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Crip-Queer Utopias in Theatre: Intimacy, Desire, and Disability

Abstract

This article examines the work of the Warsaw-based Theatre 21 (T21) through the framework of utopia as method, with particular emphasis on crip-queer intimacy and sexuality. It argues that theatre created by artists with intellectual disabilities can function not only as a site of social critique, but also as a space for exploring and performing alternative forms of desire, relationality, and erotic expression. Drawing on selected performances—*Szalona miłość* [*Crazy Love*] (2024), *Statek miłości* [*The Love Boat*] (2013), *Libido Romantico* (2022), and *Ciało w ciało z Marilyn* [*Body to Body with Marilyn*] (2021)—the article examines how collective artistic practices enable the articulation of intimate needs often excluded from dominant social frameworks. The analysis demonstrates that Theatre 21 simultaneously exposes ableist and heteronormative constraints, reconfigures embodied subjectivities, and stages crip-queer forms of intimacy that resist normative definitions. At the same time, it highlights the limitations imposed by legal and social structures regulating the sexuality of people with intellectual disabilities. The article argues that T21's transformative potential lies in its capacity to imagine and perform more inclusive, relational, and non-normative forms of intimacy.

Keywords: crip-queer intimacy, sexuality and disability, utopia as method, disability theatre, relationality, Theatre 21.

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INTRODUCTION

In Western culture, one can find numerous representations of theatre ensembles co-created by people with disabilities that function as communities or even as families of choice. Among the most widely recognised are two American screen productions: the cult film *Freaks* (1932) and the fourth season of the popular television series *American Horror Story: Freak Show* (2014). In both works, a freak show emerges as a space for the formation of friendships, solidarities, and romantic and erotic relationships. Circus communities thus create what might be termed a *freaktopia*—a term used by Stevi Costa in reference to *AHS: Freak Show*. Costa compares these communities to queer "chosen families," which stand in opposition to heteronormative, nuclear, middle-class family structures. As she observes, such chosen kinship networks contrast with blood-based kinship (76). In both *Freaks* and *AHS: Freak Show*, heterosexual relationships and cisgender characters coexist alongside queer people and relationships, while in the series, monogamy coexists with polyandry and the affirmation of sexual pleasure. Importantly, in both productions, the cast includes performers with disabilities, and in the case of *AHS: Freak Show*, accounts from the set suggest that bonds of friendship extended beyond representation into the sphere of production ("*American Horror Story: Freak Show*—Inside the Freak Show—Cast Interview").

However, both examples ultimately confine the theatrical activity of people with disabilities to the framework of the freak show—historical cultural spectacles in which non-normative bodies were displayed for the entertainment of sensation-seeking audiences. In such contexts, the space of representation and performance most often did not serve to empower performers or to express their identities, political demands, or desires. The community formed within these settings was, in turn, the result of limited opportunities to establish other forms of social bonds—familial, professional, or neighbourly. Similar conclusions can be drawn from the works discussed above. Ultimately, in both the film and the series, impulses associated with the vision of an alternative crip and queer reality give way to normative notions of happiness. Happiness is thus attainable only in the afterlife or by leaving behind the extended chosen family in favour of a monogamous, heteronormative one. The crip-queer community can exist only on the margins, where it remains vulnerable to violence.

An alternative to these cultural representations can be found in real theatre ensembles co-created by crip artists. Their work engages with the legacy of the freak show primarily through critical interrogation (for example, *Jak przestałem być idealny* [*How I Stopped Being Ideal*] by Theatre 21 or *Dschingis Khan* by Monster Truck and Theater Thikwa).

Some of these groups, however, seem to implement and further develop in their practice the utopian impulse present in the above-mentioned representations of freak shows—particularly by forming families of choice based on genuine, rather than circumstantial, bonds, as well as transgressing sexual taboos (both heteronormative and queer) and addressing the question of parenthood among people with disabilities. The Polish professional theatre company Theatre 21 exemplifies this trend. Their works showcase a kind of symbiosis that develops between representation, production processes, and community relations, enabling a more explicit articulation of utopian impulses than the film and television examples discussed above—impulses that point towards possible forms of community that embrace diversity.

Theatre 21 was founded in 2006. Its actors are people with Down syndrome and on the autism spectrum. Although they have no formal training in theatre, over time, they have become highly professional artists. They owe this largely to their first teacher and director, Justyna Sobczyk. Her unique working method, based on the agency and empowerment of all group members, is continued by the current leaders: Justyna Wielgus (choreographer and artistic director) and Justyna Lipko-Konieczka (dramaturg and programme director), who have been working at the theatre for many years (in collaboration with Justyna Sobczyk). From the outset of its long-standing practice, Theatre 21 (T21) has consistently prioritised establishing supportive relationships grounded in each member's subjectivity. In its performances, the company has explored issues that are important to the ensemble, including the still highly regulated domains of desire, love, and parenthood among people with disabilities. It has also been increasingly incorporating queer themes into its work. In doing so, T21 constructs a utopian vision of a diverse community which, although conceivable, remains difficult to implement outside the stage. This idealised vision is therefore repeatedly disrupted in their performances by the ableist and homophobic social and legal realities that the actors face.

In this article, I will analyse works by this company or featuring its members from the perspective of intimacy and sexuality. First, I will examine a documentary film, *Szalona miłość* [*Crazy Love*] (2024), directed by a long-time collaborator of T21—Martyna Peszko. The film presents the love between two members of the group and raises the question of their prospects for a marital relationship in Poland. I will then discuss three performances— *Statek miłości* [*The Love Boat*] (2013), *Libido Romantico* (2022) and *Ciało w ciało z Marilyn* [*Body to Body with Marilyn*] (2021)—to highlight the diverse and divergent dynamics of crip-queer intimacy presented in them. When analysing these works, I will examine strategies

for producing utopian impulses that stimulate the imagination for social change, while also considering the real and potential applicability of such visions. To this end, I will first outline relevant strands of the theory of utopian impulses and discuss the relationships between disability and utopia, as well as between disability and queerness.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The methodological framework for my analysis of T21's work is grounded in the theory of utopian impulses. I draw on this concept while remaining mindful of its problematic aspects, particularly those identified by marginalised groups. Utopia has often been criticised for its unrealistic idealism, its disregard for human diversity, and its tendency—when implemented—to produce authoritarian systems (Levitas 7–11). As a construct historically shaped by white, able-bodied men, it has also excluded diversity and legitimised social hierarchies and discrimination (Vogler 591–92).

However, I align with the contemporary reappraisal of utopia by scholars such as Ernst Bloch, Fredric Jameson, and Ruth Levitas. This approach reframes utopia not as the blueprint for an ideal social order, but as a method for interpreting the dystopian present and imagining a desirable future. Such an interpretative and imaginative practice is inherently political (Jameson, "Utopia as Method" 42–43). It involves identifying, even in adverse conditions, latent potential that may be developed and that points towards possible transformation. In my view, this is precisely the work undertaken by many artists with disabilities. While acknowledging the constraints of their social reality, they seek to cultivate its unfulfilled potential for fostering more diverse and inclusive forms of communal life.

Similarly, in Ruth Levitas's account, the creation of theatre and alternative stage worlds can function as a form of "education of desire" (xvii). It enables alternative configurations of needs, desires, and satisfactions and helps us recognise what is missing from human existence (4–5). Levitas distinguishes three interrelated modes of utopia as method: archaeological, ontological, and architectural. The archaeological mode links utopia with sociology and involves diagnosing the unfulfilled needs and utopian impulses embedded within the dystopian present. It involves social criticism. The ontological mode addresses the relationship between social conditions and the ways of thinking and acting that arise from them (153), asking what kinds of people and societies we might wish to become (182–83). The architectural mode, in turn, concerns "the imagination of potential alternative scenarios for the future" and

their implications (153). These imagined scenarios must themselves be critically examined in archaeological terms, with attention to their omissions, contradictions, and political consequences. In my opinion, T21's work engages with all three modes. It offers a critical reflection on ableist norms, imaginaries, and systems (the archaeological mode). It constructs alternative forms of relationships both on and off stage (the architectural mode). It also demonstrates how changes in social frameworks may enable the flourishing, creativity, and well-being of people with disabilities (the ontological mode).

At the same time, such practices must confront not only real-world ableism but also the ableism embedded within the very concept of utopia. In his review article "Crip Utopia and the Future of Disability," Peter J. Mackey highlights the complex relationship between utopia and disability. He notes that the ableist ideal of a perfect, healthy body underpins a dystopian vision in which disability is framed as a tragedy and suffering to be eliminated through medical or technological means. The work of T21, by contrast, draws on alternative utopian visions of inclusive societies (e.g., Vic Finkelstein, Adolf Ratzka), which correspond to Levitas's architectural mode. It also draws on critical revisions of these visions (e.g., Tom Shakespeare, Paul Abberley), which may be situated within the archaeological mode.

Such an understanding of utopia also enables solidarity among marginalised groups. Their collective critique of exclusionary social imaginaries becomes a key force for emancipation. As Fredric Jameson argues, group politics take on a radical dimension when different marginalised groups recognise their shared conditions and strategic interrelationships ("Utopianism and Anti-Utopianism" 390). According to Gisli Vogler, utopia allows such groups to reject exclusionary social projects and to imagine alternative futures in which they occupy a central rather than marginal position (592). These imaginaries require political intervention, including changes to law and social practice (601–02). Artistic expression and collective practices—both in representation and production, as exemplified by Theatre 21—are particularly conducive to generating utopian impulses (Jameson, "Utopia as Method"; Levitas; Muñoz).

The gradual queering of romantic and erotic relations in the work of T21 can also be situated within this theoretical framework. Reflections on crip utopias are closely connected to queer theory and activism. José Esteban Muñoz conceptualises queerness as a utopian horizon that enables a break from the oppressive present and directs attention towards future possibilities. His work has become central for theorists of crip utopia, who increasingly combine queer and crip perspectives. This has

led to the development of concepts such as crip-queer perspectives, crip-queer erotic futures, and alternative political practices of relating, loving, and resisting normative structures. In this article, I seek to demonstrate that the performances of T21 take evident pleasure in deconstructing normative visions of happiness, exposing their oppressive character, while affirming that which remains unimaginable within "normative" society.

Emma Sheppard extends this approach by introducing the figure of the "crip killjoy," drawing on Sara Ahmed's concept of the feminist killjoy. The crip killjoy disrupts ableist norms of happiness by refusing to conform to the ideal of the "properly" regulated disabled subject. Instead, such figures actively challenge normative expectations through acts of refusal, disruption, and critical questioning. These acts may also serve as sources of pleasure and relief. The fusion of queer and crip perspectives is particularly productive for rethinking sexuality, intimacy, and desire. Crip-queer approaches challenge compulsory monogamy, heteronormativity, and dominant scripts centred on penetration and orgasm. They emphasise alternative temporalities, redefine pleasure, and prioritise communication, consent, and bodily autonomy. As Santinele Martino argues, creative adaptations and new forms of erotic practice should be understood not as compromises, but as valid and fulfilling expressions of desire. The recurring manifesto present in the performances of T21, as well as in Martyna Peszko's documentary about the theatre company, *Szalona miłość*, calling for the recognition of the need for intimacy, romantic relationships, and sexuality of people with intellectual disabilities, their right to fulfil their desire in these areas, and their right to parenthood, fundamentally disrupts dominant representations of such individuals as "eternal children" and challenges decades of more or less explicit eugenic thinking (see, for example, Piniewska). What, then, do stage representations of queer people with disabilities—who openly and unapologetically demand recognition of their love and desire—do to the normative social imagination?

By tracing the multiple entanglements between the lives and artistic practices of the artists of T21 and crip-queer utopia, I pay particular attention to the diversity of strategies mobilised by the group. I analyse Peszko's documentary from the perspective of the archaeological mode and the works of T21 as examples of the ontological and architectural modes. These works present a utopian vision in which a reconfiguration of social conditions enables both individual and collective flourishing (Levitas 153). I focus on how utopian impulses related to intimacy are produced, performed, and represented, while also considering their limitations and their potential to contribute to social change.

SZALONA MIŁOŚĆ [*CRAZY LOVE*] FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE ARCHEOLOGICAL MODE OF UTOPIA

As I have suggested, visions of theatre ensembles as micro-communities—within which, alongside artistic creativity, the intimate and romantic needs of people with disabilities are expressed and partially realised, and to which there are often few alternative social spaces—can be found in T21's work. The development of such impulses, both within and beyond artistic practice, takes place in dialogue with existing legal and social structures. It therefore becomes part of a broader process of critique and emancipation. In this sense, it can be analysed through the framework of the archaeological mode of utopia.

Theatre 21 functions both as a space for artistic expression and as a community grounded in friendship, emotional closeness, and mutual support. When its members speak publicly about the ensemble, they frequently emphasise the personal and intimate nature of the relationships that connect them (Kietlińska 56–63). They repeatedly describe themselves as a family, despite not being biologically related. As Piotr Swend states, "We create a family and a theatrical community" (qtd. in Kietlińska 58).[1] Similarly, Grzegorz Brandt notes, "We are a theatrical family," while Aleksander Orliński clarifies, "We support one another and trust one another. We believe in each other" (qtd. in Kwaśniewska). Bogna Kietlińska, who conducted research on the functioning of T21, grounded in both sociological and theatre studies perspectives, emphasises that working in the theatre has helped build relationships and overcome social isolation and loneliness not only for the actors, but also for their parents. To support this, she quotes a response from an anonymous survey conducted within the group: "[Theatre 21] has given me a new family: a theatrical family I can rely on, with whom, through the hours spent together, I build bonds—sometimes stronger than those with my biological family" (qtd. in Kietlińska 76). It therefore seems justified to suggest that Theatre 21 has become, for many of its members, a form of chosen family.

At the same time, as noted earlier, people with disabilities often have fewer opportunities for self-realisation than non-disabled individuals. Work in the theatre, however, also constitutes paid employment (Kietlińska 73), where actors, as employees, are not obliged to form deep relationships. In this sense, choice concerns the degree of engagement in the collective, which is more than simply a theatre group.

[1] All quotations from the texts by Bogna Kietlińska and Monika Kwaśniewska have been translated by the author of the article.

The ensemble has also become a space where long-term romantic relationships have been formed, as shown in *Szalona miłość* [*Crazy Love*]. The film tells the story of Magda Świątkowska and Michał Pęszyński (henceforward referred to as Magda and Michał—as they are presented in the film), two T21 actors who have been in a relationship for many years and who dream of getting married and having children. They met and got engaged in the theatre. In their performances, they speak openly about their desires and at times stage their imagined fulfilment. In the film, Magda and Michał's romantic partnership becomes a shared and celebrated experience. Michał proposes to Magda during a rehearsal, surrounded by their colleagues, and receives applause and encouragement. Later, Magda's friends from the theatre help her choose a wedding dress. These scenes reinforce the idea that T21 functions as a chosen family, with whom its members share their most private moments.

The actors' biological families, although initially anxious, respect the couple's privacy and support their relationship. When Magda visits Michał—who appears to live independently—they spend time together in an intimate atmosphere. The camera captures them lying on a bed, expressing affection, kissing, and, the following morning, measuring Magda's blood sugar (she has diabetes), preparing breakfast, and eating together. They also jointly decide on the destination for their honeymoon, which they begin planning before the wedding.

Magda and Michał are treated, both by their friends and their families, as adults who may require some support but still have the right to privacy and intimacy. Their artistic activity plays an important role in making this possible. Creating performances, receiving awards, travelling to festivals, leading workshops, and earning an income all contribute to strengthening their sense of agency and their parents' support for their independence.

What stands in the way of fulfilling their plans, however, is Polish law. At the end of *Szalona miłość* [*Crazy Love*], Magda and Michał visit a registry office to inquire about the procedure for marriage. The clerk, citing legal provisions that employ stigmatising language, explains that, as people with intellectual disabilities, they are "not an ordinary couple." Since it is uncertain whether they can care for children, they must obtain the court's consent to marry. It remains unclear whether they will pursue this path. What seems clear, however, is that despite the autonomy they have developed with the support of their community, they are still not fully recognised as capable of making decisions about their own lives and future. Such decisions may ultimately be made on their behalf—by the court, and, indirectly, by their parents.

"Happiness," accessible to many disabled people so long as they conform to normative expectations, once again proves unattainable for

people with intellectual disabilities. *Szalona miłość* [*Crazy Love*] thus highlights the particularly acute form of discrimination they face in matters of intimacy. As Santinele Martino observes, people with intellectual disabilities are often perceived as "perpetual children," which leads to their infantilisation and desexualisation (485).

At the same time, *Szalona miłość* [*Crazy Love*] points to the potential for intersectional alliances. When the clerk reads out the marriage law, the first and unquestioned principle becomes evident: in Poland, marriage is defined as a union between a woman and a man. Magda and Michał meet this requirement of heteronormativity, but as people with Down syndrome they are perceived as a girl and a boy, rather than as a woman and a man. This scene highlights the broader, intersectional dimension of discrimination rooted in Polish law—against people with intellectual or psychosocial disabilities and against homosexuals.

In recent years, struggles for the recognition of same-sex partnerships in Poland have unfolded alongside broader movements advocating for the rights and dignity of disabled people. As Peszko's film suggests, restrictions on marriage and parenthood—such as the ban on child adoption by same-sex couples—constitute shared challenges for these communities. The critical dimension of the utopian archaeological mode thus gains wider significance, revealing whose intimacies and sexualities are regulated, controlled, or restricted by the state.

THE ONTOLOGICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL MODES OF UTOPIA: THE THEATRICAL PRACTICE OF T21

The performances of T21 nourish the imagination of the alliance discussed above. For this to become possible, however, the theatre had to undergo a long process of development. This work was not only artistic, but also educational.

In Poland, people with intellectual disabilities cannot study at public theatre schools. For this reason, their work in the theatre had to begin with learning the basics of acting. Today, however, the ensemble, its collaborators, theatre critics, and audiences have no doubt that its members are professionals (see Kwaśniewska). Developing acting skills, followed by creating performances and the group's subsequent successes, has also been an empowering process for many participants. As their parents indicate in the previously cited survey, working in T21 has increased the actors' independence in everyday life, improved their communication skills (for example, Paweł Sakowski began to speak, while others improved

their articulation), and strengthened their ability to cooperate, their self-confidence, self-awareness, and sense of self-worth.

The growing recognition they have received in Polish theatre has also given them a sense of achievement. This has not only reinforced their pride but also their sense of responsibility and reliability. Consequently, the actors are now better equipped to express their needs, including those related to their own disability, while also resisting the ableism they encounter in everyday life (Kietlińska 75). Today, the actors not only create performances, but also run theatre workshops (also in public theatre schools) and speak publicly in the media, thus participating in public discussion on issues that concern them; some of them play musical instruments and give concerts, develop their physical skills by engaging in sports, and write texts for theatre. This aspect of T21's work closely aligns with the ontological mode of utopia, as it demonstrates how changes in the living conditions of people with disabilities unlock their potential to flourish. It shows how people with intellectual disabilities could function within society if they were provided with opportunities for comprehensive education and self-realisation.

This is the result of T21's working method, which has never been oriented towards implementing the director's overarching vision on the stage. The topic is always selected by the actors themselves, while the performance itself is largely devised; it is based on the actors' conversations with the directors and dramaturgs, as well as on their improvisation (see, for example, Kietlińska).

Over time, alongside issues such as independence, the themes of love and sexuality also began to emerge. By freeing the performers from social constraints and normative expectations, the architectural mode of utopia employed in T21's creative work allows the actors to perform a wide range of desires that resist patriarchal frameworks and cannot be easily categorised within narrow definitions of sexuality or intimacy. Heterosexual, homosexual, and transgender imaginaries intersect fluidly, without the need for rigid definitions or boundaries. The sexual identity of the actors/characters (the boundary between them seems very fluid) emerges and develops through individual expressions of desire, love, longing, and frustration.

One of the earliest performances to address romantic and intimate relationships—*Statek miłości* [*The Love Boat*] (2013)—presents scenes of seduction, closeness, and declarations of love across diverse gender configurations and scenarios. Alongside male–female interactions, there is also a scene between Anna Drózd and Maja Kowalczyk, who lie on a large, heart-shaped red cushion while planning a romantic dinner in New York. The pleasure of being together intertwines with the sensual pleasure

of eating. The food they imagine—carrots with peas and pizza—departs from stereotypical images of refined meals accompanying romantic rituals. Their shared fantasies culminate in a declaration of love, a dance, and a tight embrace.

The performance also reworks a range of cultural representations of attractiveness and romance. In several scenes, the actors wear masks depicting celebrated "beautiful" figures such as Marilyn Monroe or Elvis Presley. They recreate the iconic scene between Rose and Jack from *Titanic*, and they repeat, almost like an incantation, the word *l'amour*, drawing on the idea of French as the "language of love." Yet all these borrowed models, once transposed onto the actors' own bodies and modes of expression, are gradually transformed.

Instead of a pop song, Maja Kowalczyk's sensual dance is accompanied by Teresa Foks's non-verbal vocal performance. When Marta Stańczyk responds to the cue "l'amour" with "I won't talk about love, I don't speak French," Kowalczyk begins to ask her questions in an invented, unintelligible language, gently overcoming her resistance. Madonna's well-known song "Like a Virgin" is performed not by a woman, but by Piotr Swend, who does a partial striptease, while Kowalczyk films him on her phone, as if they were jointly creating a music video or an erotic film.

Towards the end, the entire ensemble joins in. All actors, regardless of gender, wear grass-like skirts, flower wreaths, and garlands. The choreography combines gender ambiguity with tropical holiday imagery and the aesthetics of the freak show, where ableism intertwines with colonial tropes. Immersed in red light and smoke, the group performs a collective dance to Foks's vocals, enacting its own ritual of love under the guidance of a young queer woman, played by Kowalczyk. The accompanying poetic declarations of love—both verbal and non-verbal—form a collective performance of tenderness and longing which, while remaining personal, also becomes a shared manifesto. Such reconfiguring of a familiar cultural topos subverts the heteronormative patriarchal order. It presents a vision that appears impossible in a world governed by ableist and homophobic social norms and legal frameworks, yet becomes possible within a space where these norms are temporarily suspended.

A similar trope can be found in the much later performance, *Libido Romantico* (2022). Its central theme is sexuality, which results in a more direct and explicit performance mode than in *Statek miłości* [*The Love Boat*]. The actors enter the stage in drag-inspired (tight and revealing) and animal-themed (antlered) costumes, and the performance includes scenes of romantic confessions and kisses in various constellations.

In one such scene, Piotr Sakowski, wearing a tight black dress with a plunging neckline, is caressed simultaneously by Maja Kowalczyk and

the "horned" Aleksander Orliński. Daniel Krajewski, dressed in leather trousers and a white fur coat worn over his bare torso, reads romantic poetry by Adam Mickiewicz, the central figure of Polish Romanticism. He then approaches Kowalczyk, signals that he wishes to take her place, embraces Sakowski, and begins kissing his chest. Soft jazz accompanies the scene, whose atmosphere remains calm and tender—in these interactions, there is no jealousy, aggression, shame, or violence.

The connections that emerge are fluid and unstable. Is Sakowski desired as a man, as a drag persona, or as a woman? Or perhaps desire here has no fixed object or direction at all, becoming instead an expression of intimacy shared within a close-knit community. Yet the expression of desire in *Libido Romantico* also has a painful dimension—it reveals unfulfilled longing and frustration. Aleksandra Skotarek cries out about her desire for a "normal man," thereby subverting the stereotype that a person with Down syndrome can only form a relationship with another person with an intellectual disability. She rejects this imposed scenario, as she desires different kinds of partners. At the same time, she recounts her experience of sexual abuse perpetrated by a boyfriend with an intellectual disability—introducing into the performance an important and still underrepresented theme: sexual violence against disabled women, which has received little attention within the #MeToo movement.

So far, Aleksandra has experienced only disappointment in relationships with non-disabled men, and she therefore declares that she will "drown herself in love." Maja Kowalczyk, writhing in unfulfilled desire, shouts: "Here, here, put it here! I want to make love like this!" She is joined by Daniel Krajewski, who, in an authoritative tone, instructs someone to sit on his lap and pull his hair. Magda Świątkowska, unable to fulfil her desire for motherhood, sinks into deep sadness.

These difficult emotions are partially sublimated within the space of the performance. On stage, Skotarek puts up a poster of a naked man; later, she wraps herself in a fabric shaped like a human heart, onto which an image of a muscular, wet male torso is projected. In contrast to patriarchal conventions, what serves as the object of desire here is the naked white male body. At the same time, in Skotarek's narrative, this imagined relationship is not objectifying but relational—the appropriation of dominant visual strategies transforms their meaning.

Krajewski and Kowalczyk begin to push and pull one another, rolling across the floor and tugging at each other's hair while repeating, "I like this." Eventually, they embrace. Their interaction resembles a form of BDSM grounded in mutual consent. Świątkowska, in turn, creates a magical garden, inviting her imagined children into it. She prepares her body for pregnancy and breastfeeding by rubbing it with herbs, and then—

dressed only in underwear, as both a mother and a pregnant woman—performs an erotic dance. In this way, she simultaneously transgresses the social prohibition on motherhood and the desexualisation of disabled and pregnant bodies.

This release, however, is not permanent. Waves of anger, despair, and resignation return, only to be sublimated again in the film projected at the back of the stage, where the actors, dressed in eccentric costumes, stroll through the centre of Warsaw, carrying a large, fabric, anatomically shaped heart as a banner of their rights. The crip-queer utopia they construct within the theatre thus extends its symbolic territory—although in practice it still remains largely confined to the theatrical space.

Throughout these scenes, the ensemble's response is one of complete understanding and acceptance. Neither orgiastic imagery, nor nudity, nor expressions of despair, nor consensual BDSM provoke discomfort or judgment. The group becomes a space where both pleasure and pain can be expressed and shared—without bias, rejection, or shame. The performative space created by Theatre 21 thus evokes possible future communities in which intimacy and sexuality are not subjected to social or moral regulation or categorisation. They are not even named—they simply exist, though, as Emma Sheppard suggests, not always in ways that can be described as "happy."

Alongside these collective explorations of intimacy and sexuality, Theatre 21 has also created more intimate, small-scale works devoted to these. An excellent example is the camera-based performance by Aleksandra Skotarek and Maja Kowalczyk, created during the pandemic—*Ciało w ciało z Marilyn* [*Body to Body with Marilyn*] (2021).

This work is a subtle in-depth exploration of intimate relations—between oneself and one's own body, between two young women, and between them and the icon of idealised femininity invoked in the title. Styled as Marilyn—wearing blonde wigs and the characteristic beauty mark above the lip—the performers, connected via their computer cameras, focus on their bodies, self-images, and identities. Their actions, directed both towards themselves and towards the audience, evoke associations with online sex work. These associations, combined with the reference to a cultural icon of femininity, sharply puncture dominant social stereotypes.

At the same time, Skotarek and Kowalczyk do not seem primarily concerned with producing a specific effect on the viewer; rather, their attention remains focused on themselves and on each other. Over the course of the hour-long performance, each of them lies on a bed, rolling in the sheets; sits in an armchair reading a book; assumes various poses in front of a mirror or the camera; caresses herself; makes faces; and performs unusual choreographies. These gestures evoke both performances of femininity—

often drawing on the repertoire associated with Marilyn Monroe—and movements reminiscent of animals such as rabbits, cats, or horses.

Initially focused mostly on themselves, the actresses gradually establish contact with one another. They repeatedly confess their love in different ways. Expressions of affection intertwine with personal disclosures. Skotarek once again speaks about her longing for a man, while Kowalczyk delivers a poetic text about an underwater journey towards fulfilment in love. Later—whether in an attempt to position herself within her friend's desire, or as a gesture of enacting her own yearning—she dresses as a man. A text appears on the screen referring to fascination with masculinity, followed by the phrase: "sometimes woman, sometimes man." It remains unclear whether these words refer to Kowalczyk's identity or to the direction of her desire. The performance relies on subtlety and ambiguity.

Utopian impulses from both the ontological and architectural domains are clearly intertwined here. *Ciało w ciało z Marilyn* [*Body to Body with Marilyn*] traces the subjectivation of the disabled female body, while simultaneously constructing multiple possible frameworks within which this process might occur. It affirms bonds between women and evokes what Adrienne Rich described as the "lesbian continuum" (11–48) This concept refers to a space in which lesbian existence is understood as one of the potential forms of women's desire, but which also encompasses a broad spectrum of intimate, supportive relationships between women—relationships that involve sharing desires and resources, and mutual support in resisting patriarchy, understood here as a form of violence against all forms of non-normativity. It is a space of friendship, partnership, and eroticism (Rich 11–48).

Although Rich's essay was published in 1980, such "lesbian spaces," which escape patriarchal prescriptions, remain rare within cultural representation. *Ciało w ciało z Marilyn* [*Body to Body with Marilyn*] creates one such space, incorporating within it women with intellectual disabilities. In doing so, it generates a powerful utopian impulse that evokes an inclusive, intersectional, crip-queer future—one in which sexuality and identity are understood as fluid and shifting performances. Different directions of desire and subject positions coexist simultaneously, beyond hierarchy and exclusion.

CONCLUSION

The analysis shows that Theatre 21 and the way its members present themselves align with the concept of a theatre ensemble composed of people with disabilities as a form of chosen family, within which disabled

individuals explore and fulfil their needs related to intimacy and sexuality. Their mode of operation turns theatre into a space for development, self-realisation, the formation of diverse relationships—including romantic ones—and the acquisition of new skills.

Their devised performances, in turn, create a space for the free exploration and expression of crip-queer utopias. The communities and realities that emerge within them bring together all three modes of utopia: archaeological, ontological, and architectural. As a result, the work of the ensemble reveals ableist and homophobic structures within social and political life that limit the possibilities for development and self-realisation among those who do not conform to patriarchal and ableist "norms."

This critical aspect of Theatre 21's work is enhanced by constructive and affirmative practices that test how the principles governing the social world need to be reconfigured to enable crip and queer individuals to flourish. The potential impact of T21 on the transformation of social relations and the collective imagination thus operates on multiple levels—from social critique to experimental practices of imagining desirable futures, and their application in everyday work.

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