

THE OGRE OF SILENCE IN BAD WORDS

An analysis of Perla Szuchmacher's play

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Dedicated to our loving Perla, who will always
live in our doings and in our memories.

FOREWORD

Alice is a writer and everyday before work, she sings while arranging her desk. But today, exactly today, she decides to open her memory box and from there on her story starts to unravel.

It is a story like many stories of adopted children, when loving parents are afraid to face the moment of truth, which sooner or later has to come.

Alice's working space becomes her childhood, when she played games with her long-lasting friend Fuzzy, the mistreated neighbor Graham, the mom, the dad and one of those aunts that always exist.

Alice gives life to the characters by animating everyday objects that tell us, through memories, her story of adoption, a story with happy ending.

This is the plot summary of *Bad Words*¹ as presented by Perla Szuchmacher, a theatre play apparently intended for school-age children which in fact talks to children of all ages.

Perla Szuchmacher (1946–2010), an Argentine who exiled to DF, Mexico, in 1976, specialized in children's theatre and literature to later devote herself fully to playwriting, directing and teaching. She has mostly approached a sensitive theatre whose subject matters are related to human issues and embrace highly emotional situations, as these subject matters see into issues which are generally excluded from children's theatre. In the last few years, theatre for children has been characterized by a strong presence of comicality and didactic purposes, that is, plays develop contents from syllabi so that the show becomes a trigger for classwork. The common theatre play for children avoids making the adult (teacher, parent) awkward so that they don't need to discuss harshly human subjects with their students/children), themes which are more linked to values than textbook contents. It is a kind of theatre that keeps believing in the "playpen of childhood" which has been well defined by Gabriela Montes to refer to a childhood protected from the wolf but yet locked up or oppressed, that is, deprived of freedom by the adult world (Montes 21).

1. Original title in Spanish *Malas palabras*; translated into English as *Bad Words* by Alberto Lomnitz.

Szuchmacher's plays can be considered within the framework of "literature that grants the reader the possibility of encountering a terrible fate" (Eco, in Montes, 10; free translation), challenges all the clichés of theatre for children and deals with realistic themes which are loaded with ideology and far away from the fantasy of mythological monsters, witches and fairies. In this case, the ogre becomes flesh in the pronounced silence which hushes up the word that hurts—a word that hurts because of the truth it encompasses and hurts even more because it is left unsaid.

Could we possibly say that *Bad Words* deals with a taboo subject? In the first place, childhood is a construction shaped by adults. Today we cannot hold an ideal picture of the *playpen child* (Montes). Children are sensitive actors and witnesses of reality. But people responsible for theatre aimed at children are still us adults who—from our very childhood—have been instilled the silence of certain themes considered forbidden and dangerous or, in other cases, just not suitable for a healthy childhood or for the future citizen of our motherland.

In her writings, Perla Szuchmacher has unveiled the reality as lived and endured by those flesh-and-blood children, presenting their daily conflicts where there is indeed room for cruelty, death, sexuality, and history, themes which were prohibited during the last military dictatorship in Argentina.

We should break new ground and embrace these new proposals of contemporary playwriting directed at children

and young people, known as “new playwriting”. There is no set age for theatre spectators. Children and adults alike are mixed in the reception and the binomial seems to be shaped up as the model spectator. As adults, we are moved as much or more than children. As adults, we should also stand by children in their reflection, which will certainly result from their expectation, as *Bad Words* is not over when the show ends but leaves something resounding, an unanswered question floating in the air: Who am I? Where do I come from?

In this way, Szuchmacher does not underestimate the child–spectator but considers them a thinking individual, as sensitive and critical as any other person.

NOT TO BE SPOKEN OF

The term “taboo” is of Polynesian origin, and means “forbidden”. By extension, it is used to refer to “the condition of people, institutions and things which are not to be criticized or mentioned”.

In other words, something which cannot be censored (from the Latin “to form a judgment of a work or thing”, or “correct, disapprove of or deem something wrong”) and which cannot be talked about. Taboo remains in the realm of silence, of the in–betweens, the interval, trying to pass unnoticed. There is no person or group acting as censor and expressing the prohibition. In any case, the taboo is a prohibition held by society itself, by a corpus of doxic knowledge, by popular imaginary rooted in time. Although we are all aware of its existence, “nobody talks about it”;

taboo is respected silently, without being uttered, as there exist in society general rules regarding the sayable and the writable, a topic which determines the acceptable in the social discourse of an era. That is, only the acceptable and the thinkable can be said; that which has not been refracted ideologically cannot be verbalized, though both ends coexist and are in a permanent dialectical relation. Taboos exist in the latter group.

Bad Words is about adoption and identity as well as the fear to face the moment of its revelation. The play depicts the first steps in the identity construction of Alice, a girl who at the age of ten confirms her suspicion of being an adopted child —a revelation which will undermine the world she has known so far. The doors to the adult world, to the unshaped truth, the loss of innocence, family secrets, the need to know are some of the lines of action developed in the play.

An adult Alice tells her story by means of a testimonial account, narrated in first person singular in the fashion of an autobiography. In an intimate atmosphere, she makes a constant journey back to her childhood in order to recover voices and present situations in the form of flashbacks deployed in a constellation of mixed emotions: fantasies, fears, illusions, and disillusion. Childhood appears as a foundational element which has made Alice be what she is today: a writer. Who can possibly withdraw from their childhood?

Szuchmacher puts forward an interesting technique for interpreting situations, as she suggests approaching

characters through objects and the development of images of strong poetic feeling. Supported in a simple scenic structure where a table and a few desk elements are used for the scene—public communion, and the scenic design acquires a strong visual presence. The word gains prominence and assumes the voice of dreams and truths, and the treatment of the actor's body becomes metonymical before the thing that comes to the foreground. "The child and their absolute belief in what they see allows the scene to be a complete universe, a place where the event occurs. [...] The movement to which the object is subjected suggests that what is seen is the almost—life of the object as, obviously, despite being capable of acting in scene, its life is nothing more than a projection of human imagination. It is an object that wants to be a living being, transforming itself into a character. Its role is to be a living being, but limited by the dead matter of which it is made. Its charm lies in this very contradiction; that is where matter and spirit come into contact." (Alvarado, 36)

For the staging, Szuchmacher recommends that the actress give life to objects on the table to tell the story little by little (the father might be represented by a pair of glasses; the mother could be the flower in the base; the friend could be the worsted doll) until the actress eventually finds which of them suits each character best. Similarly, she proposes creating the images suggested in the text (Alice's nightmares and fears, the moment of revelation, etc.). Besides, the objects are also used to produce sounds and enrich the different atmospheres, as the sonorous

aspect is as important as the visual aspect.

In the beginning, Alice introduces her best friend, Fuzzy, and says they share a secret activity: looking up forbidden words or rude words, “bad words”, in the dictionary. The game, which lends its title to the play, anticipates the presence of the taboo: “that” which should not or cannot be said. Thus, the play announces something of the realm of the forbidden to derive in the idea that true bad words are not those dictionary playful tricks but the ones left unsaid.

The dictionary-object is then the core object which intertwines the story and is present in varied situations, accompanying Alice in her emotional process. “Ship, Shire, Shirt. Look at this one!” Some words are not mentioned, just hinted at, whilst others are said: “cogitate”, “supercilious”, “adopted” and “tenacious”. This very last word produces an interesting twist as it is a new word for Alice’s universe, which appears in a particularly painful moment, carrying a positive semantic connotation. Alice considers her friend Fuzzy tenacious because he insists on seeing her again after his betraying her, and Alice herself is tenacious for insisting on knowing the truth, showing that the search is not an easy task at all but entails many setbacks instead—but being tenacious eventually helps the truth come to the surface.

The dictionary-object also shows us that Alice is a school-age girl who knows how to read and write, has reading inclinations and, most important, is curious. For her, the dictionary is a toy and also a mirror in which to recognize

herself, a threshold, a kind of door for an initiation trip.

After introductions are made, signs start to emerge, like puzzle pieces which will result in anagnorisis: Who is Alice really? The first emerging hint is the fact that Alice's mother does not have any pictures of Alice as a baby, just photographs of her since she was two, and the mother made her excuses saying they did not have a camera back then.

ALICE

From the day of the photograph I had the feeling that my mother was hiding something from me.

From then on, Alice's questions start to come up, and new hints materialize: her mother's crying, her parents' quarrels at night and her aunt's visit. As a result, Alice starts to show new symptoms, as is usually the case when some subjects cannot be talked about: nightmares, problems at school, ghosts, fever and illness, lack of appetite and a wound which will leave a scar, the mark of an experience.

Signs are made flesh. The parents cannot make use of speech and confess the truth to their daughter but their bodies speak for themselves, and that body text can be read by the girl. A smart girl whom the author does not underestimate for being a child, as usually happens in most of the theatre plays for children.

Silence leaves marks. Body signs speak up, and the first ones to talk are the ones of a mother who stands for the sensitive, the affective and the intuitive: the wet eyes, or the red eyes dry from crying so much, her sudden

bursting into tears, her mood swings, her crying aloud at night, her daily sighs, her paleness, her memory lapses.

ALICE

My Mom turned pale, and she took a deep breath, as you do when you're getting ready to say something really important. But she didn't say anything. She just sighed and didn't speak a word.

ALICE

My Mom forgot to serve the soup, and when she realized it, she just sat there staring at the spoon and her eyes swelled with tears.

Alice's father is also a sensitive person, far from the stereotype of the uncaring, authoritarian father. There are many scenes in which he talks to his wife and communicates through the silent language of looks, and in which he is attentive to Alice's reactions with his marked and constant eyebrow raising. Her father comforts the mother and also has some lapses and body signs that something hidden and secret is going on.

ALICE

My Dad seemed absent-minded and didn't finish his desert. This was really odd because he always asked for seconds.

ALICE

My Dad's eyes swelled with tears, which was something I had never seen before.

The conflict is triggered by her Auntie's visit, whom Alice found very gloomy though she "was always so cheerful":

ALICE

When my Mom brought coffee, they sent me out to play. I used an old trick I'd seen in the movies, the one where you make noise closing the door but you stay inside, and so I heard the following conversation:

AUNTIE

What are you waiting for? Go ahead and tell her.

MOM

Not until she's older.

AUNTIE

She's nearly 10. You should have told her already.

MOM

Do you think so? We are fine as we are.

Alice, courageous and mischievous as children her age, and "tenacious" as can be, gets closer to the truth, and fails to succeed simply because of a sneeze interrupting

the scene which forces her to escape and meet the ghosts of “dreadful fate”, a scene where she daydreams that she is being persecuted by different objects while they confess awful truths of diverse nature to her:

ALICE

You are going to have a baby brother!
You’re moving to another town and you’re going
to have to go to a new school.
You’re not going to have a birthday party!
Your parents are getting a divorce!
Little child fearful and nervous and mad.
Little child frightened, little child bad!

This scene is followed by another one in which Alice’s parents decide to talk to her and take up the word.

ALICE

My Dad’s eyes swelled with tears, which was
something I had never seen before. The world was
turning upside down; nothing was the way it used
to be. But what I didn’t know was that this was
just the beginning...

The scene of the revelation is not shown completely but only through the position of the bodies of the three characters in space (Alice, her mom and her dad) in the form of a choreography with background music. It is not a realistic scene but pure poetry in space. The author

chooses a certain poetics to express what she wants to narrate: the poetics of the theatre of the image and of the theatre of objects where “less seems more”, where you can go beyond the obvious, making a cruel reality subtle and easy to assimilated by means of symbolic language.

Adult Alice verbalizes the news that she is an adopted child; the writer transforms it into a narration. That which we could sense delicately from images, so that it was not so rude and shocking, is made explicit in the present. There is no room for doubts whatsoever.

ALICE

I was still mad at my parents. Why hadn't they told me before? Now I had to reconsider my entire life. My parents really were my parents but at the same time they really weren't my parents. My Grandma really was my Grandma, but at the same time she really wasn't my Grandma. My Auntie... the list went on and on.

ALICE AS A CHILD

I told you, they are not my parents.

FUZZY

Does your Mom kiss you goodnight?

ALICE AS A CHILD

Uh-huh.

FUZZY

Did your Dad teach you how to ride your bike?

ALICE AS A CHILD

Uh–huh.

FUZZY

Does your Mom take care of you when
you are sick?

ALICE AS A CHILD

Uh–huh.

FUZZY

Does your Dad help you with your homework?

ALICE AS A CHILD

Yes. So what? They are not my real parents.

FUZZY

You are really stubborn, child. And you know
what? You deserve to have gotten Graham's parents
instead.

In the end of the play, an adult Alice tells us how the story went on and gives her opinion, which leads to the message of the play, as the play itself is an act of provocation, which is necessarily translated into commentaries, isolated thoughts, associations and other cognitive moves.

ALICE

The dictionary games helped me a great deal. I always did love to play with words. Words are neither good nor bad. What matters is how you use them. Now I know that the only “bad words” are those that are hushed up.

CONCLUSIONS

Bad Words recovers the value of words, giving way to questions even though they are left unanswered. Speaking is healthy, it means overcoming trauma and the pathological. *Bad Words* are the ones hushed up. Speaking means being capable of symbolizing experience, granting units of sense to reality and being able to transform it.

Curious, courageous and tenacious, Alice prefers to face the truth though it might hurt. She chooses knowledge over ignorance, challenge over comfort of already established things, the world upside down over certainties. Alice has crossed a threshold (“know yourself”) in the form of a fantastic journey around the territories of her existence; she has grown up and is no longer the same.

She has gone through a life-changing experience; she has gone beyond her “own boundaries”, that is, what is known, to face the unknown.

Thus, Alice faces fear and breaks the taboo rooted in her family, facing the ogre of silence and beating him, as the truth is finally told. Silence or truth? Truth or dare? Quite a choice!

The play becomes a tour of emotions, which does not

exclude humor and yet does not become solemn either for dealing with a subject that has been mostly displaced or considered “serious”. As life itself, the play goes through laughter, fear, sadness, anger, and joy. It is a story of love and lack of love. The main character goes through a disappointing experience which will be a milestone in her life, but thanks to friendship, among other values, she can find sense in what happened to her and is able to overcome anger and embrace life. The play goes beyond the instance of disappointment as an initiation ritual, brings about learning, goes deeper, triggers a reflection, leaves us thinking and vibrating.

In this new theatre, taboo is exposed and overt; it is an ogre that is to be beaten as Alice did. Many children may identify with Alice, so may parents; many might even feel infected with their strength, and many will leave the theatre wishing to be a little more “tenacious”.

Besides, although the anecdote is a particularly different one and does not depict the case of the sons of victims of forced disappearance during the military dictatorship recovering their true identities today, as Argentine recipients of the play we cannot help associating the play with this situation.

In fact, *Bad Words* is about trying to recognize the place of origin. Although Alice’s mom and dad are not her biological parents, they have played that role in her life and have shaped her into what she is today. The songs intoned by her mother, poems by Antonio Machado² presented in the form of intertextuality which

metaphorically narrate the story as well, are a clear example. The songs tell by means of poetry what Alice tells through her daily vocabulary.

ALICE

From my Mom I inherited her songs, and from my Dad his love for books. I went to college and I found my calling. I am a writer.

Bad Words is not aimed at the spectator of commercial theatre in the hunt for success. It is a deep, community –engaged play which may cause some discomfort in adults but which will certainly open up the hearts of whoever watches it by means of poetic skills and subtle language.

It is a new theatre which seeks to dismantle established forms in the traditional theatre for children, which often underestimates boys and girls and considers them inferior beings —a new theatre which dares tackle a social discourse such as taboo with the only aim of raising an issue and leaving it resounding.

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2. Szuchmacher's play in Spanish (*Malas palabras*) includes original Spanish versions of Machado's poems, while the play in English, *Bad Words*, has free translations of Machado's poems by Alberto Lomnitz.

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SOURCE

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