

Review of *Us/Them* (Ann Arbor, 2018)

The production of *Us/Them* by BRONKS and Richard Jordan productions was brought to Ann Arbor through the efforts of University Musical Society (UMS). According to their description in the program, “BRONKS is a Brussels-based art house with an accent on theater for a young audience... BRONKS aims with its artistic and art education activities to stimulate children, youth, and their environment to discover and explore the possibilities in ourselves and in the world.” On the UMS website, this show is recommended for audiences of twelve years of age and older. According to the actors, however, this show was targeted towards audience members as young as nine years of age during their tour in Europe. It raises questions about what is considered too provocative or off-limits for theatre for young audiences. Although *Us/Them* deals with a violent tragedy, the show itself is not an account of these distressing events, but rather it explores the ways in which children process and cope with extreme situations, and how understanding children’s coping mechanisms can help adults communicate better with children through theatre for young audiences.

The show opens with the two actors mapping out the blueprints of their school on to the black floor and on the back wall, a green chalkboard with several metallic rivets in a grid-like pattern, with chalk. The male actor wore a bright yellow turtleneck and jean shorts, and the female actress was dressed in a navy top and light blue patterned skirt. They speak in unison with a child-like competitiveness and eagerness to relay directly to the audience how many entrances there are in the building, where the gymnasium and libraries are located, where the administration offices can be found, and how many people work there. They gossip about the children they both know and the mothers and grandmothers who volunteer in the offices. Their

innocent banter and eagerness to earn the trust of the audience brings about a sense of familiarity and fondness for the two from anyone in the audience who has ever known and end enjoyed the company of a child.

The children move on to talk about the assemblies they have every morning in the gymnasium and what songs they learn to sing. The boy becomes the idyllic image of a young nationalist, insisting he knows all the words to the songs and anthems the students are taught. He begins to sing an anthem, showing the audience the quotidian routine of the students at this school, before the girl insists the recording of the anthem sounds far better than he ever could. At this cue, the recording of this upbeat nationalist anthem is played loudly while the two actors jump off the stage and rush into the house frantically, breaking the fourth wall to let the audience members know that 32 terrorists have entered the gymnasium from the back entrance.

This is the only time throughout the entirety of the performance that the actors display extreme fear or panic. This moment is interesting because the actors cease to be the characters they are on stage when they are in the audience, as though they were embodying how the audience should react to the terrorists. However, the moment they are back on stage, as the children again, they stand with a quiet fear beside each other with their hands up in surrender. Juxtaposed with the panic they displayed when acting as adults in the audience, their quietude in the face of danger is a vivid image of the resilience demanded of innocent children caught in the bipartisan politics of adults.

*Us/Them* is based on accounts of the Beslan school siege that began on September 1st, 2004, during which 1200 schoolchildren, parents, and teachers were held hostage for three days by Chechen terrorists. During that time, captives were denied access to food, water, and

healthcare, forcing many to drink their own urine and eat the flowers they had brought in for teachers on the first day of school. On the third day of the siege, two explosions set off a chain of other detonations, causing the roof of the gymnasium to cave in on the hostages. Fighting between Russian forces and Chechen terrorists ensues, and by September 5th, the death toll had risen to 355, 155 of whom were children. These facts are included in the program for awareness and context, but the performance itself avoids political undertones and focuses only on the experiences and the resilience of the two children through this crisis.

The children navigate the hostage situation as though it were an intense game. They compete with one another to hold their hands higher for longer periods of time, or to hold off longer on taking any of their clothes off (in the 90-degree room), or to only faint from dehydration after the other faints. There is no screaming, no crying, no panic. Only a quiet fear that manifests itself in the way the two children try to wrap their heads around their circumstances. They use math that they've been taught at school to keep track of the ratios of terrorists to hostages, and to keep scores and personal bests. The boy writes on the back chalkboard that he has not been to the bathroom in 38 hours and 12 minutes, which is a 191.6% increase in time from his last personal best. They use geometry they've learned in class to reenact the way in which the Chechens made them prisoners, caging the stage with strings pulled taut to represent wire and tying black balloons to represent the bombs. The children pay close attention to small details like the care that went into the routine of changing the Chechen guard whose foot is on the detonator every two hours without changing the pressure. They reenact this procedure for the audience factually with a sort of fixation with perfection and exaction. According to Paul Taylor for the Independent, "the mad precision of this is reminiscent of the

damaged, obsessional characters in Beckett.” The production follows the children as they attempt to make sense of their dire, unfamiliar situation by comparison to the cold facts they know about their world and by competition that allows them to cling to something they know well: their relationship to each other.

The play ends with a reenactment of the final explosion that causes the roof to cave in, killing and injuring several of the remaining hostages. The boy tells us he woke up in a hospital and found he needed to have his leg amputated, but a football player has given him 15,000 rubles - enough money to buy 3 Wii's, 8 skateboards, or 5 iPods. Again, the boy puts his unfamiliar circumstances into terms he can understand by comparing it to concrete facts about items he coveted. The news of the amputation in apposition to the boy's excitement about the goods he can receive as compensation is uncomfortable to watch. The audience is not implicated for the circumstances explicitly, but the circumstances evoke guilt from the audience as the boy is forced to find reason and silver linings in the senseless acts of violence he has endured.

The boy retells his situation with his characteristic lighthearted attention to detail, and the comedic effect he creates is enough to give one hope that the explosion and hostage situation would not turn out as bad as one would imagine. We soon find out, however, that the girl has been killed by the explosion. She tells her audience with gut-wrenching sincerity and excitement that it was her dream to be famous on national television, and now she finally is. Her eyes glow as she tells us that a 2-minute long footage of her (with blood trickling down her left ear) has been shown in one hundred countries. In America, she informs us enthusiastically, she was on TV for four minutes because they aired her footage in slow-motion. The play ends with the girl

telling the boy she thinks it's a shame they only got her left side, because she thinks her right side is prettier.

Despite its deceiving simplicity, *Us/Them* is a harrowing piece of theatre for an adult viewer because it reflects the effects of the traumas inflicted by our world onto those of children. This is shown through the retelling of the incident through the innocent eyes of children who cope with inexplicable tragedies in ways adults don't expect. They are not emotional; in fact, they seem rather detached. They are resilient: they are able to find logic, humor, and meaning in circumstances that are utterly incomprehensible to adults who wish to protect their children. And despite their resilience, children are the ones who suffer the most when caught in the midst of conflicts in the adult world.

*Us/Them* is skillful in its execution as a production and has been lauded by critics in all the countries it has toured in. Especially to American audiences, it has been praised as being revolutionary in its approach to children's theatre. It tackles this crisis without becoming melodramatic or clichéd. The show is innovative in that it grapples with themes like violence and terrorism without ever turning to guns or physical violence to depict it or depict an attitude towards it. All of this makes the lens of a child's world more vivid and makes the ending more devastating to watch. Thus, despite its lack of direct acknowledgement of guns and weapons, the play sends a clear message about the trauma endured at the hands of adults with such destructive tools. The children are forced to detach from a world that hurts them when it should be nurturing them. They are not only neglected, they are actively harmed, and they are forced to take action and make sense of the circumstances they are forced into if they want to survive.

As a piece of children's theatre, *Us/Them* has been very successful with audiences of all ages, but there is a difference in how it succeeds with different generations. According to the director, Carly Wijs, "Most of the adults are emotional because they either connect with what happened at the time, or compare it to their own lives, or events happening in the world today. Children often roar with laughter at moments when adults just don't because they see what's happening so differently." *Us/Them* was not meant to be a revolutionary piece of theatre for young audiences when it debuted in Belgium; it was merely meant to be an educational retelling for audiences of all ages, marketed towards children as young as nine years of age. However, when the production came to the United States, it was censored, and only children above the age of twelve years were permitted to see it. The show does not actively send a political message about what theatre for young audiences should look like, but the way it has been received says a lot about how adults from different backgrounds treat theatre for young audiences.

*Us/Them* raises concerns about what we allow our children to see and what we hide from them in order to protect them, though we really can not protect them from the outside world. In the wake of the recent school shootings in Florida and around the country, this production sends a powerful message that it is high time for us to re-evaluate how we treat our children and what we allow them to know about the reality of the world they live in. Through its exploration of children's resilience and strength in dealing with disastrous circumstances, this play urges its audiences, both youths and adults, to consider the consequences in being condescending towards children or belittling them in order to protect them from the cruelty of the world around them. *Us/Them* shows it is possible to have a conversation about tragic events with younger audiences, and to show them that there is healing and hope that can come after the tragedy as well.