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MONSTERS

– From monstrosity to humanity in Ilka Schönbein's work



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MONSTERS

« Madness will also have something to do with the made puppet itself, so often a crude and disproportioned thing, with its staring eye and leering teeth, its tiny hands, the impossible red or blue of its face, barely human in form, like a monster or mistake, a fetus or a corpse »

Kenneth Gross

Ilka Schönbein is one of the most famous independent puppeteer and her art is peopled by strange disturbing creatures. She is dealing with the dark side of human beings. It is inherent in her art.

I will base my work on Ilka Schönbein's show *My own flesh and Blood*. It is a puppet show for adults based on a novel of Aglaja Veteranyi titled *Why the child was cooking in polenta*.

My aim is to show that through puppets and monstrosity Ilka Schönbein is reaching our soul. I would like to answer the question: What monsters tell us about humans?

The inner questions are: Why do we need monsters? Why do we want to see monsters in theater? Why do we need to face them?

KEYWORDS:

Puppet, monster

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1 INTRODUCTION

Take a theater space, a human being and lots of objects, masks, human limbs. What will happen on stage will be a human being combining himself with all the objects that were brought there. Pictures and creatures will appear in front of you and emotion will rise from it. You will dive deeply into a strange monstrous story. And you will get thrilled, it will come deep in your soul. That's exactly what happens when you go to see Ilka Schönbein's shows.

“The puppet creates delight and fear” writes Kenneth Gross in his essay on uncanny life. We are seduced and scared both in the same time by the power of puppets. Fear is born from strangeness because it is different and unknown.

Puppetry is based on the fact that objects are brought on stage as dead objects but once they are there they become alive. Life and death is the starting point of this fascinating art form. Puppets are brought to life assisted by its manipulator, a sort of god who decides for his life. I call “object” : all the items, props, puppets, costumes which will take part in creating the image on stage. From each image/composition will emerge a dramatic situation. Once the actor is surrounded by all what he needs to play he will start quietly. To let life go into the puppet, the manipulator has to be quiet so that his aliveness is transferred to the object. As death is needed for life, quietness of the actor is needed for the dead object to come alive. There is a switch to make. The object needs the human presence to exist, it is his source of life. Life is shared and the object prolong the actor's movement giving the illusion that it has its own life. It is easy to recognize that it is not an usual situation to see such a magic and that it can provoke strong emotions in the audience. I will use the concept of Freud to speak about this phenomenon. Puppets create a “disturbing strangeness”¹. Freud considers all that is hidden, secret, buried. It is a matter of a foreign, unknown region, where one prefers to rid of all that is not acceptable. For Freud, it is a matter of the unconscious where are buried the taboos.

Ilka Schönbein says that she has cut the strings of her puppets to let them come closer to her. In the end they are body to body, almost one. She is manipulating not only with

¹ Sigmund Freud, *L'inquiétante étrangeté et autres essais*, Folio, 1985

hands as it usually happens in traditional puppetry but with all her body : legs, arms, mouth, back and bottom. Ilka Schönbein is the basement for her construction. All the character emerge from her. They are skin to skin, bones to bones. Tension is created between the living and dead body. Both are playing a role. They are in a permanent dialogue. This way of manipulating and creating character give birth to new creatures, half human half paper that will be called monsters. In front of us we see human body extension, hybrids, doubles, metamorphoses. We can feel that there is a straight connection with very old stories, with our fears and ancient gods. And it moves us like a dream or a nightmare. This fact brought me to question myself about our need to see our dark sides and human borders. In our society where everything has to be normal to be accepted by the community. In our time of a strong normalization of thoughts and behaviors we still need to face our demons and to see monsters. They are present in all art forms. In cinema for example we can see Nosferatu, Frankenstein, Alien, Terminator, and Batman... As Cinema is not my field of study so I will concentrate on puppetry and base my reflexions on Ilka Schönbein's play *My own flesh and Blood*. My observations brought me to that question: Why to show monsters?

2 MY OWN FLESH AND BLOOD A PUPPETRY SHOW FOR ADULTS

2.1 About Ilka Schöbein

2.1.1 Biography

Ilka Schönbein is a German solo performer working with puppets masks and objects. She studied string puppet in Stuttgart puppetry school with the puppet master Albert Roser. During many years she learned Eurythmy. It is an expressive speech and movement art developed by Rudolf Steiner in the early 20th century. It develops a very sensitive language by using sounds and human body in motion. It is music translated into movement, a sort of singing in movement. This art has strongly influenced Ilka Schönbein in her work. She created a unique technique of puppet manipulation based on linking puppets, body and soul by movement.

After she finished her education, she played in different groups during ten years meanwhile she created her own performances. Eventually she started to play in the street and created her own company Theater Meschugge. *My own Flesh and Blood* is the fourth show of the German puppeteer. Like in every show, she builds masks and puppets, directs the piece and plays the leading role.

2.1.2 Shows

First show is called *Metamorphoses*. It is mainly a solo performance with several puppets. The show is built as a series of pictures in motion. The performer, lays

out her props and costumes in front of her adult audience. Without relying on language at all, Ilka Schönbein uses her masks and puppets and every muscle in her body to create a series of separate scenes that, when experienced as a whole, produce a powerful emotional impact. A wide variety of vintage Klezmer recordings are played during the show. She creates a Middle European world inspired by the Jewish tradition and her feelings as a German woman towards Shoah. Ilka Schönbein uses masks and puppets with a strong resemblance to her own face that evokes family members. Vulture, rats and dove are also part of the tragic dance.

Metamorphosis means “change of form or shape” and “to transform, to be transfigured” It is a natural phenomenon, a process of development in nature when insects are growing to a new shape. That's what happened for this so called show. Ilka Schönbein agreed to adapt her initial show for stage. And each time she created a new version masks and costumes changed, certain characters and scenes vanished, other appeared instead. There were successively five versions of *Metamorphoses* and the last one was called *Metamorphoses of Metamorphoses*.

Second show, *King Frog* is a young audience show created in 1998. It is based on the famous Brothers Grimm's fairy tale. A spoiled princess becomes friend with a frog. After rejecting it from disgusts she allows it to sleep on her pillow and it turns out to be a handsome man. Transformation is the main concern of the show. The show grew in three different versions.

Back to the adult audience, she creates in 2003 a third show is the *Winter journey*. It draws its inspiration from Frantz Schubert's music and Wilhelm Müller's poems. “Winterreise” are twenty-four poems written during the 1820's and set in lied by Frantz Schubert. Desperate love and death are themes of this long and cold journey. Ilka Schönbein is accompanied by an accordionist and a singer through the whole show.

Fourth show is *My own flesh and blood*, created in 2006. The play is an adaptation from a novel of Aglaja Veteranyi, *Why the child was cooking in polenta*.

2.2 Aglaja Veteranyi

2.2.1 Biography

Aglaja Veteranyi is a Romanian writer and actress. Born in a circus family in Romania she came with her family to Switzerland, in Zurich, to escape the hard political situation of there country. From 1982 she was very active and involved in theater life in Zurich and she wrote three novels : *Why the child was cooking in polenta*, *Gifts- A dance of death* and *The shelf of the last gasps*. She drawn herself in 2002

2.2.2 Text

Inspired by Aglaja Veteranyi's own life, the novel is a long autobiographical journey. She is handling a wild humor, sometimes disturbing, to chase away her demons. Through her children voice we discover the true story of a girl born in a circus family. The family escaped Romanian dictatorship and communism to settle in Zurich. They were escaping fear but the little girl couldn't get rid of her own fears. Every evening the child Olinka is afraid for her mother who is executing her number attached by hair at the top of the big top. She is afraid that she would fall and die. To make her forget her terror her sister tells her the terrible story of the child cooking in polenta. Her father is a clown, alcoholic and incestuous. He mistreat her mother in front of her terrified daughter. One day he disappears and the mother has an accident. Her career is over. Olinka is forced to dance in cabarets to earn there living.

Aglaja Veteranyi takes place in the skin of a child who examines the world of adults, her enjoyments but also her turpitude. We follow the main character

through her children eyes. She is inventing a poetic but biting world with a powerful god who is living in the sky watching her life. A god who is responsible for life and death.” You have to explain to god why you prefer to be dead than alive. And if you don't succeed to convince him, he switches your brain off and you must start life again from the beginning”² We dive in the cruel poetry of childhood. Sensitive poetic images are emerging. Words of a child full of imagination and fantasy creates a very emotional world that we enter from the first second of the show.

2.3 The play

2.3.1 “Lifted the curtain on childhood circus”

The show is build with series of nine scenes played as circus acts. Audience is welcomed by a knighting woman dressed with a long black plastic dress “Ladies and gentleman, dear public, welcome to our small circus. This evening we are presenting young artists very talented. Famous all around the world. Each of us knows them.”³ While presenting them “it is the abused, neglected, abandoned, rejected (...) it is the children we were, banished in the darkness of our hearts.”⁴, she is raising her dress to reveal on the ground heads of children. The guests. Puppets that will be used to play the story. There are mainly two characters shown in the play : the girl Olinka who is the main character and her mother. Others are evoked as a series of ghosts. They appear through a hat for the father and a tongue out for the lover. Each scene is a sort of dance between two characters or pieces of them. This supernatural ball is punctuated by several black out. Between

2 Ilka Schönbein, *Chair de ma chair*, Institut International de la Marionnette,2006

3 Ilka Schönbein, *Chair de ma chair*, Institut International de la Marionnette,2006

4 idem

each episode the stage becomes dark and we only see a strange blue clown-angel typewriting the girl's diary, illuminated by a small lamp. Chapters of the story of the little girl are lead by the voice of the clown-angel. It is the narrator of the drama of Olinka from her birth til her death. One after another characters appears from the darkness and play their role in her dramatic life. Like a river it is flowing and takes us in the stream. Atmosphere is very calm and dark from the beginning of the play and it starts with this words whispered by the angel “ we stay dead much longer than alive that's why it is necessary for the dead much more happiness...”⁵

Text is said in German and French translated immediately by the narrator voice. We can fully hear this intense text that carried us away from reality. Images of Ilka schönbein are never illustrative. Voices are retelling a situation and we see its metaphorical sense in image. One of the most striking example in the show is girl skating on ice. She is dancing in the cold and retelling that she went with her mother to her lover so that the father doesn't get suspicious and she is waiting in the room. Waiting for her mother to commit adultery. It is her winter, her solitude that we see. The shift between image and text create emphasize the feeling of being in a dream. In a distorted reality. And it helps us to enter in the rough reality of Aglaja.

2.3.2 Stage Design

On the black stage emerge eight wooden boards on which are painted in black with a blue sky and small white clouds on top. It is the sky mentioned by Aglaja Veteranyi in the beginning of her novel. Boards surround the stage as an open wall. Arranged in semicircle, the black pieces of wood evoke the family circus ring of the big top. In the center a black round spot and a black metal stand are installed. Space is divided in two parts. Of the right hand-side of the stage there

5 Ilka Schönbein, *Chair de ma chair*, Institut International de la Marionnette, 2006

are several objects fixed on boards, a children school chair, feathers and a blue jacket are situated at the top of the right side boards. A blue typing machine with a blank paper and a small blue desk lamp are in front of it, on the floor. Of the left hand-side there is one board on the floor, facing audience and another on top of car tires. A leg is hanged on the very left side of the stage. This circus ring is lit by a sober light which leaves the bottom of the stage in the shade. Each scene is supported by a spotted round light pointed toward the middle stage.

The very simple setting creates a poor place, unadorned. It is the itinerant circus built from few pieces of wood. Made out of very simple material and reduced to the bare minimum it is a sad and miserable show. We are far from glitters and success. The atmosphere is dark and heavy. The fear which oppresses the little girl invades the space and it becomes oppressive for the audience. But Ilka Schönbein is having a lot of humor, thanks to it the show doesn't become too depressive.

Stage design is transformed and used during all the show. Feathers become angel wings on the back of the actress, jacket is used and manipulated as Sir Loyal director of the circus. Typing machine is a sort of diary for the narrator. Events and thoughts are retold while typing them as if Aglaja Veteranyi would be on the process of writing her book in the same time. Boards become table, bed, black board with chalk. The world of the girl builds itself and faints away in front of our eyes.

2.3.3 Actresses

They are two actresses on stage sharing the words of the girl. Ilka Schönbein is playing the main role of the little girl. Her costume is evolving during the play. She is pulling away layers until being almost naked in the end of the show. She has some elements of the black costume of the puppet manipulator : a black bonnet, simple piece of black cloth used as a dress and sometimes a black tight. The rest of her outfit is made with flesh color under clothes and body paints. Face is black,

hands and arms are red, mouth and legs are painted during the show. She is bear feet.

Nathalie Pagnac is the narrator, she is using objects of the space (typing machine, wings, jacket). She wears a blue round hat. Her face is painted like a clown with blue eyebrows and nose. She is dressed with a short black dress with straps and black ankle boots.

Their duet evokes black and white clown. White clown is the master on stage, he is more serious, the other one is more grotesque and crazy. Ilka is making faces, using her mouth and eyes is a grotesque and ugly way to deform her face and becomes monstrous. The style is not realistic.

2.3.4 Puppets

Puppets are heads, masks, pieces of body (legs, arms) and pieces of clothes made in paper and painted with flesh color. Each scene includes two characters, mixed with each other. For every act the puppet is fixed in a new part of the body. Ilka Schönbein is manipulating them switching between the mother, father and child. she is a sort protean figure, playing all the roles, starting with the innocence of the little girl and then switching to the perverse eyes of the father raping his own daughter.

3 CREATION OF FASCINATING MONSTERS

3.1 Definition of monsters

The noun « monster » is used in current language and has different understandings : physical monsters, freaks, social monsters, deviant humans, monsters from imagination and myth. Monsters are present in Ilka Schöbein's work in all those different levels. We will explore them to proceed further in the subject.

Monsters have always existed in nature. It is a living being, body conformation abnormal (excess, default or abnormal position of members).

A monster is an individual or a creature whose appearance or behavior is surprising in its gap with the norms of a society. The monster represents an individual who does not go into the standard because of his irregularities. He can be disproportionate by his size like the giant or dwarf; hybrid half human, half animal or half man half woman.

It is also from the language and etymology, what shows, warns. By extension it can be what is shown. Latin verb meaning monstratum which suggests that the word originally referred to a phenomenon that was shown at fairs and circuses.

That was proved during the whole history of art : monsters were drawn or shown in very many ways.

In puppetry, disproportions are very much used. Puppet builders love to play with shapes and proportions, to emphasize an aspect of a character. They do not create perfect humans but creature that often more look like monsters. Ilka Schönbein is a very bright example of an artist giving a singular point of view on humans by using twisted figures.

3.2 Combining figures that creates monsters : a singular manipulation technique

3.2.1 Melting with puppets

Ilka Schönbein can be considered as a master of hybridization, all of her creatures are combined figures : Mother and child, father and child, man and woman. It is due to her technique.

Ilka Schönbein shares completely her body with her puppets. She is manipulating several puppets or pieces of puppets and give illusion of life through them . She says in the documentary *Anima, spirit of puppets*, that it is a sort of † sacrifice † from herself to give life for another. It is actually only half a sacrifice because she doesn't disappear behind but she lives with her puppets they both exist in the same time. She calls her technique “body mask”. It is a very personal technique where she is putting on herself new body pieces such as legs, arms, half and full faces. (picture1)

The dance of three (picture2) is a brilliant example of this combination of figures and characters. The three characters are : the girl, a man and a spider in its net. The girls head is a mask hold in Ilka Schönbein's mouth. She is the main character dressed for a cabaret show, with red underwear and red painted legs. Behind her is standing a man that we can recognize because of his black top hat. And the spider is a glove puppet fixed on her left hand living in a net made with an umbrella painted with white strings. Umbrella is animated by the right hand, turning constantly. Hands, mouth, head, all of them playing a different role and supported by her body which is the main part of the character. It can seem quite schizophrenic to assume so many moves in the same time. In fact it is very calm and peaceful. Each move is essential and give enough information for us to see it alive and thinking.

In the combination of three figures playing one after another their role and her body is the central axis of the picture. They are sharing one body and this body is taken by different souls, it melts in it. The man standing behind is her eye opening and closing on the left side of the mask of the girl. A black top hat complete the picture of the man and evokes her father from the incest scene. She is holding an open umbrella with a white spider net painted inside. In the scene she is a young cabaret dancer trying to hide her body from a man. She will finally have sex with him. The spider is her mother who is prostituting her and keeping her in her net. Spider is a predatory keeping the young girl like a bait in her net to attract and catch men. The net is turning behind her all the time hypnotizing us like little flies.

3.2.2 Eurythmy

To understand this fascinating ability to create hybrids we have to come back to Ilka Schönbein influences and education. Ilka was trained in eurythmic dance and string puppet. Eurythmic which increases the extend of movements and so required an exceptionally precise gesture. This technique really challenging the law of movement. She uses very often very slow movement and is looking for the string which link the soul and movement together. She erases the position of the puppeteer, trying to become her own instrument, the puppeteer being as one with the mask. In the birth of the child, legs are moving very slowly around the enormous head and we see alternatively legs of the mother in the air, arms of the baby and a strange creature. Mother and child are alive in front of us just by those slight move even if we don't have the full picture of their bodies we feel their mixed presence. The slowness of the move increase fascination. It gives us the essence of each of them.

Ilka Schönbein feigns and pretends, but in the same time she's in a real state of possession. She plunges us in a kind of waking dream. She is both angel and devil, half fairy and half witch. Life emerge from her slow move, from absolutely amazing creatures born in front of our eyes. We above the law of nature.

3.3 Distorted figures

Puppeteers like to play with shape, size, proportions to create their characters. It underlines specificity of its nature. A figure does not need to be realistic to become a human character. Ilka Schönbein is rejecting naturalism, she does not imitate nature and humans. She is exploring disproportion and strangeness.

3.3.1 Human monsters

A monster is someone who is shown. Freaks, are the most striking example in the history of shows and humans. "Tonight, wonderful and sensitive young artists, dangerous beasts and demons from the grave of oblivion will come in the light of our ride" says Ilka Schönbein in the opening of the show. As a Mister Loyal, she is presenting her creatures. And those creatures are freaks, human monsters. During 19th and 20th century where show in circus and fairs in Europe and United state. This shows are forbidden nowadays. Ilka Schönbein is referring directly to this tradition of exhibiting humans with special gifts and physical deformity. Each artist has a name mentioning his specificity like the child able to be thinner than a needle, the child ogre or the steel-haired woman .

The steel-haired woman (picture 3) is attached on top of the big top of the family circus with her hair. With half mask and a fake leg Ilka Schönbein is executing this flying performance standing on one leg covered with a black tight. The mother seems to fly in a very slow and light way. But in the same time we see a frightening figure, half paralyzed from the face with three legs. Position of legs are also not realistic, it becomes less and less flying and it ends in a coitus with Armando, her lover. Later mother and daughter become Siamese sisters having two torso for only one body. Fighting with a bottle. The child in the first scene has an enormous head like an hydrocéphalic child and two legs are moving behind it . They are tentacles, arms, legs. In a constant metamorphose the child figure is evolving,

almost growing up in front of our eyes. Later the child, petrified by the idea of her falling from the big top, becomes a two heads monster screaming for her mother to come back.

Physical deformity is visible in all of the puppets and characters created in the show. It is due to the fact that most of the puppet pieces are made from her own body. She is making molds of herself. A new monstrous body is born.

3.3.2 Metamorphoses

Ilka Schönbein's body is changing shape, becoming another, a hybrid, half woman half paper. She undergoes transformation and metamorphoses. The Greek poet Ovid wrote the story of our origins in a long epic poem called *Metamorphoses*. Myths are the basis of our western culture and collective imagination. Those stories of metamorphoses are terrible because they happen in the human body and are often violent. But at the same time they are attractive because they deal with our fragility of being humans. There is far in our unconsciousness the fear not to be a human anymore. Like waking up from a bad dream, wondering for a slight moment if we are still the same than yesterday. « stories of metamorphosis and transformation of the body are often terrible, often heartbreaking. [...] Because they do not talk about anything else than our fragile humanity ». Metamorphoses is central in Ilka Schönbein's way to deal with her puppets. Her body grows extensions, becomes another body and comes back to its original shape.

3.3.3 A certain idea of beauty

Harmony and beauty are put aside in Ilka Schönbein's world. Distortion, ugliness, unnatural, freaky characters are the norm in her circus. There is no beauty seen. Everything is old and seems to be taken out from the garbage. Costumes are simple pieces of fabric, or painted underwear. Characters have strange features but also a sad color and texture. Skin seems diseased, never exposed to proper

sun light it has a very pale color as if they would come back from the kingdom of death. Children are bold having eggs heads. Ilka Schöbein is dealing with an aesthetics of ugliness.

In the play characters are ugly physically and morally. Ilka Schönbein is painted in black with bloody hands making faces, twisting her face , opening wildly her mouth and eyes. And it is impossible to avoid a feeling of disgust when discovering her skinny body. Not exactly a woman not anymore a child, she is like an old girl, as sort of freak herself. Fascinating and frightening in the same time. The surrealist artist Hans Bellmer has explored in his works *dolls*, this idea of repulsive beauty.

We are disturbed by those hybrid monsters because of there liveliness, because they are so close to us , they look like us.« the worst monster is the one that looks like us”. They are human beings, living bodies. But in the same time their ugliness and disproportion are disgusting. We are rejecting them because they are a nightmare because they are out of norms. As norms reassure us and keep us safe it is scary to face the one that does not fit in it. It weakens the barrier between monsters and us. We are normal and they don't. But why do we feel empathy toward them? Because it echos to our own monstrous side that is well kept somewhere deep inside of us. From monstrosity something of our humanity emerge, a question about our human identity. We see ourselves as humans, we see the beauty behind the beast.

4 FRIGHTNING MONSTERS IN HUMAN REPRESENTATION

Our first meeting with monsters happens during our childhood. Children between the age of four and five cannot make the difference between reality and imagination. At that age we do believe that monsters exist. They are powerful ugly creature hiding in the darkest corner or under our beds. We are creating them in our imagination, creating our own fears. Why do we need to face those frightening creature? Why do we have to fight them, to chase them out of our minds to get a quiet night? Because we are afraid that they would eat us or kill us. We consider them as a negative force that could destroy us. They awake the most powerful emotion that we can produce: fear. Fear is an instinct to survive. It gives a signal to the body to protect ourselves from danger. It creates a physical reaction of all the body, who tries to get away, even slightly, from danger. It can be a real or imaginary danger. As we are growing up fear of monsters disappears. We manage to make the difference between what really exist and what is created in our heads. Being a grown up person, monsters are still creating discomfort but they also provoke a sort of fascination. If to look at the art history we can see that monsters are present in almost all art forms. We tend to represent them in literature, painting, photography or theater. We are still inventing them, showing them. We have seen that monsters have many different shapes, they are not one but many. Their main characteristic is that they look like humans but they are different in shape or behavior. Monsters are either superior to humans or considered as Gods like in mythology or regarded as inferior, deviant humans. Both of them are creating discomfort. They carry a strange force. Looking at them we try to see similarities and differences to understand what makes a Man a Man. And we can feel that they reflect our fragile condition.

4.1 Gods from mythology

In almost all mythologies monsters are present before humans and are the origin of our existence.⁶ Monsters are born from union between sky and earth in most of the mythologies from Indian, Persian, Scandinavian, and Egyptian to Grecian. From this union are born Giants and Titans, huge powerful characters. In Grecian mythology, Uranus the sky, horrified by his monstrous children, decides to keep them in the ground to prevent them from appearing on earth. They are imprisoned in their mother's flesh.

The show *My own flesh and blood* is filled with the presence of ancient gods. The play starts with Ilka Schönbein seating on a table, covered from face till ground with a long piece of dark plastic. She looks like emerging from the ground. Knitting calmly, she slowly she starts to stand on the table and to pull the black dress. Like the Goddess of earth, with bloody hands, she is revealing from her bowels pieces of body, limbs and heads. She is showing us her monstrous children like Gaïa pregnant for the second time with her born children. Pulling away the dress Ilka Schönbein appears as a pregnant mother trying to kill her child. She gives birth but in the end the child will eat her.(picture4) “Olinka has already eaten eight mothers, the more she eats mothers the more it loses weight. The mother is as big as a house. The mouth is full of appetite, no place for words, no room for crying, no more room for anything”⁷. The mother eats her children and the child devours her like a Zeus taking his revenge on his father Cronus. There is a second mythological presence in the show: the mother knitting with red thread. She evokes the figure of a spider knitting the destiny of her child. The mother is appearing again in a shape of spider during the dance of three. This time she is a little creature climbing on the body of her daughter as if it would be her own possession. Like the Parques, she seems to be responsible of her daughter's destiny from birth till death.

6 Martin Monestier, *les monstres, histoire encyclopédique des phénomènes humains des origines à nos jours*, Le cherche midi, p17

7 Ilka Schönbein, *Chair de ma chair*, Institut International de la marionnette, 2006

Those stories are more than two thousand years old and they are still affecting us. We feel their power. They are a link to our phantasmagorical origins. They confirm that we can be both protective and oppressive as a spider building her net around the person she loves. Our human side can exist only because of our monstrous one. There is always a risk that the dark one takes advantages on the bright one. That is what terrifies us. Born from imagination monsters become real in our own flesh. They do echo to our internal disorder.

4.2 Monsters in theater

As we have seen Man are creating their own monsters. From reality, through imagination we are distorting ourselves to reveal our hidden parts. We stop for a moment to be reasonable and let our unspeakable desires express themselves. Since that Man exists he tends to represents himself to understand his condition. That's why he creates stories, images and paintings. We are retelling for ourselves what we are, who we are. To achieve this portrait we use our imagination and through it we build a mirror of our impulses and fantasies. Monsters are taking part in the picture, reflecting our irrational side. To my point of view theater is one of the most powerful arts to speak about humans. As it is a live art, there is an immediate empathy with characters. We are, as an audience, taken by the action and we experience the situation with the actor.

4.2.1 Grecian tragedy

Grecian left us a huge heritage of their theater, through it we can notice that characters in theater are not behaving like in everyday life. They are going further to explore a new zone of human soul. In Grecian theater tragedy is the main genre. In the plays, characters are marked by Hubris which is an excessive,

inflated behavior such as hate or pride.⁸ They over step the normal behavior, they become unreasonable. Passion and instinct is leading them. The hero, main character of the play, is taken over by this exaggeration of feelings that triggers the tragedy. Because of this abnormal behavior they turn into monster: they are child killer like Medea, murderers like Electra, incestuous like Oedipus. They are becoming monstrous in the moral level. Aim of tragedy is that audience will go through strong emotions and question himself about the situation he has seen. It has to create a cathartic effect. Catharsis is, from Aristotle's definition, « purging emotions ».⁹ By identifying ourselves to them and seeing them behaving in front of us we feel emotions they are going through. Audience is filled with terror and piety. Experiencing a strong situation that he probably wouldn't live in his own life. Humans are playing themselves, to see a reflection of their condition, of what we could be or can become. Showing monstrosity in humans has always been part of the theatrical tradition. In this sense Ilka Schönbein carries the heritage of this art form.

4.2.2 Social monsters

Even though she is following the line of cruel theatrical characters and destiny she does not follow the rules of tragic. She coming closer to our reality and is definitely connected with our time. Coming back to the definition, a monster in the moral level is a person who creates fear by his cruelty, his perversion.¹⁰ They don't need to be physically distorted to be considered as monsters. In the current language we use the word monsters to speak about criminals or persons having a deviant behavior. They are considered as social monsters. They transgress taboos. They are the manifestation of a flaw in human. Through them we are questioning the limits of our social system and our own moral. The border is thin and we are very sensitive subject.

8 Hendrik Van Gorp, *Dictionnaire des termes littéraires*, Honoré Champion, Paris, 2001.)

9 Aristote, *Poétique*.

10 Robert

In the show we are facing monstrous behaviors. The father is beating his wife and forcing her to have sex with him. The mother is becoming alcoholic after falling from the big top, trying to force her daughter to drink in the Siamese scene. Fully dependent on her daughter, supported by her body she is screaming « If my child abandon me I die »¹¹. They are violent and we see them acting in front of us. Ilka Schönbein shows us human perversion but she does not judge it. She uses humor, dark humor to depict this terrible family portrait. And it seems to me that it is essential when dealing with such situation and subject. She is showing life and its absurdity. And once more we are facing our fragile humanity

4.3 Grotesque

Between tragic and comic we bounce from laughter to tears. Brigitte Prost in her article about Ilka Schöbein¹², defines her theater as grotesque. I fully agree with this qualification. Pervert and basic human instinct are shown in *My own flesh and blood*. The tittle already suggests this triviality. Characters are giving birth, eating, having sex, nothing is hidden. There is no idealization of the human. It is raw meat served on stage. Close from fair spirit they look like typical characters of popular theater. Their behavior is taken from life they do not pretend, they are fully themselves. It is the intimacy of the body that we see characters are extravagant, weird, caricature of humans. The grotesque and humor prevents Ilka Schönbein to dive into the sordid picture of human depravity.

We are afraid but cannot take our eyes away from them, trying to find similarities with our own behaviors. Have I ever thought about it? Would I dare to go so far? Would I let myself become such a person? Barrier is thin. Moral and norms are keeping us but it can break. We feel discomfort.

Like Dr Jekyll we are often hiding a mister Hyde inside of us.

11 Ilka Schönbein, *Chair de ma chair*, Institut International de la marionnette, 2006

12

5 CONCLUSION

In the end of the show everything goes back to darkness. When the light comes back for bowing, we see on stage pieces of this dream, like dead leaves. Ilka Schönbein brought us into a strange world where children are cooked in polenta. We followed the creatures of the circus in their world of cruelty where fear is a master and beauty is hidden behind the masks. With her paper extensions Ilka Schönbein managed to give birth to amazing creatures. Fascinating us by the liveliness of those dead pieces. Each new element brought on stage was adding movement to the picture, renewing it. Images in perpetual motion bewitch audience. The beauty emerge from the movement, its slowness and gentleness. Even if the scene is violent by its content it never goes to real violence on stage. Each picture is a dreamlike dance. The cruelest situations are played with great humanity. It helps us to accept it as it is, as a fact and not to judge. We are witnessing a terrible story of a little girl for whom the world is full of fear and violence. But in this world she is still a girl ready to question life.

Puppets by their strangeness reach the soul. They are monsters, pretending to be humans. They are taking over the body of the manipulator to live their own life and express their monstrous nature. They undergo metamorphosis reminding ancient legend. As they are ugly and distorted they cannot be considered as real human. They have another nature, they are further. Already dead but able to come to life. Puppets and monsters goes together, they are not humans but beside it. Giving a reflection to humans of what they look like if to distort them just a little bit. The monster is the other. He seems be dangerous. But he is fascinating, we want to see it, to see how he moves, how he lives. And after all he has many similarities with us. Actually, the monster is in us. We belong to them and they belong to us. They are mirrors awakening our own humanity. From monsters to humans. They come to us to talk about ourselves, we Men. That is why we need to see them on stage, to see an hidden part of ourselves and accept it.

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PICTURES

Picture 1. *My own flesh and blood*, Theater Meschugge



Picture 2. *My own flesh and blood*, Theater Meschugge



Picture 3 . *My own flesh and blood*, Theater Meschugge



Picture 4. *My own flesh and blood*, Theatre Meschugge

