

HELEN JAKSCH

## REAL LIVE KIDS

*Before Your Very Eyes*

Gob Squad

Public Theater, New York, November 2015

*Employee of the Year*

600 Highwaymen

Under the Radar Festival, New York, January 2016

A former mentor of mine once said, “Animals, babies, and butts will always be a better actor than you.” A goat, or a butt, does not know it is performing—it just is; same for children. In this contemporary moment of postsincerity and pro-irony, artists can carve out space in the theater for elusive ideas of authenticity, of truth, of unperformed and unpolished reality to emerge without apology. Both Gob Squad’s *Before Your Very Eyes* and 600 Highwaymen’s *Employee of the Year*—presented recently in New York but with long international touring histories behind them—create circumstances where the young, awkward, growing bodies of older children collide with the hypertheatricality of dress-up and formalized choreography. Both productions—with children *for* adults—tell stories of an entire life, from childhood to death, but the bodies of the young performers are never fully subsumed by the narrative. Even with a white, curly wig placed haphazardly on her head or while telling us about the baby growing in her gut, the child always remains a child. In both stagings, the audience is placed squarely between these real children and high metatheater. In this middle space we see our own lives, past and present, and glimpse the potential of our futures, too.

Gob Squad’s title makes playful reference to the circus, the sideshow, and national folk festivals given for the benefit of curious tourists. Digital, red letters flash out at the audience before the action begins: “Real live children!” What is Gob Squad and its group of young collaborators expecting our assumptions about real, live children to be? Kids playing games? Playing dress-up? Containing all the carefree innocence we have come to expect from the young body onstage? The company embraces all of these expectations. The children play a series of card games and watch cartoons behind a one-sided mirrored box when the audience arrives. They put on wigs and sweaters and makeup, contorting their bodies into the exaggerated postures of the elementary school play. But the children also literally flip us the bird. They tell off the omniscient, bossy voice that has been ordering them around and asking them questions all night. They

constantly remind us that although they'll play this growing up game to its conclusion, they're in charge.

It may be impossible to avoid looking for ourselves in the children's awkwardness, nervousness, charisma, and joy. The set's reflective surface magnifies this impulse; a person can see the children only through the audience's faint reflection. In one of the piece's most moving moments, the children are given the opportunity to reflect on their younger selves. The UK/German collective began interviewing and devising with the children more than two years before this Public Theater presentation, when the children were in fifth or sixth grade. The night of this performance, in 2015, they are two years older than they were when they created the piece. And what a difference two years makes in the appearance and demeanor of a tween. Two screens flank the mirrored box; on these we watch projected images of the young children talk about their dreams and fears. One of them poorly but passionately recites Shakespeare while the current version of him onstage buries his face in his hands in total embarrassment. "I'm a much better actor now," he tells us.

A young girl, Charlotte, stares into the camera, all round cheeks and clutching a small toy. She tells the camera how much she loves playing with this toy, how she'll never get rid of it. While this happens, the current version of her has put on a leather jacket and caked her eyes and mouth with black makeup, embodying the archetypal teenager, full of angst and irony. The children have a direct-feed camera in their box, and they zoom in on her. She rolls her eyes at her younger self. She scoffs at her younger self's fears of monsters under the bed and being alone. With disdain, she yells at her younger self. She's afraid of cracking her phone now and her parents walking in on her with a boy and bleeding on her clothes because of her period. She's not afraid of all that baby stuff anymore. "Don't forget to play with your toy," her younger self reminds her. "I threw him away. Grow up!" her older self replies. With prompting from the voice, Charlotte says goodbye to her recorded younger self and the image fades away. The children play dress-up, trying on the trappings of adolescence, adulthood, old age, and death. As with a lot of child's play, the observing adults can find deeper meaning in the make-believe. The children performers are in conversation with their younger



Gob Squad's *Before Your Very Eyes*, Team 1, Public Theater, New York City, 2015. Photo: Joan Marcus



*Before Your Very Eyes*,  
2015. Photo:  
Joan Marcus

waymen's *Employee of the Year* stands in for a different part of the central, collectively depicted character J's life from age three to eighty. "I am J," the first narrator says. "I'm three years old. I'm in my yard. Hello? Hello? Where's my mom? Where is she? Where is anyone?" Gob Squad's piece explores aging and growing up in the broadest, universal sense while *Employee of the Year* chronicles a single life. Here instead of a reflective box the stage holds just a white square floor flooded with lights that never change. Five narrators pass off the story as it moves forward through time, in a style that has come to be associated with the New York-based devising duo 600 Highwaymen: crisp, abstract movement and straightforward storytelling. The dress-up aspect of Gob Squad's staging highlights the performers' youth; Abigail Browde and Michael Silverstone's choreography places a similar emphasis. The girls execute the movements with skill, but something always feels stumbling or reaching. This is not a negative critique: there is something quietly virtuosic about a big step forward executed by little legs or a performer constantly scratching her wrist when it is clear the stage picture should be static. Or perhaps the virtuosity exists in being able to see through the codified movements through and because of the young body performing.

The performers in *Before Your Very Eyes* are protected by a one-way mirror, but the five girls in *Employee of the Year* remain vulnerable. They do not change their voices to portray the social worker, the aunt, the boyfriend, or the child that appears in J's remembered narrative. They are costumed in clothes that would believably be the ones in which they walked into the theater after school. We are never lulled into suspending our disbelief that we are not in a theater being told a story. Then, toward the end of the show, one girl steps forward and says, "My name is Candela. Candela Cubria." I leaned forward in my seat. I flipped through my program. She is not playing J at this moment

selves, with the older versions of themselves that might exist far into the future, and with us. But all of these selves perform to some level; it is their bodies that are actual and authentic. Through watching these young bodies onstage, we reflect on who we have become (and have not become) as we grow up and grow older each minute.

While the children in *Before Your Very Eyes* mark the passage of time with an ever-changing wardrobe, each child performer in 600 High-

like the four girls before her. She is playing herself. She tells us about the trip to and from Brooklyn she and her mom take for her to be in this evening's performance. She begins to sing without any music: "Will I remember being in this play when I'm sixty? What are the things I'll remember the most in my life?" This song, one of many written by David Cade for the show, highlights the doubleness that can make theater with young people so captivating to watch. The performer Candela wonders aloud what she will remember about her life at the same moment that the character J is at the end of her life. Through the simple melody, Candela looks backward and forward at the same time. A cynic could read this and several other moments in both productions as achieving some kind of sentimental shorthand through the use of children, but to another kind of attuned spectator the moment achieves a balance between sentimentality and simplicity. The moment is full of potential, curiosity, humor, and regret—just like life.

*Before Your Very Eyes* progresses through milestones marked by specific ages—drive, vote, smoke, get divorced, lose friends—and *Employee of the Year* moves through J's life marked by what she sees as she gets older. When she is seventeen, J sees a girl in a photo that looks like her—her birth mother. When she is twenty-five, she sees a photo on the fridge of her mother and a man. When she is eighty, she sees her mother's face and name on an employee of the month plaque in a grocery store. J finds her mother in photographs but is never able to find her even after a lifetime of searching. In the end, J is left only with the sight of herself in an old bathroom mirror. With this motif of looking, searching, and seeing weaving through J's story and five young narrators, the play ends with "There was blindness . . . That is what you could say about my life." It is Candela who delivers these lines: Candela, whose name is the only one we know. Candela and Candela-as-J say this, and the piece seems to pose the question to the audience: what are you seeing and failing to see in your lives?

*Before Your Very Eyes* begins with a dance projected on the two screens on both sides of the stage. The performers' younger selves dance in various locations around New York City to the Queen anthem "Don't Stop Me Now." They shake their hips. They flip their hair. They bounce up and down. One by one they jump out of the frame and run (two years older now) into the mirrored box onstage. At the end of the piece, they each rise and take off their old people costumes and walk slowly backward out of the box, again underscored by Queen but this time with the song playing backward. The performers slowly become young again. The rewind button has been pressed, but when they next emerge for a curtain call they are already a little older than when they began. Something similar happens with the five young narrators in *Employee of the Year*. These girls grow and change a little each day. In the theater, however, time moves at an astronomical pace. A child becomes a teenager in a matter of minutes. Seventy years passes in about an hour. Something about this theatrical time signature captures what it is like to reconsider your youth from a long way off. As adults watching children onstage, our own childhoods seem to move just as quickly. One month you have



600 Highwaymen's  
*Employee of the Year*,  
Under the Radar  
Festival, Public  
Theater, New York  
City, 2016. Photo:  
Maria Baranova

a minimalist space that focuses the senses on the small movements of a wrist and the sound of bare feet on the floor. But both companies have created pieces *with* children *for* adults. Each devising process was tied to cooperation and collaboration between adult artist and child. Perhaps the reason that both *Before Your Very Eyes* and *Employee of the Year* adeptly court and coyly avoid irony and overt sentimentality in equal measure is because they were created in a room where adults and children faced one another. The child has not yet bought into one proper ideology of “art” or art making, and maybe this unknowing allows for a certain manifestation of contradictions—the productions achieve *and* embody irony: they are well-executed *and* awkward; they are equally mature *and* childish. It is the process version of the animal, butt, and baby idea. Perhaps the child is also a better artist than you, too? Or at the very least, much more of a capable artist than you, too?

Ultimately these productions with children for adults use theatrical ideas of time at odds with young bodies in constant flux to prompt questions about the nature of theater and about life: What will I remember? What can I do know? What do I regret? What have I learned? Who's in charge here? What am I doing? Does what I'm doing matter? What's coming next?

We make one more play.

We get older.

*Theater* 46:3 DOI 10.1215/01610775-3620376  
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baby smooth skin, and the next you are sprouting hairs on your chin. One month you are playing with your best friend, and the next month they are your sworn enemy. You are a child one month; the next, you're an old woman.

Gob Squad's and 600 Highwaymen's aesthetics are almost the polar opposite of one another—one revels in the chaos of technological, acoustic, and object overload while the other breathes quietly into

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