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Staging Joyce's Prose – Zenon Fajfer and Katarzyna Bazarnik's *Finnegans Make*

Abstract: The purpose of the paper is to examine *Finnegans Make*, Zenkasi Theatre Company's adaptation of Joyce's prose devised and directed by Zenon Fajfer and Katarzyna Bazarnik, staged in the 1990s. It aims to demonstrate how by employing avant-garde compositional ideas and language games, they translate the structural and linguistic complexity characteristic of the Irish author to the idiom of the stage. demonstrate the thematic coherence of Joyce's work, accompanied by compositional and. It analyses in detail the play's circular structure that draws on excerpts from *Dubliners*, *A Portrait of the Artist*, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. It also discusses how Fajfer and Bazarnik engage the audience and explore the theatre space. Finally, it examines how they use the space of the book and typographical devices to translate the live performance into a spatialised score of the play.

Keywords: theatrical adaptations of Joyce's fiction, James Joyce, *Finnegans Make*, Zenkasi Theatre

Abstrakt: W artykule przedstawiono analizę wystawianej w latach 90. sztuki *Finnegans Make*, będącej adaptacją prozy Joyce'a, skomponowaną i wyreżyserowaną przez Zenona Fajfera i Katarzynę Bazarnik w ramach działalności Stowarzyszenia Teatralnego Zenkasi. Artykuł ukazuje, w jaki sposób użycie awangardowych strategii kompozycyjnych i gier językowych przyczyniło się do przetłumaczenia złożonych pod względem strukturalnym i stylistycznym dzieł Irlandczyka na język teatru. Zbadano opartą na kolistym schemacie kompozycję sztuki, odwołującą się do fragmentów *Dublińczyków*, *Portretu artysty*, *Ulissesa* i *Finnegans Wake*, oraz sposoby angażowania widzów i wykorzystanie przestrzeni teatru. Ponadto omówiono, w jaki sposób Fajfer i Bazarnik wykorzystują przestrzeń książki i układ graficzny strony, by przygotowana już po wystawieniu i wydrukowana w woluminie partytura mogła jak najlepiej oddać to, co wydarzyło się na scenie.

Słowa kluczowe: teatralne adaptacje fikcji Joyce'a, James Joyce, *Finnegans Make*, Teatr Zenkasi

Speaking of Polish studies on Joyce, it is hard to ignore Zenon Fajfer and Katarzyna Bazarnik, or Zenkasi, to use the name they decided to share, who have been enthusiasts of the Irish writer for at least a few decades. Known for the concept of liberature – a literary genre suggesting the unity of form and content, awareness of the materiality and spatiality of the book as well as the reader’s involvement in the meaning-making process – they have alluded to Joyce at different stages of their career and artistic engagement.¹ The first academic publication on the genre, introducing the Polish audience to their poetics, was entitled *Od Joyce’a do liberatury. Szkice o architekturze słowa* (2002) [From Joyce to liberature. Essays on the architecture of the word]. Though exploitation of the materiality of the book goes as far back as to George Herbert’s poetry, or even earlier writings,² the title of the collection seems to hint at Zenkasi’s understanding of Joyce as a crucial figure, who revolutionised the way we conceptualise the physicality of the book. Upon opening the liberature publishing series in Korporacja Ha!art in 2003, Fajfer and Bazarnik mention their interest in the Irish writer in the conversation with their editor, Piotr Marecki. The title of the interview begins with a phrase “*Kłócimy się tylko o Joyce’a*” [We argue only about Joyce] (original italics). As I spoke to Marecki in 2016, he recollected how surprised he was to observe that Zenkasi’s library is full of works of a world canon, including Dante, Blake, and Joyce, by contrast to his own, encompassing mostly contemporary Polish literature (interview on 29 November 2016). Further, Fajfer draws on Joyce in the collection *Liberature or Total Literature* (2010), which gathers essays explaining the poetics of liberature from various angles and at different stages of its development. Katarzyna Bazarnik is, in turn, recognised as an insightful Joycean scholar in the academia. The monograph based on her PhD dissertation, *Joyce & Liberature* (2011), discusses Joyce’s exploration of the physical space of the book and is accompanied by multiple chapters and articles paying justice to her fascination with the author.³

Moreover, Fajfer and Bazarnik’s theatrical practice in the 1990s testifies to their deep immersion in Joyce’s work. *Finnegans Make*, which premiered in English in 1996 and in Polish in 1997, takes the form of a collage drawing on Joyce’s prose, his biography as well as the impressions Zenkasi had as readers. I will analyse this play in more detail as it features direct allusions to Joyce’s whole oeuvre, but also demonstrates Zenkasi’s knowledge of his creative strategies, including his thematic interests as well as his use of form and language. Fajfer and Bazarnik, who were both 26 years old at the time of staging *Finnegans Make*, refer to different works of Joyce’s in a single theatrical piece to show the essence of who he was and how he exercised his craft as a writer. Employing avant-garde compositional ideas and language games, they bring the structural and linguistic liberty characteristic of the Irish author to their spectators. Their extensive explo-

¹ See, for example Bazarnik 1998, 2004, 2013, and Fajfer 2010b.

² Radosław Nowakowski, a Polish writer who identifies with liberature, mentions cave paintings in his *Traktat Kartograficzny* [Cartographic Treatise] (2002/2009; 2021).

³ *Nota bene* the present issue of the *Studia Litteraria* journal, discussing Polish studies on Joyce, further contributes to her ongoing research on the author.

ration of media – both the theatre and the pages of the score they published after the performance in the collection *Wokół Jamesa Joyce'a* [Around James Joyce] (Bazarnik, Fordham 1998) – prompts associations with Joyce's interest in different forms of communication, at the same time letting Zenkasi achieve an innovation of their own.

Circular composition

The play begins with four characters sitting around a coffin and with a naked woman lying in bed behind the spectators. Soon, they disappear in absolute darkness, and the audience, unable to see anything, hear only the mourners' whisper and the woman's alluring voice. Joyce's readers can recognise that the actors are actually reciting passages from the washerwomen's dialogue in *Finnegans Wake* and from Molly Bloom's monologue. Then a priest comes, lights a candle, and begins his sermon – in fact, that of Father Arnall from *A Portrait of the Artist*. Once he exits, the four characters on stage transform into Nannie, Eliza, Aunt and James to comment on the death of Father James Flynn, and thus act out a scene from "The Sisters". Then the audience interacts with James Joyce himself, or rather Jampty Jompty, who wants to share whiskey, yet finds it hard to keep balance and, in the end, vomits behind the pulpit. As he is about to exit, two half-naked washerwomen (or Aunt and Eliza) run into him and he is forced to hide under spectators' legs. After their dialogue, he comes out again and approaches the dead priest to try his shoes and have some more whiskey. He is not aware that Father Flynn is not actually dead, but, being a paedophile, willing to attack him. While JJ tosses around to rescue himself, he hears his Aunt calling him. He leaves Father's corpse backstage and hides in the coffin, only to witness a fight between Aunt and Eliza transformed into washerwomen again (who, as is hinted in the script, then become Shem and Shaun). Towards the end, the half naked Father Arnall continues his sermon and meanwhile is put into the coffin by the awakened women who try to silence him. This is when Molly takes over, transforms into Mollivia as her monologue slides into the final passage of *Finnegans Wake* and in this way – finishes the performance.

What may appear striking in the script of the play is that the text uttered by the characters is composed entirely of citations from Joyce's works while the stage directions were written by Zenkasi. This suggests that overall in the spectacle the characters talk Joyce, yet move and behave as Fajfer and Bazarnik envisioned. More specifically, Zenkasi illustrate the composition of the play in a diagram presenting four smaller circles within the fifth bigger one (Fajfer, Bazarnik 1999, 123. See: Fig.1). Their size varies gradually, making the impression that the larger contain the smaller ones within themselves. Each circle includes a title in the following order (from the biggest to the smallest): *Finnegans Wake*, *Ulysses*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Dubliners*, *Finnegans Wake*. This demonstrates that, as can be grasped from the summary above, *Finnegans Make* begins with a passage from Joyce's last work which is followed by excerpts from Molly's monologue in *Ulysses*, Father Arnall's sermon from *A Portrait* and a dialogue

from “The Sisters” (i.e. *Dubliners*), until the play comes back to *Finnegans Wake* again. In this way the piece reaches its middle, the rest of it being composed of quotations in the reverse order: a passage from *Dubliners* comes directly after the middle excerpt from *Finnegans Wake* and is followed by citations from *A Portrait* and *Ulysses*. The whole work circles on itself the Wakean manner, revealing the frame and closing the complex, multi-level embedded structure.

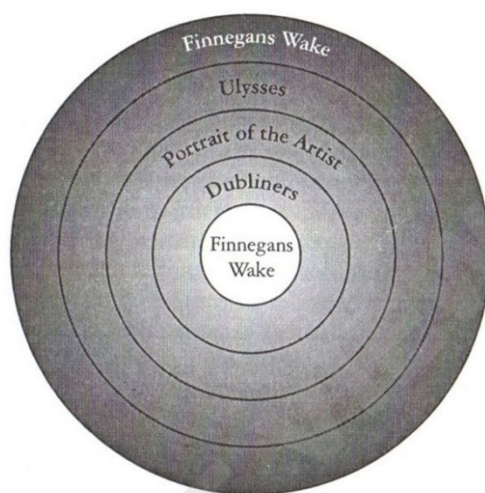


Fig. 1. *Finnegans Make* composition diagram. Fajfer, Bazarnik 1999, 123

The concentric rather than progressive form can be juxtaposed with Joyce’s compositions, especially that of *Finnegans Wake*, a book that goes on infinitely as the ending features a reference to the beginning. In her article “Joyce bez końca” [Endless Joyce] Bazarnik (2002, 29) suggests that Joyce’s texts can be interpreted by means of the ouroboros figure and that his whole *oeuvre* could be understood through the metaphor of a huge circle. Corresponding reflections are provided by Finn Fordham, who comments on how the universal, mythical qualities are disturbed by details about the characters’ identities and experiences: “[t]he circularity of the *Wake* is ... a circularity which reaches back into itself, into its own past, rather than reaching forward into our future with some prophetic promise of extension, or some sinister proposal of an eternal return” (Fordham 2007, 36).

At the same time, however, it is hard to escape the impression that the circularity is the means to represent what happened to Joyce’s works and biography once they were filtered through Zenkasi’s minds. Though the utterances in the play are made entirely of quotations, which could prompt questioning Fajfer and Bazarnik’s authorship, it is clear that they use the structure to communicate something new about the works they rely on. To do so, they distance themselves from the traditional adaptation and also from traditional drama. They admit that they

have not considered traditional staging, understood as an attempt to recreate a plot on stage because, in their opinion, it would be inevitably inferior to the source text: “the only solution was to create a completely new structure, independent of Joyce, and ‘suck in’ to his texts, in the same way that you compose music to pre-written verses” (Fajfer, Bazarnik 1999, 122–123). Hence, they thought of a new piece, which does not rely on Joyce completely, but still allows for a deep immersion in his life and work.

First of all, their composition allows them to extricate Joyce's main preoccupations, which he was dwelling on for years, time and again. As Zenkasi admit, it was inspiring for them to discover a strong thematic coherence in the texts they chose to deal with (Fajfer, Bazarnik 1999, 123). One of the motifs which benefits from such an approach is death, brought to the spotlight through the image of people around the coffin, present on stage for almost the entire spectacle (See: Fig. 2). It is inspired by “The Sisters”, but at the same time it matches Father Arnall's homily on “death, judgement, hell, and heaven” (Joyce 1992, 84). The allusions to religion and Catholicism are also abundant in *Finnegans Make* – the juxtaposition of the homily with Molly's sensual monologue seems to illustrate Joyce's ambiguous spiritual development. The tension between *sacrum* and *profanum* is further developed as the audience encounter washerwomen wearing solely petticoats and carrying a soutane, as well as Father Arnall who reappears only in slippers and a stole (Fajfer, Bazarnik 1998, 303–304, 311). In this way, the play presents Joyce's eschatological and religious searches as well as his satirical attitude to them.



Fig. 2. Characters around the coffin in *Finnegans Make*, photo: Jakub Śliwa

Additionally, the composition suggests that it was somehow possible for Joyce to blur the boundaries between novels and short stories he wrote. According to Zenkasi, he imagined an all-encompassing book and his whole oeuvre could be treated as one grand piece he worked on throughout his life. For this reason Zenkasi wanted to take advantage of multiple texts so as not to separate Joyce's books. The apparent focus on *Finnegans Wake* is only because Joyce's final work is said to encompass all that he had written earlier (Fajfer, Bazarnik 1999, 123).

The coherence can be also related to language. It is curious that although Zenkasi needed to make a selection and cut certain passages, the excerpts do not cease to make sense, moreover, they highlight chosen meanings Joyce wanted to get across. This can be observed on the example of Molly Bloom's monologue – her passages are extracted from the original and glued together for the purpose of the spectacle, yet to see where one selected excerpt ends and the other begins, one needs to read the script alongside *Ulysses*, almost line by line. The citations, though cut, still make a coherent whole and the transitions are not so easy to spot. This shows how skilful and careful Joyce was in his use of language.

Exploration of the theatre space

Apart from the composition, Zenkasi's exploration of the theatre space contributes to their reflection on Joyce. Here, it seems beneficial to focus on notions such as space, place and geography. Katarzyna Bazarnik (2011, 110–111) explains that through *Finnegans Wake* Joyce wanted to mirror God's creative gesture and use language to contain a world within the book. Due to its complexity, the work can be described as “a story of a creative construction, an engineering effort of fusing various elements to build a whole” (Bazarnik 2011, 111). The book contains numerous geographical names, often played with to create puns (Bazarnik 2011, 124; Tindall 1969, 141). Names of water reservoirs, continents, cities and other landmarks found around the globe are entangled in the multilingual discourse and contribute to the imagery, e.g. to the idea of identifying the male with the land and the female with the river. Furthermore, one can speak of geometrical figures, which influence the composition of the volume. Following the brothers' – Shem's and Shaun's – travels and trajectories, Clive Hart sketches two circles on the globe and contends that they should cross in Australia and Dublin, which is by no means a coincidence, but rather a symbolic discovery (Hart in Bazarnik 2011, 124–128). Figures like the crossed circles support the reader in unravelling intertextual references, but also in exploring the pattern of themes employed throughout the book (Hart in Bazarnik 2011).

Also the figure of the globe itself is a crucial motif in Joyce's work. Already in *Ulysses* Molly can be treated as the “Mother-Earth”, as Joyce remarked in a comment to Frank Budgen (Joyce 1975, 285). In *Finnegans Wake* the reference is even more complex. Opening the book in a way that the covers touch each other and the pages loosely arrange themselves in what from above appears to be a circle, Bazarnik (2011, 164–176) tried to imagine the book as a globe in the literal sense. She identified which pages would function as the Equator, poles and trop-

ics and, juxtaposing the findings with what is printed on these particular pages, became convinced that the composition was probably planned like this by Joyce (Bazarnik 2011). For instance, she discovered numerous Polish words as well as references to polar expeditions in the middle of the book, where she located the South Pole (Bazarnik 201, 169–170). Similar allusions can be found on pages 628–3, which form the opposite pole (Bazarnik 2011, 171).

The urge to utilize any space possible and make it a whole seems to be transferred by Zenkasi into *Finnegans Make*. Drawing on McAuley's "Taxonomy of spatial function in the theatre" (2002, 24–35), it is worth observing that the play demonstrates the tension between the performance space, devoted to the presentation of a spectacle, and the audience space, related to the auditorium *per se*, but also to the space occupied by spectators before and after the performance, e.g. the *foyer*. The central image of the characters around the coffin is presented on stage, yet there are also instances when the practitioners intrude into the space that is conventionally at the spectators' disposal. Molly Bloom is seated at the back of the black box, which additionally questions the notion of the fourth wall from the very beginning. Moreover, one can look at particular scenes to grasp how the performance and audience space become intertwined. For instance, in the scene entitled "Riverdrunk", a character reminiscent of James Joyce, described as Jampty Jompty (Sławomir Rożnawski), engages with the audience in a funny, but at the same time disgusting manner (Fajfer, Bazarnik 1998, 303). As can be read in the stage directions,

[h]e offers some genuine Irish whiskey to a man in front of him, but the latter refuses. He offers it to someone else who, having smelled alcohol, accepts it eagerly. But hardly has he tried it when Jampty Jompty snatches the bottle out of his hands and drinks from it with relish (Fajfer, Bazarnik 1998, 303).

After that JJ feels sick and throws out behind the pulpit. The following stage directions describe the model spectator, who also feels sick and realizes that the Joyce-like figure is approaching them to crawl under their legs. Finally, he stands up, apologises with a gesture and wants to reach the entrance, through which the audience had accessed their seats before the play began (Fajfer, Bazarnik 1998). This is when the washerwomen burst into the black box and Joyce hides again under the audience's seats (Fajfer, Bazarnik 1998, 303–304). Overall, the scene demonstrates how different elements of the black box are shared by the practitioners and the spectators. In this way, the play seems to flow in the theatre space and expand onto areas conventionally unavailable for actors. Knowing how open-minded and ambitious Joyce was in his approach to geography and space, it is no wonder that Fajfer and Bazarnik aimed to push the theatre space to the limit and hint at meanings also in the conventionally unexplored architectural areas, like the auditorium, stairs and doors. Perhaps, inspired by their predecessor, they also wanted to create an original, vast artistic space with its own rules. As Derek West contends, this had a strong impact on the audience, who, faced with emotions like shock, disgust and amusement, could experience how Zenkasi envision Joyce's life and fiction (quoted in Fajfer, Bazarnik 1999, 125).

Moreover, Zenkasi were aware that Joyce's careful geographical references in *Finnegans Wake* hold together what for many is a convoluted and obscure work. In order to transfer this complexity into the theatre space, they make extensive use of darkness, going beyond traditional short periods when nothing can be seen. At the beginning of the score one reads that the darkness is so thick that it makes it impossible to see one's hands or the fellow spectators (Fajfer, Bazarnik 1998, 291). Different elements of the theatre space, including chairs, stairs and the bodies of the audience are out of sight, the shapes and contours one may use to find their place in a given space – disappear. The audience is left to rely on the auditory message from Molly lying down behind their backs. A thorough exploration of the room, causing the performance space to fuse with the audience space, is thus accompanied by a refusal of boundaries within space, executed by means of the pervading darkness. In effect, we are presented with a mixture of the visible and traceable with what balances on the edge of the invisible and ungraspable. In this way, the exploration of the physical space in theatre helps to convey the juxtaposition of the precise or carefully planned and the ambiguous, unavailable, which is also inherent for Joyce's work. From this perspective, *Finnegans Make* seems to be a dream about Joyce, which highlights that one can work with unrestricted, convoluted material and still, or maybe thanks to that, get a sense of who a persona as complex as Zenkasi's predecessor was.

Designing the score

Finally, Zenkasi render what Joyce's work means to them through the space of the book and its materiality. Having always been drawn to Joyce's awareness of how the physical shape of the volume influences the overall meaning of the piece, they experiment with form in their own printed works, also in the score of *Finnegans Make*, where we encounter a clear attempt to render the black box through the arrangement of the text. The distribution of the characters' names on the page matches their location within the theatre space, i.e. the name "sennacassia", referring to Molly, appears on top of the page while "MaMaLuJo", signifying the characters around the coffin, are inscribed on the margins in the middle or closer to the bottom (Fajfer, Bazarnik 1998, 292). The text they utter forms shapes to demonstrate how the sound waves were flowing in the space between the front and back of the room. In this way, the page seems to resemble a map of the black box, with the back wall sketched at the top of the book and the stage towards the bottom (see Fig. 3). This arrangement is not kept consistently throughout the score for later certain pages are devoted to text only (e.g. 294–295, 297) or the representation of the characters around the coffin appears in different places on the page (e.g. 298–299). Still, the three-dimensional room is at times represented within the space of the book – the shape of the room is translated onto another medium.

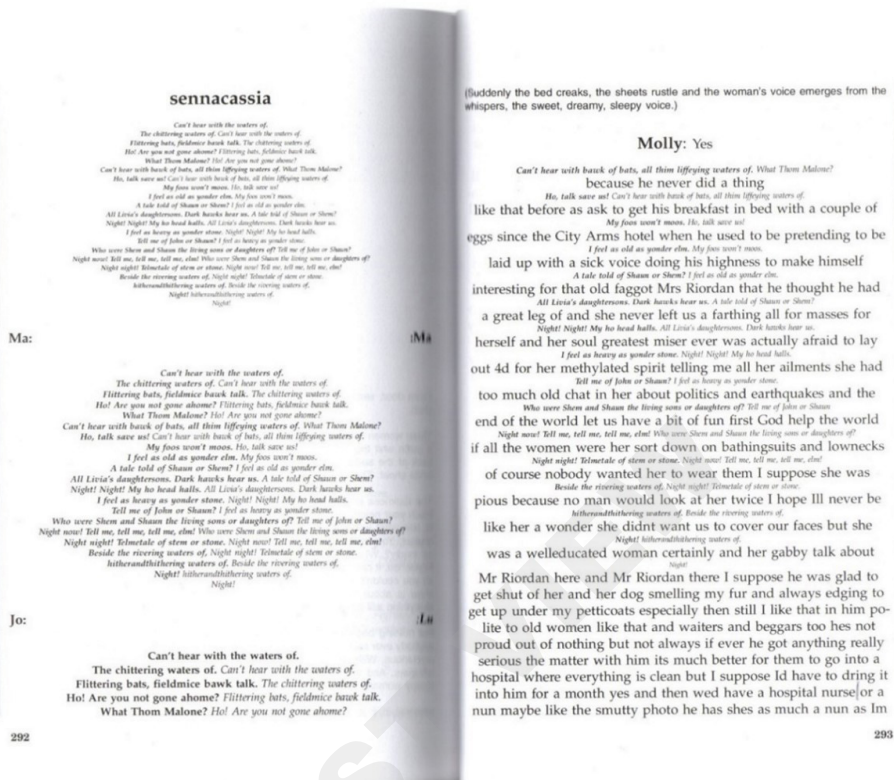


Fig. 3. Fajfer and Bazarnik 1998, 292–293

Furthermore, the margins in the score are a clear illustration of the darkness pervading the room throughout most parts of the spectacle. As their colour oscillates between black and grey, the reader gets a glimpse into how much light was let into the black box in different scenes. All this may have been inspired by *Finnegans Wake*, for instance the beginning of the “Anna Livia Plurabelle” chapter, where the triangular arrangement of the text represents “a river gushing from the spring” (Bazarnik 2011, 140). As Bazarnik notes, the combination of the shape and the sound of words featuring multiple “liquid ‘l’s”” testifies to the fact that Joyce’s goal was to “make the reader *see* this” (ibid., original italics). A corresponding strategy appears to be used by Zenkasi in the score of *Finnegans Make*. By means of the space of the book and typographical devices, they want to “make the reader *see*” what the audience saw in theatre. The score is clearly a hand given to those who would like to get to know the play, but could not attend the show in person. As such it testifies to Joyce’s interest in the material characteristics of the book and, as we could say, the architecture of the volume.

Conclusion

To conclude, *Finnegans Make* attempts to demonstrate thematic coherence of Joyce's work, accompanied by compositional and linguistic liberty that both supports and destabilises the message. At the same time, it is a piece of avant-garde theatre in its own right, an original play of Fajfer and Bazarnik who reveal themselves as knowledgeable enthusiasts of Joyce's complex prose. It is the difficulty of such a theatrical enterprise that fascinated Zenkasi in the early years of their career and encouraged them to cherish obstacles they faced on the way of putting different works together and translating them onto the theatre medium. Even today they admit that the goal was to deal with and enjoy this kind of a challenge. The result of their quest is a play that is both dark (in the literal and metaphorical sense) and brave – a play that faces the audience with the grim truth about death, but also shows that revision and recuperation are powerful tools that enable to bring back what was created long ago and to find new means of engaging with it.

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