworth, *The Street of Crocodiles*, <http://www.cix.co.uk/~shutters/reviews/99002.htm>, 9.12.2013 [accessed 10.9.2015].

17 M. P. Markowski, *Text and Theatre. The Ironic Imagination of Schulz*, [in:] D. de Bruyn, K. Heuckelom, ed., *Unmasking Bruno Schulz*, Amsterdam–New York 2009, p. 435.

18 K. Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama*, London–New York 1997, pp. 12–16.

19 J. Limon, *Trzy teatry*, Gdańsk 2003, p. 76.

but also, in keeping with the oneiric mechanics of dreams, ontological spheres interpenetrate each other. The configuration of characters combines with the dynamics of the stage set to create a flight of stairs, multiple levels in a house, and a train rushing rhythmically forward on the rails. The actors, making use of the semiotic potential of objects on stage and ordinary elements of the set such as chairs and tables, create first a dining-room, then a classroom, and then Father's shop. Spectators watch as whirring coils of material change into the undulating waters of the ocean, thus bringing the reams of fabric lying on the floor to phantasmagoric life. Ben Brantley writes: "I've never seen such a distinctive, purely literary voice so closely approximated in a piece of theater. Schulz's work, like that of Proust and Kafka, shakes readers free of the blinkers of habitual perception. This production, against all odds, achieves the same effect [...]"²⁰

Simon McBurney is reckoned to be one of the 12 most influential theatre directors in the world, and *Complicite* is considered a group that has shown how the theatre's possibilities can be expanded and thereby provided an example for others to follow. Christopher Innes, author of what is probably the most exhaustive study of contemporary British theatre and drama, finds that McBurney "represents an on-going search for the kinds of meaning that will both reflect and express contemporary consciousness, leading into the new millennium."²¹ This adaptation of Schulz's prose formed the beginning of a series of works

²⁰ Ben Brantley, "A Haunting Vision."

²¹ Ch. Innes, *Modern British Theatre*, Cambridge 2002, p. 543.

whose aim was to express the transitoriness of human remembrance and deepen the mechanics of memory. The creators of the production found images in Schulz that enabled them to put their artistic principles into action in the fullest possible way; in his work, they discovered the sense of loss and abandonment that constitutes an integral part of the contemporary sensibility. The rupture in continuity between the past and the present, the loss of contact with what has passed away, a peculiar fracture that typifies the human being in today's world. But which can, in McBurney's view, be transcended. It can be transcended with the help of what takes place in the theatre in between the stage and the seats in the house.²² Schulz is part of that process of communication.

translated by Timothy Williams

²² McBurney, M. Wheatley, "Prologue," in *Complicite, Plays: 1*, pp. x-xii.