

## ***Ja goryl, ty człowiek: Understanding Koko***

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The story about Koko the gorilla who learns sign language has been well documented in scientific research and films such as *Koko: A talking Gorilla* (1978), or *Koko: The Gorilla Who Talks To People* (2016). But the Opolski Teatr Lalki i Aktora im. Alojzego Smolki under the direction of Marek Zákostelecký brings the story to the theatre. Through puppetry and imagination, the children in the audience at the Przegląd Nowego Teatru dla Dzieci in Wrocław get to meet Koko and encounter her journey at the Gorilla Foundation in Woodside California. The production stages the encounter of the audience with Koko, but also with Polish Sign Language and accessibility.

Just before the play starts a sign language interpreter is introduced, she is standing on the right side of the stage. There is also a message for the people in the audience who use audio description that they can put their headset on for a description of the set design. Throughout the play the audio description will provide verbal commentary of the important actions and expressions that happen on the stage so that Blind/Partially sighted people can understand what is happening on stage. This is such a simple but important thing to have for the theatre. Yet, I have not seen any theatre show yet which had accessibility for both Deaf and Blind/Partially sighted people at the same time. The theme that everyone experiences the world differently runs through the production. Koko sees the world differently than Janet, but they find a way to understand each other.

The play opens with Janet, played by Karolina Gorzkowska, who stands on the left side of the stage towards the children and asks them if they can hear her. Yes, they can hear her. Then she explains that they can hear her but that is not the case for everyone, which is a simple but necessary nod to the work that still has to be done in the theatre to make it accessible. Then Janet teaches the children her name and a couple of other words in Polish Sign Language, she invites them to practise the words. This is again a simple and effective way to talk about accessibility. Because of how gently accessibility supports are introduced, the show avoids othering people who need it. In fact, in ***Ja goryl, ty człowiek*** sign language is an inherent part of the production for all spectators.

After this Janet-Gorzowska gives the audience a little background about Koko and the research centre in which she lived. One by one five actors-puppeteers (Dorota Nowak, Mariola Ordak-Świątkiewicz, Tomasz Szczygielski, Jan Chraboł, Andrzej Szymański), all dressed in white clothing enter the white stage. Throughout the show, they animate bunraku-style puppets representing Koko at her different life stages. They sign the year 1975 and the story begins. We see how Janet is trying to find a connection with Koko and does this by giving treats, a gorilla puppet comes up and the children meet Koko for the first time. Koko is very playful like a real baby gorilla, the puppetry looks lifelike on the stage and the audience is engaged in her movements

The story of Koko is being told in a chronological order and as she becomes older the gorilla puppet becomes bigger. In the last scene, which is set in 2017, the puppet looks worn out, like the elderly gorilla that she is. She gives Janet a present, a video camera with a message. Janet listens to it after Koko is being carried to the back of the stage, suggesting that she dies. The message is about caring for and preserving nature. The message is based on the video that was made for the 2015 climate change conference in Paris and it is a very smart choice from the director Marek Zákostelecký to let it be Koko's final message this way it has the most impact on the audience. And relying on the reactions from the audience, the choice worked. I personally had goosebumps, but other spectators were crying and it shows the emotional impact this play has.

The play was emotionally well constructed with music by Martin Husovský as a way of setting the scene. For example when Koko is little, a tune is played which sounds like it could be a nursery rhyme, to give the impression that Janet sees Koko as her child. Another example is when Koko wants a baby of her own and Janet tries to find her a mate and upbeat tones are played and then when he rejects Koko the tones are slow and played in a minor key. The music supports the puppetry as the puppetry expresses Koko's emotions on the outside, the music reflects how she is feeling inside.

***Ja goryl, ty człowiek*** can be the start of a conversation about accessibility, climate change and preserving nature. It is perfect for a children's theatre festival as these children will be the future. The production is a little step towards a more understanding and caring future for these children.