

Drapando: Scratching for a connection

Maria Karaś (University of Wrocław), Jacky Lie-An-Joek and Tessa Coenen (University of Amsterdam).

The play *Drapando, czyli Atak Zamszałego Starucha (Drapando, or the attack of the mosy old man)* directed by Zofia Pinkiewicz as part of an exam for a Composition of Theatre Production module at the Akademia Sztuk Teatralnych im. St. Wyspiańskiego, centres on the relationship between a family and their daughter Katie, played by Jagoda Zimała. Katie has the atopic dermatitis, or AZS. The play was written by Szymon Jachimek with his daughter Jana Jachimek. It is based on their own struggles with the AZS, as a child with the AZS and as a parent of a child with the AZS. In 2020 *Drapando* has won a competition for new children's plays organised by Poland's Centrum Sztuki Dziecka (Centre of Arts for Children) for the last 35 years. *Drapando* loosely translates to 'scratching' which refers to Katie who keeps scratching her skin because of the AZS.

When the audience enters the auditorium, three actors are standing stage left and keep telling the audience in Polish 'Nie drap się!' which translates to 'stop scratching!' Their words evoke some stereotypical parental behaviour, and their tone of voice is very strict. During the performance we learn that these three actors are Katie's father (Mateusz Guzowski), her mother (Dominika Banaszek) and her brother (Krzysztof Kozak). The play centres on the relationships between the family, the importance of communication, and on understanding, acceptance and transparency related to the AZS and each other's feelings.

The stage is set like a playground with lots of different pillows, all in their own shape, sizes and colours. The pillows are used to make Katie's world come to life through imagination. For example, in a hospital scene, a doctor is represented as a big red monster. Katie ends up kicking the monster as a way of getting agency over her health. All the colours have different meanings; red is the AZS and pain, yellow is a healing cream, blue is water, a good diet and lifestyle. Pink and green colours are referring to various medications. In the post-show discussion, the choice for pillows was explained. It serves as a contrast to the painful skin that Katie experiences. Something that is meant to be soft and safe is incredibly painful for her.

This contradiction is also prevalent in other areas of the play. Namely the relationship between parents and their kid who suffers from the AZS. A loving touch can be experienced as something painful, even though Katie longs for connection. She is very lonely because she can't touch her parents. Even the medication which they give to help her, hurts her. This is also mentally painful for the parents because their intentions are good and they want to help her, but they fail in making her feel better, which in turn makes them feel sad and powerless. It was touching to see Jagoda Zimała being a bridge between Katie's family and the children in the audience by directing her acting towards them.

The family keeps trying to understand Katie and make her understand that they are there to help her. They do it, for example, through theatre and storytelling. They create and perform the story about medical creme, in which the ointment is the superhero rescuing Katie from the AZS. During these kinds of imaginary stories, the production uses music from well-known action films. The music supports the light-heartedness of the stories that dad creates help Katie to see the situation anew. Some children yell 'Avengers' when the *Avengers* theme starts to play, showing that they recognise it immediately and know it well. This makes Katie's situation more relatable: Katie is just like them.

The target audience are children +6, but the play is very touching for an older audience as well, even an audience that doesn't speak the language. Not all of us can speak Polish and yet the play was very touching for us all. Because of the physical acting of the actors, the music and the colour coding of the pillows, a lot of emotions and intentions became clear. Aside from the materiality of the performance the reactions from the children and the adults in the audience gave away much of its meanings. There were laughs, applause and even tears.

It was nice to see a children's play to be so prevalent in meaning for an older audience as well. Even more so as the family found a way to understand each other and to find a connection with each other through empathy and transparent communication about the illness. The topic of this play speaks also to other contexts where families deal with children with atypical conditions. The AZS can symbolise different illnesses and unfamiliar health conditions. Everyone has their own issues and painful experiences, understanding and gentleness. In that way *Drapando* makes a very specific family story relatable for everyone.