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Review of A Kid Like Jake

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Coming-of-age is not a process that begins in adolescence and ends in early adulthood, even if it is generally associated with that period of psychological development. It is a lifetime project really. Take this novelist. He is a young novelist if not a young man. He has made lasting contributions to our profession and already would be in a Cooperstown for psychoanalysts if there were such a place, yet here in *The Year of Durocher* he is making a wonderful debut as a novelist. This Jacobs fellow is forever a boy of summer. He is still stretching, still taking his swings and making good contact, still coming of age.

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A KID LIKE JAKE. By *Daniel Pearle*. Lincoln Center Theater, New York, 2013.

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What if Cinderella attends the wrong ball? What if she's asked to catch a ball, instead of dance, and is ridiculed for refusing? What if Cinderella is a four-year-old boy named Jake whose parents desperately want him to get into an elite private school?

These are among the questions raised by *A Kid Like Jake*, a new play by Daniel Pearle that had its world premiere at Lincoln Center Theater in 2013. The play presented a topical but largely unsung dilemma: how to raise such a boy in the face of norms more wicked than a fairy-tale stepmother.

Much like the parents in the play, psychotherapists are awakening to gender nonconformity and the pressing needs it places on us as practitioners: to challenge tradition, welcome new voices, and expand our capacity to hold and reflect forms of expression, identity, and self-narratives that have no precedent. Daily, we are challenged by the ever increasing number of "gender-creative" children and adults as they arrive at our offices and transcend our culture's normative definitions of male/female (Ehrensaft 2011). Even more important, and too often overlooked, is our personal experience of gender meanings as they seismically shift and

adapt before our eyes. We are thus tasked—but without any founding father, or fairy godmother, to lead us.

The core conflict of *A Kid Like Jake* reflects the unsettling demands placed on parents, clinicians, and people—the demand to “not know beforehand” (Fordham 1993) and to engage in “a mode of unknowing” (Corbett 2009a) in order to facilitate the creation of personal meaning and a revitalization of the self (Safran 2006; Mitchell 1993), for our children, our clients, and ourselves.

The play opens much like the Cinderella story, with a mother, Alex, plotting to secure her child’s “royal” status and thus her own. Here that status equates with acceptance at an elite private school in New York City. The father, Greg, is an easygoing psychotherapist who contains Alex’s Upper East Side anxiety and offers gentle reassurance. Though we never meet the child in question, Jake, we learn immediately that princesses inspire his play, and that his parents are fine with that. This information poses the central question of the play: can Jake’s parents be progressively attuned to his unique sense of self and be status (quo) hungry at the same time? And can this be achieved without Cinderella’s mother becoming her evil stepmother?

The plot thickens when Alex meets with the principal of Jake’s preschool, Judy, for advice on admission to a top-tier grade school (“Cinderella’s ball,” in the play’s narrative economy). Is Judy a fairy godmother and, if so, of whom—Jake or Alex? She is highly attuned to Jake, including his “gender-variant play,” which she explicitly names and encourages Alex to make use of in the family’s application essays. Alex shudders at the mere suggestion and instead pleads with Judy to use her “magic” connections to squeeze Jake into the best possible school by underplaying his “variance.” But the label Judy has assigned Jake haunts his parents with questions long after the meeting: will presenting Jake as “gender-variant” affect his chances of getting into school or, upon admission, limit his creative, academic, and social development?

Alex happens to be pregnant at this point, an unexpected development that adds a number of complications to the plot. Mom and dad now imagine having a child with a normative story, which increases the distance and tension within the family. It also emphasizes Alex’s fear of failure, having miscarried once before.

As school interviews commence and Jake is encouraged to temper his play (e.g., Alex does not allow him to be Snow White for Halloween), he becomes aggressive: he shoves another child and acts out violent

moments from the Grimms' Cinderella story—drawing bloody pictures of the stepmother cutting her daughters' feet to fit the glass slipper, even throwing his Cinderella figurine at his grandmother's face. Greg suggests they bring Jake "to see someone," but Alex insists it would needlessly pathologize him and signal to schools that he is defective.

A cycle of rage ensues. Jake is rejected by schools, exacerbating Alex's frustration and leading her to become ever more controlling. As anxiety heightens, each of the characters splits. Alex imposes gender norms on Jake. Judy stridently advocates for him. Greg sinks into helplessness. And all the while Jake's aggression dominates the group. The play rises in a crescendo: fear becomes anger, anger becomes betrayal, insults, tears, loss, and emptiness.

And then something happens. We gain access to Alex's inner world by way of a dream sequence, and life starts up again where fluency has broken down (Phillips 1998). We see Alex as someone who herself felt pressured to give up "girly play" in order to gain status. We learn that she worked as a lawyer before choosing to raise Jake full-time, and that a fear of failure has always pervaded her life. We hear of the many hours she spent alone raising Jake in a fantastic play space she created for them, where each of their "girly" desires could safely expand and not be shunned—a space where each of them could be Cinderella. We recognize the great loss they share when the clock strikes midnight, the carriage becomes a pumpkin, and social norms reclaim them.

Fortunately, the play's final scene suggests that Jake and his parents have begun work with an analyst and seem on a trajectory toward reflection and understanding. While watching Disney's *Cinderella* during a sleepless night, Alex shares with Greg her revelation that the title character's resilience may come from a sense of being "good enough." Perhaps Alex is beginning to feel that she herself is a "good enough mother," capable of "active adaptation" to Jake's needs (Winnicott 1971).

Of great relevance to therapists is the play's evocative enactment of what Ken Corbett (1996) calls a "category crisis," the dilemma of not fitting neatly into a social category (or glass slipper, if you will). Greg and Alex's conflicting categorical ideals come to mind: to be boastful, proud, attuned parents of a fully self-expressed child while also being boastful, proud, disciplined parents of an elite private school student. The task of finding these characters refuge from such a storm, regardless of their class and environment, could perplex even the most learned analyst. Jake's category crisis is the most critical of all. Children bring with them

a rich palette of gender uniqueness (Ehrensaft 2011), and at age four there is no indication that Jake wants to be anything more defined than Jake at some times, Cinderella at others, Snow White for Halloween, and the Little Mermaid whenever he is so inclined. When his mother coercively suggests he dress up as a skeleton for Halloween, he tells her she has “lazy ideas”—and in a way he’s right. As would many of us, Alex reflexively makes the safest choice, one that will incur the least amount of scrutiny or criticism and unequivocally “makes sense.” But in so doing, she withdraws herself from the reverie she has co-created with Jake, letting him take the lead while she “lazily” lags behind.

As more and more children take the lead in their gender creativity, it is crucial that we as parents and therapists keep up and not be lazy in our ideas. Even as some children now make clear categorical choices to identify with one gender over the other—like six-year-old Coy Mathis, recently banned from the girls’ restroom at her school until the Colorado Division of Civil Rights intervened by establishing a legally recognized status of transgender (Banda and Riccardi 2013)—we must be vigilant about the expressive needs and the treatment of those in between the lines, those for the restroom not least of all.

Another crisis of category occurs when Judy, Jake’s pre-school principal, uses the term “gender-variant play.” Judy aims to reflect on Jake’s uniqueness, knowing it will be a stronger sell in his school interviews if it is embraced rather than ignored. But Alex understands “variant” to mean categorical illness, “some kind of Gender Identity Disorder [GID]” that could be used against Jake, as opposed to “a range of that which is normal” and to be “relished for its ideality” (Corbett 2009a). The play was written before the release of DSM-V, which has replaced GID with “Gender Dysphoria” in an attempt to avoid stigma and clarify that the transgender situation is “not in itself a mental disorder,” but the fact that a category exists at all gives Jake’s parents something on which to project their fears. Alex even unwittingly uses “girly boy” as a pejorative category, a term coined by Corbett (1996) in an effort to address the problem of “category crisis,” revealing how tricky it is for any of us to discuss the troubles of gender polarity without reflexively reinforcing the dualism we intend to critique (Benjamin 1988).

The parents do not speak about, and arguably dissociate from, their fear that even as gay acceptance increases in the mental health field, male femininity is still often seen through the lens of deficit and disorder (Sedgwick 1991). Jake’s parents acknowledge they have no idea whether

he will grow up as gay-identified, but they do know he is a prime target for the stigmatizing categories of “gay,” “feminine,” “sissy,” “weak,” and “sick” that will be slapped on him along the way. By avoiding an explicit and expansive conversation about these labels and their social implications, they inadvertently model shame and thrust upon Jake what I call “don’t act, don’t tell” (O’Connell 2012), the subliminal practice of “closeting” or “covering” (Yoshino 2006) one’s gender expression (“gay acting”) in order to dodge a stigmatizing label. Fear of the particular stigma Jake’s behavior will likely bring keeps them all mute and therefore incapable of “mutual recognition” (Benjamin 1988).

Jake’s parents are caught between other categorical identities as well—as parents and social beings, but perhaps even more so as husband and wife. Since we never see Jake, we experience his parents’ complex reactions to him firsthand. In some cases the “dual mandate of adaptation and acceptance” (Malpas 2011) of their child’s gender nonconformity can cause one parent anxiously to impose stereotypical norms (here, Alex), while the other opposes this with overacceptance (in this case, Greg), each all along thinking to protect the child while in effect eroding their marriage (Malpas 2011). Further, Greg and Alex ultimately blame each other for not living up to an ideal of “woman” or “man”—she for being too “aggressive” rather than nurturing, and he for not being a stereotypically masculine role model, for never having thrown “a ball in [Jake’s] direction.”

Here is where the play ever so slightly opens these two characters up for blame. Parents are often held responsible for gender nonconformity in children (Ehrensaft 2011), with an “intrusive” mother and/or a “shy” father (Coates, Friedman, and Wolfe 1991), for instance, being called to account. Although the play effectively forces us, in the playwright’s own words, to “live in the uncertainty” (personal communication), Jake’s absence onstage may nonetheless lead us to blame his parents by default, as we are compelled to protect his presumed innocence at every turn. Pearle explained to me that in addition to the usual difficulties of having a four-year-old onstage, if Jake were present “you would make your own decision about how you feel.” He’s probably right. We as audiences would be tested and implicated by our own responses to him, the sounding alarms of our own internal “gender police,” or “gender ghosts”—our childhood imprints in a gender-binary world (Ehrensaft 2011). But by being spared our experience of Jake, are we given too easy access to the high road while his parents struggle within our judgmental gaze? Seeing

them interact with a gender nonconforming child might have given the audience, struggling with their own “ghosts,” more opportunity to identify with these parents.

According to Pearle, many audiences revealed their gender ghosts in the form of anger directed at Alex. He said that both men and women would often gasp at the character’s moments of intense ambition, and laugh when her husband, out of frustration, derides her. A friend of the actress playing Alex apparently even told her, “You were so good, I wanted to punch you” (personal communication). These raw reactions illuminate the misogyny fueling much of our discomfort with gender nonconformity, which is all too often unnamed. As Eve Sedgwick wrote, we often consider a mother’s involvement in raising a son to be “over-involvement, any protectiveness is overprotectiveness” (Sedgwick 1991), perhaps alluding to Coates, who perceived mothers of gender-variant boys to be “controlling” (Coates, Friedman, and Wolfe 1991). Audience responses suggest that these perceptions are generally (and alarmingly) still held, some twenty years after Sedgwick penned her essay.

The play itself, while fresh, visceral, and realistic, also contorts to accommodate the category of “drama.” The subplot of Alex’s pregnancy and miscarriage certainly provides a clear dramatic arc from hope to despair, as well as an opportunity for an “earned” theatrical climax complete with raised voices. But is it necessary? Would the play not hold our interest without this device? Would we not relate, care, or invest as deeply in Alex and Greg’s challenges with Jake without a literal physical life failing to be born? Did Pearle reflexively dress up his play with a formal structure—like a skeleton for Halloween—for fear we might not accept a more nuanced, complicated drama? One harder to categorize, one lacking an obvious catharsis?

Still, the playwright has observed that actors in this production reported frequently bowing to conflicted audiences who had not yet made up their minds about the play, the characters, or the actors: “The audience shares in an experience that doesn’t have answers, and they often don’t want to talk about it right away,” which was often “hard for the actors” (personal communication). The actors and audiences were left with uncertainty, a lack of resolution, and perhaps even melancholy, not unlike anyone confronted with the dilemmas of gender nonconformity.

As Jake and his parents navigate uncharted territory, we too confront needs to create more playing space between genders—for everyone. Alex and Greg demonstrate that our most vital resource here lies in finding

comfort in our own gender authenticity (Ehrensaft 2011). They further illustrate that with a decrease in anxiety comes increased ability to empathize with our children's and patients' inner experiences (Malpas 2011).

Alex and Greg also remind us there is no better way to gain access to a child's inner experience, and to move forward with him or her, than through mutual playing (Winnicott 1971). Though clearly in need of help, they instinctively attune to Jake through play. Watching them discuss the repair of Jake's Cinderella doll, the audience immediately senses their affirmation of their child's capacity to create a livable world for himself. The challenge for Alex and Greg is to maintain this reverie with Jake while also facing and engaging with the wicked social norms swarming outside their home like vultures, ready to claim and punish them as they open the door. How can they, or we, maintain mutual play with children and patients while straddling the "boundary between the psyche and the social" (Corbett 2009b), when the social is not only severely punitive, but is also us? How do we not only "stand in the spaces," to invoke Bromberg (1998), but also *play* in the spaces and maintain reverie and access to the patient/child's world while acknowledging the painful need to negotiate self-states?

The playwright reveals each parent as capable of walking this line, yet they frequently lose the faith to follow through on their instincts. When Alex learns that Jake has shoved a playmate—in defense of his portrayal of the Little Mermaid—and then refused to speak to the intervening teacher, Alex explains: "Well, he couldn't talk . . . the Little Mermaid loses her voice." This devolves into argument, but there is an opening here, one that a professional could employ to help Alex make use of "potential space" (Winnicott 1971) or "reflective space" (Corbett 2009a), "a shared reverie state" (Bromberg 2011; Bion 1962), that is, a play space in which to join Jake and work with him to better resolve conflicts in the future. Greg has a similar moment while talking with Judy about Jake's "bloody" illustrations. He takes them to represent Cinderella's stepmother cutting her daughters' feet to fit the glass slipper, and ultimately getting her eyes pecked out for her autocratic ambitions. What if Greg shared this observation with Jake, offering empathic recognition of his struggle by following his creative expression, and thereby joining him in his despair?

Perhaps playing in the spaces becomes possible when play is allowed to be sad, anticlimactic, or a melancholic reverie—like players bowing to an uncertain crowd. Judy hints at this idea when she wonders why Greg

shows Jake pictures of Scottish men in kilts but not pictures of cross-dressing men, and asks the father, “You didn’t tell him there are men who do wear dresses? In our culture?” To invite the concept of men who cross-dress into their play space might carry with it the dark cloud of societal abjection, hardly such stuff as play is typically made on. But perhaps it could be. Near the end of the play, Jake asks to be rescued in the form of play, enacting the traumatic rupture he’s experienced by playing Cinderella hearing the stroke of midnight over and over again. Could his parents use this opportunity to join Jake in a melancholic reverie, mutually playing, reflecting, and existing through feelings of loss and despair, but also desire and hope—holding both the carriage and the pumpkin while playing in the spaces between?

One of Jake’s favorite characters, the Little Mermaid, comes to mind here, caught between the world of her birth and the world of her dreams. Though given a happy, normative (lazy?) ending by Disney, Hans Christian Andersen’s original character is fated to an ever-after as sea foam—in a melancholic space between two worlds. Alex and Greg might find themselves keeping up with Jake by introducing such sea foam to him as play—as opposed to something to be dissociated, overlooked, or rewritten—and by joining him there. The final scene of the play suggests they just might.

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IMAGINATION FROM FANTASY TO DELUSION. By *Lois Oppenheim*. New York: Routledge, 2013, xxvi + 207 pp., \$140.00 hardcover, \$40.95 paperback.

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In his final great novel, *The Adolescent*, Dostoyevsky (1875) writes: “A photograph very rarely resembles the person. That stands to reason since the person only rarely resembles himself. It is only for brief moments that the human face expresses a person’s most characteristic thought, a person’s essence. An artist studies a face and discovers in it that essence”