

**I DON'T KNOW THAT  
WORD...YET**  
ДЕЈАН КАЛУДЈЕРОВИЋ  
9 – 31.12. 2022.  
Ликовна галерија  
Кнез Михаилова 6, Београд

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*I Don't Know That Word...Yet*





# I'M BETTER THAN YOU, AND THAT'S THE BEGINNING OF EVERYTHING!

(On the opera *Conversations: I Don't Know That Word . . . Yet*  
by Dejan Kaludjerović)

The concept of “childhood” has changed drastically throughout history. As probably the first historian of childhood, Phillipe Ariès<sup>1</sup>, elaborated in the 1960s, before the seventeenth century this concept did not even exist, or childhood was simply viewed within the framework of the Christian concept of “original sin”, acquired by the very act of being born and carried by children, therefore not at all innocent. But during the nineteenth century, children became more and more sentimentalized, precisely as symbols of innocence, and hence culturalized as angelic and pure. Only in the twentieth century, children were given their own voice in a certain way, beyond such sentimental personifications, and childhood was then extended to include the period of adolescence (interregnum between childhood and maturity), and the cultural-consumer category of teenagers appeared. While the sentimentalization of children in the nineteenth century was a response to their exploitation for production purposes (child workers), the space for the alleged emancipation of children, especially from the middle of the twentieth century onwards, was primarily conditioned by their transformation into consumers. During the twentieth century, children increasingly acquired their own cultural representation – for example, through the creation of the “coming-of-age” genre in literature or film, or the construction of the child-narrator as a kind of observer and interpreter of the world of adults. Through the figure of the child narrator, children are inscribed with a kind of innocent wisdom as a construct with the help of which adults think they can represent their own world.

Almost from the very beginning of his artistic activity, Dejan Kaludjerović has dealt with the concept, perceptions and culturalization of childhood. In the past ten years, through the *Conversations* project, he has reversed the existing cultural constructs by collecting and recording the direct speech of children. This is how a series of audio recordings of conversations with them in culturally and politically different environments (Vladikavkaz, Belgrade, Baku, Tehran, Vienna, Jerusalem, Ljubljana, Graz) was made, in which Kaludjerović asked about seventy questions on topics that adults couldn't really deal with. In Kaludjerević's most recent work, these recordings became the raw material on the basis of which the libretto was created (for which he hired playwright Tatjana Šljivar) based on which the composer Marija Balubdžić wrote an opera, premiered in Graz under the direction of Bojan Đorđev. The gallery installation at the Cultural Centre of Belgrade, composed of singing video-portraits of four performers, an original recording of a performance in Graz (which here becomes a kind of spatial background) and props-toys such as oversized mikado sticks and blocks with letters, is a special iteration of this opera.

According to the specification of the ways in which stage/theatrical performativity is articulated in the space of contemporary art, proposed by theorist Ketī Chukhrov<sup>2</sup>, Kaludjerović's procedure belongs to “artistic practices that borrow some performative practices, such as dance, theatre and music, while remaining in the domain of contemporary art”, in order to constantly review and overcome media-specific art procedures. In Kaludjerović's case, it is the questioning of opera as an artistic medium, torn between its own glorious tradition, according to which opera has become a sign of

(petty)bourgeois belonging to high-cultural values, and its potential to be transformed into an unexpected form for contemporary contextualizations, rearticulations and interventions.

The children's statements through eight arias written in different music genres are not only an expression of the way children see the world (and their world is actually always a world created by adults), which is a characteristic of literary and film genres that construct the figure of the child narrator, but an expression of the way in which “children's discourse” is a kind of fatal copy of adults' discourse, a copy that serves to establish the psycho-political diagnoses of the modern world that Kaludjerović is looking for in his work. The libretto of this opera therefore consists of fragments of children's answers to questions related to some abstract concepts, some of the “key words” for the correlation of our life and the existing world. Fears and restrictions, freedom and money, class and national differences, sexuality and sexual identities, war, torture, fossil fuels – all these topics are not presented in the opera in the way that the viewer can immediately conclude that it is a “children's discourse” but, instead, they think they attend a Brechtian “epic theatre” that urges us to see the world as it is. But it is the “astonishment” in Kaludjerović's procedure that arises with the knowledge that we are witnessing a collage of children's speech, which reinforces the anti-cathartic feeling that what is spoken through songs is not something we can fully identify with (because we are adults), but it is precisely why it is more real than any literary construction in which adults give roles to children. Sung sentences, such as “I'm better than you and that's the beginning of everything”, are far more real when children say them, but in order to reach that common reality, Kaludjerović pulls us through the illusion of adults that they can understand the reality only if it is the one mediated by forms of culturalization.

Branislav Dimitrijević

1 Phillipe Ariès, *Vekovi detinjstva [Centuries of Childhood]* (1960), Zavod za udžbenike, Belgrade, 1980

2 Ketī Chukhrov, “The post-dramatic theater's misadventures in the age of contemporary art”, *E-flux Journal*, br. 120, 2021