

The Valuation of Popular Theatre Performances

The Forgotten Success Story of *Ljungby horn*

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ABSTRACT

Albert Ranft started as an actor in touring theatre companies in the 1880's, but soon became responsible for one of the most important groups. Twenty-five years later, he ran a big company with about 2500 employees, owned theatres in Stockholm and Gothenburg as well as a couple of touring companies.

His repertoire was based on popular entertainment plays, revues, operettas, historical plays, contemporary dramas etc. Simultaneously, his companies could offer 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' productions. Even the actors could, during just one week, work in different genres. The way of programming was for Ranft an art form by itself, and sometimes he even acted in and directed the plays.

In November 1893, at Stora Teatern in Gothenburg, he premiered a fairy tale play, and the staging was filled with spectacular effects. The play was, from the beginning, a stunning success with the production running for several hundred nights. Moreover, the production of *Ljungby Horn* became the ground stone for Ranft's theatrical enterprise.

The article describes how this success was established through mediatization and its base on rural oral history. The performance is analyzed and discussed as a popular theatre production (McConachie, Price, Röttger, Schecter). The author proposes that a more inclusive definition of popular theatre should be used; one which also takes into account the productions that had commercial success. Popular theatre needs to be included in theatre history writing to enable a better understanding of how the theatre system has developed.

KEYWORDS

Popular Theatre; Mediatization; Spectacular; Ranft; Historiography; *Ljungby horn*.

The Valuation of Popular Theatre Performances

The forgotten success story of *Ljungby horn*

On the evening of 5 November 1893, the play, *Ljungby horn*, had its opening night at Stora Teatern in Gothenburg. It was the beginning of a remarkable success and it became one of the corner stones of an expanding theatre company. After Gothenburg a long successful tour followed, including a long period in Stockholm. In this article, two central questions are raised: in what terms can the performance of *Ljungby horn* be analysed as popular theatre and how has it been evaluated in Swedish theatre history?

The term popular theatre can have different definitions. Researchers in the field (e.g. Jason Price, Joel Schechter) mostly concentrate their research on twentieth-century theatre, using a narrow definition of what popular theatre is (this will be discussed further in the article, see p. 20). As shown in the article, the notion of theatre as part of liberating social movements is often used as a selection tool for defining popular theatre. In the article, the following question is raised: How should we approach popular theatre productions that have been neglected both by historical writing based on canonised productions and by a non-inclusive definition of popular theatre?

The second half of the question widens the topic of the article to the question of theatre history writing. Attempts have been made to give a broader view and include “non-western” theatre, although the outcome has often been seen as

problematic when it comes to selection. My primary concern is about the way Swedish theatre history is written when popular theatre productions do not receive attention. I argue that a more inclusive way of writing theatre history will lead to a new understanding of how the theatre developed. It will also give a new perspective on canonised directors and actors. I attempt also to clarify how a popular theatre production was partly constructed through the mediatization of the spectacular in the production, such as news about the preparation at every tour stop and the daily reports about the overwhelming audience reactions in the daily papers. Furthermore, I will try to grasp the reasons for *Ljungby horn's* popularity amongst new audience groups.

AUDIENCE

To fill the big theatre houses the companies needed to satisfy audience groups with a wide range of educational and social backgrounds. At Stora Teatern, the seats in the first circle were only available for people who could officially prove that they had a certain yearly income. Only people of high rank in society were, therefore, able to buy these tickets. Ranft stopped this form of restriction; it was only the ticket price itself that should govern where people could sit. Sociologists Roger M. Kern and Richard A. Peterson have, based on Pierre Bourdieu's writings, studied the cultivation of taste and the interests of different genres of music during the 1980's and 90's, defining people with more stable tastes, who are based in the more privileged parts of society, as 'omnivores'.¹ The 'omnivores' do not have any problems with mixing 'high' and 'low' art, but people of lower classes tend to prefer 'low' art. In 1890, the Swedish theatre had not yet established a field in Bourdieu's sense.² However, those people who could be deemed as snobs about one hundred years ago, could certainly be interested in various types of popular entertainment. As the Popular Theatre researcher Joel Schechter writes: "Wealthy spectators are not immune to the attractions of great comic actors, pantomime artists, and clowns, even if the performance lacks

¹ Kern & Peterson 1996.

² Bourdieu 1996.

sympathy for the leisure class.”³ Indeed, prominent actors were one of the highest marks of theatrical quality of the period, but directors were still very unusual. There was, however, a debate about which form of theatre could be seen as being of a higher value than others. The famous director, Harald Molander, complained, in an article in 1899, that a more demanding play like Hauptmann’s *The Weavers* only had the possibility to attract a small but enthusiastic audience, while the larger audience and aristocrats filled up the auditorium when light and comic plays were on the bill.⁴

Of interest is also the growth of the Social Democratic Party at the end of the nineteenth century and their relationship to culture. Per Sundgren describes, in his dissertation, the struggle between those who wanted to build a new working class culture and those who, instead, wanted the working class to take over the values of the wealthy classes.⁵ The value of ‘high’ culture was seen as something absolute, which everyone could learn from, while a culture based on the oppressed masses’ own experiences was seen as something without any real quality. Through learning to understand the classics, the working class could prepare to take over the governing of society.

BACKGROUND

The background of the performance, if we are to believe Albert Ranft’s memoirs, was that he, together with one of the young leading actors, Anders de Wahl, took a tour to Copenhagen and saw the fairy tale play, *Et Folkesagn*, at Folke-teatret.⁶

There are several layers behind the production in Copenhagen. In 1854, August Bournonville produced a new three-act ballet entitled *Et Folkesagn* based on Danish folk tales (collected by Just M. Thieles) and also inspired by a H.C. Andersen story. The ballet was tremendously popular and the wordless story, which partly took place in the underworld amongst hobgoblins and

³ Schecter 2003.

⁴ Molander *Teatern* 1899/1.

⁵ Sundgren 2007.

⁶ Ranft 1928, 134.

witches, became the basis for several other plays.⁷ The play *Ranft and de Wahl* saw was written by Edgar Collin, Wilhelm Østergaard, and Alfred Ipsen and premiered at Folketeatret on 26 December 1892, running for 53 performances, using the same music by H.P.E. Hartmann and Niels W. Gade that was originally composed for Bournonville's ballet and completed with additional music. During that period, this play was the most popular production at Folke-teatret and was advertised as a romantic fairy tale in five acts.⁸ In an overview covering the history of the theatre published in 1919, *Et Folkesagn* was described as a naïve but effective folk play that was dependent on the young actress, Charlotte Wiehe.⁹

Ranft writes that during the performance at Folketeatret, he felt more and more that it had a strong resemblance to the well-known Swedish legend about Ljungby horn. He saw the performance a second time and noted down which changes had to be made. Most importantly, the then well known old song about Ljungby horn should be sung before the performance.¹⁰ He contacted the playwright and translator Frans Hedberg who efficiently wrote a Swedish adaption of the play.¹¹

The process must have been rather fast as the premiere of the Swedish adaption was given in November 1893 featuring decorations for six different settings made by the most prominent decorator at that time in Sweden, Carl Grabow's ateliers, situated in Stockholm.¹² In the advertisement and later also on the posters, the six different scenes were highlighted and given the title "New decoration." It was seen as something remarkable to produce a completely new

⁷ The most well known play based on the folktale is Johan Ludvig Heibergs *Elverhøj*, Kragh-Jacobsen 1952, 277.

⁸ Larsen 1988, 77.

⁹ Zachariae 1919, 30.

¹⁰ Ballad by Frans Friberg & Lorenzo Hammarsköld 1813.

¹¹ Frans Hedberg was a very popular and productive playwright and translator during the nineteenth century. He mostly wrote amusing plays and *Bröllopet på Ulfåsa* (The wedding at Ulfåsa) was the most successful of them, but he also wrote several historical plays.¹¹ Two of his sons ended up in the theatre, the dramatist and artistic manager of *Dramaten*, Tor Hedberg and the director at Ranfts Svenska Teatern, Karl Hedberg.

¹² Bergman 1966, 268.

set of decorations for a performance, which may also be seen as a clear sign of the strong belief Ranft had in the production.¹³ The same musical score was used and even the same orchestration as in the Danish original production.

THE PLAY AND ITS MORAL VALUES

The play that Frans Hedberg wrote, or freely translated, consists of 243 handwritten pages, and it has over 27 separate roles besides descriptions of several fantasy figures such as gremlins, brownies, and elves.¹⁴ The play takes place in northern Skåne around the castle of Ljungby at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The main point in the story is that hobgoblins have exchanged a child in the cradle, replacing the castle daughter, Hildur, with the underworld Birgit. Birgit does not live up to female norms, has a bad temper, drinks excessively and wants to dance at night. It is decided that the 'false' daughter should marry the knight, Olof, but he refuses. Hildur, who is being held captive in the underworld, is to be married to her 300-year-old 'brother', Vidrik. Hildur escapes with the help of her other 'brother', Didrik, and decides to stay in the upperworld and finally marry Olof. When she decides not to return, the underworld collapses and all of its inhabitants have to leave the forest in order to find a new place to settle down. Birgit is married to Måns, an old farmer who is attracted to this dissolute woman and his punishment is that he has to act as her servant.

The script uses a lot of effects and it can be seen that cliffhangers are nothing new when it comes to dramaturgy. I'm certain that the audience were excited during the three hours the performance lasted, and this is something the reviewers and news coverage confirm.¹⁵ The use of the two different worlds, too, is something that should have triggered the audience, not least the big wedding party with guests such as Death and a mermaid. It would be an exaggeration to say that the storyline of the play was a version of the old legend. There is a minor resemblance to the original story, but there is no exchange of children

¹³ Advertisement *Göteborgs-Posten*, 1893.

¹⁴ *Ljungby horn*, Svenska litterär sällskapet Helsingfors.

¹⁵ G.B. [pseud] *Göteborgs-Posten* 1893.

and it does not end with a happy marriage. Nevertheless, the critics repeated over and over again that there was no need to recount the story to the reader because it was so well known.

Underneath, there is a moralistic message in the play: girls should not be demanding, backchat important male individuals, nor should they drink or party too much. Such things threaten the patriarchal order of society. But it is worth mentioning that the play ends with a message of peace from the underworld when Birgit and Didrik send good brownies from the underworld as helpers to Hildur and Olof when they build a home together.¹⁶

ALBERT RANFT

Albert Ranft started his career as an actor in touring companies, later taking care of one of the most recognized companies, August Lindbergs sällskap. He started to stay longer in Gothenburg, Malmö and Sundsvall during the tours. The quality of the productions was seen as being high (in comparison with other companies) and Ranft also attracted a lot of well-qualified actors. In Stockholm, he took over the contract for Djurgårdsteatern and, consequentially, of Vasa-teatern, Svenska teatern, Södra teatern, Östermalmsteatern, and Oscars-teatern. During two seasons (1909-1911), he also ran the Royal Opera House, and while in Gothenburg, he owned Stora teatern (1893-1920). During one night, he attracted more than 4000 visitors. His confirmation as a theatre king in Sweden began during the time when the Royal Dramatic Theatre lost its economic support from the state and the king (1888-1907). But even after the state had taken over the operation of Dramaten in 1908, Ranft was still successful and it was only in the mid-twenties that his star started to fall.¹⁷ By then, he had been running his big theatre enterprise for nearly thirty years with several thousand employees. He moved his actors and singers between the theatres and the touring companies in a rather complex way to gain the best effect.

¹⁶ 'Brownies' seem to be the most accurate translation for the Swedish word 'tomte', which is common in the Nordic myths. Brownies are, if they are accepted, kind and helpful, that differs them clearly from gremlins.

¹⁷ Rosenqvist 1989.

Ranft, as a private entrepreneur, marked a rather new way in Swedish theatre, but he was later overtaken by theatres with funding and his way of building a repertoire was not seen as useful any longer. What was also different from today's practice (and was an exception during his own time given the large scale of his company) was that he ran everything himself: economy, contracts, engagements and, at the same time, he was regularly on the stage as an actor as well as director. The notion of high and low drama made no difference to him. He produced several of the first productions of Strindberg's plays and, at the same time, staged plays and operettas that, later in the twentieth century, would be classified as less important by theatre critics and theatre scholars. However, at the end of the nineteenth century, I am not really sure that either the audience or the critics had such a well-defined value scale. But as we shall see, there was a clear difference between the play's later production in Stockholm and the original Gothenburg production regarding the reception and evaluation of the play.

MEDIATIZATION

Before I come to the reviews of the performance, I would also like to mention some of the material that was published in newspapers that could be seen as a mediatization and part of the theatrical event. In the daily papers in Gothenburg, there were often descriptions from performances of *Ljungby horn*. For instance, that it was still highly admired after several weeks in the repertoire, that the final applause was long, and, when there was a specific family performance, the papers reported that a lot of disappointed children had to leave the theatre because it was completely sold out even though the children sat two to a seat.¹⁸

Furthermore, it was reported, both in advertisements and in news items, that extra trains had been arranged to bring in audiences from the rural areas around Gothenburg, and that the start of the performances had been adjusted in relation to the train timetable.

¹⁸ s.n. *Göteborgs-Posten* 1893.

When the performance was transferred to Malmö, the third largest city in Sweden, reports were published about traffic jams forming outside the theatre and that the performance had been sold out for days. Here, too, a lot of extra trains were arranged.

The first advertisements for the production when it was on tour called for 20 children as well as some young girls and men to participate as extras in the production in each town. In each city, the touring ensemble would organize a full day of rehearsals, which was also mentioned in the advertisements. The newspapers in Gothenburg also covered the successful tour that followed the first period of performances in Gothenburg. This also continued the play's economic success despite how much was invested in its set design and its huge ensemble. Ranft made a clear effort to be present in the newspapers as a strategy to build up the popularity of the play. The reputation of the production was so well constructed that it lasted for several decades.

REVIEWS

A comparison between the reception in Gothenburg and Stockholm raises the question, why did the judgement of the production differ so much between the two cities? Is it possible to talk about two different value systems when it comes to the judgements of the critics?

The review in *Göteborgs Posten* started with mentioning the overwhelming reaction from the audience, and the reviewer stated that the manager, Albert Ranft, had found a play that would be a guaranteed economic success. The performance was claimed to be one that everyone should see to their satisfaction. The reviewer, G. B., was clearly astonished by the experience and seemed to have been deeply emotionally affected, as well as being overwhelmed by the set design, the actors, and stage effects:

You will hear four-meter-high mountain kings read verse. You will see beautiful mermaids, and the elder-tree mother, and even Death personified. You will see

glittering bugs with eyes of fire, and grasshoppers with the same. I will not tell you anything more at this time, it should be sufficient.¹⁹

In a sort of conclusion, he says that it “is one of the best popular plays that he has ever seen.”²⁰ The review ends with:

The whole evening, the intensity of the applause increased act after act, and after the last, it increased into a burst. I counted nine curtain-calls – it could even have been more – and the audience called for Mr. A. Ranft.²¹

A reviewer in *Göteborgs Aftonblad* was also very positive about the performance. He points to the fact that the performance was a relief for audiences that had begun to be fed up with farces and lighter plays about private marriage conflicts. This play has “in comparison with other spectacular plays, a substance.”²² This is an important point: theatre productions that are mainly meant to be entertaining can, nevertheless, also touch on moral values. Also in this review, it is mentioned that this was a hit for the theatre manager and that Ranft had struck a guaranteed financial success.

The two reviewers are very satisfied with a play that has both substance or a serious task and spectacular entertainments. They both seem to be astounded by the emotions that the play and the production delivered and both understood immediately that it was a blockbuster. They linked the play directly to the Swedish folk story that should be so well known among the audience that it was not necessary to recount it. However, one week before the premiere, the two newspapers published a résumé of the original legend, but without drawing any comparison to the storyline in the play.

One of the spectacular effects that the reviewer G.B. mentions is “eyes of fire”, which probably indicates an early example of the use of electricity in the performance.²³ In a news report from the dress rehearsal of *Ljungby horn* at the

¹⁹ G.B.[pseud.] *Göteborgs-Posten*. [my translation].

²⁰ Ibid. [In the Swedish original, the term folkstycke is used, which could be translated with the term folk play, my translation].

²¹ Ibid. [my translation].

²² s.n. *Göteborgs Aftonblad* [my translation].

²³ G.B. [pseud.] *Göteborgs-Posten* 1893. [my translation].



Justus Hagman as Didrik in *Ljungby horn*
Photo Alfred Peterson 1893
Helledays collection, Statens musikverk.

summer theatre in Stockholm, Djurgårdsteatern, in July 1894, it is reported that electrical wiring had been specially installed on stage for this production.²⁴

The term spectacular is regularly used in the reviews. This includes the set design, costumes, the music, acting, and stage effects including electrified effects. In one of the advertisements a prop man is also listed.²⁵ Kati Röttger has studied the technology of spectacles and looked into how new technological discoveries were used on stage during the emerging modernity. “Mediality and medium is in a

stage occasion put together so the medium is first visible during the development process.”²⁶ All the effects work together in order to reach the level of the spectacular.

RECEPTION IN STOCKHOLM

When *Ljungby horn* had its Stockholm premiere in Djurgårdsteatern, the critics made some negative remarks compared to the critics in Gothenburg. In *Nya Dagligt Allehanda*, a critic signing as –x-n complains about the quality of the play. He finds it is a mishmash of different sources, and that it was not exactly on Shakespeare’s level, considering that it is like a repetition course about famous operas and plays. Even when he compares it to other performances using spectacular effects, it doesn’t fall in *Ljungby horn*’s favour. “But even the small, but still remarkable success the play made, points to that it will run for some

²⁴ Nivelle *Dagens Nyheter* 1894.

²⁵ Advertisement, *Stockholms Tidningen* 1894.

²⁶ Röttger 2016, 56 [my translation].

time.”²⁷ But the audience that will be attracted by the performance will not be so well informed: “[...]it is more a play for the large, naïve audience, that do not count so much on incoherence and originality as long as they get some variations and delightful sights.”²⁸

In *Stockholms-Tidningen* a similar valuation was made, the performance was claimed to be only of interest for the spectacular settings and effects, there was nothing of deeper meaning in it and the poetry was blunt.²⁹

The daily conservative newspaper, *Vårt Land*, which often argued for a stronger Christian influence on culture also reviewed the performance. The reviewer complains that the story was too expansive and lacked any real emotions:

A person who during an evening at the theatre is satisfied with viewing colourful costumes, decorations, extraordinary lighting effects etc. should certainly be fully satisfied [...] but a person that demands something more and different of a romantic fairy tale play, demands at least some real romance and a mode of fairy tale should feel, as this writer feels, a bit disappointed.³⁰

The critic from *Vårt Land* also pointed out that the people occupying the more expensive seats had been less enthusiastic and the critic predicted that the performance would not achieve a long run despite the enthusiastic response from the audience members occupying the cheaper seats.

One of the reviews was more positive: *Svenska Dagbladet*, expressing some astonishment towards the performance. Here, in contrast to the other reviews from the Stockholm papers, the play was highly valued. It is not the deep meaning of the play, but, in this critic’s view, the naivety of it that gave it its quality: “this simple fairy tale is told with a hearty and true folk music tune. Freed from all banality, but rich in warm and partly humoristic poetry, which you, as audience member, were caught up in due to the festive-atmosphere.”³¹ The review

²⁷ –x –n [pseud.] *Nya Dagligt Allehanda* 1894 [my translation].

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ s.n. *Stockholms-Tidningen* 1894.

³⁰ s.n. *Vårt land*, 1894 [my translation].

³¹ s.n. *Svenska Dagbladet* 1894 [my translation].

in *Aftonbladet* focused on the spectacular aspects and also the enthusiastic audience. The critic foresaw more than 50 performances in Stockholm.³²

The entertainment magazine, *Söndagsnisse*, also published a positive review and a couple of days later they dedicated a whole page to the performance, providing a summary of the play along with sketches from the performance. They also predicted many full houses.³³

Compared to the reviews of Gothenburg, the critics of Stockholm were more critical of the play. The majority of the reviews in Stockholm found that the storyline was too weak and had too little content. However, they all acknowledged the spectacular dimension of the performance when it came to set design, lighting effects, and costumes. The Stockholm critics, though, were not fully satisfied as they found the delightful sight empty. They also commented on how successful the performance would be after its long run in Gothenburg and Malmö, whereby most of them didn't think that it would run for a long period. It is interesting to note the critic in *Vårt Land*, who mentions that the more well-seated audience members seemed to be the less enthusiastic. The question is, did the critics in Gothenburg have a less elaborate taste than the ones in Stockholm, or was it based on the different grades of enthusiasm that seems to have divided the audience in Stockholm? One complicating factor is that the main actor, Anders de Wahl, was not part of the performance in Stockholm. He had played at Djurgårdsteatern during May and June, but he was free during July and started to play in *Ljungby horn* again on August 13. One other reason for the less favourable reviews was the fact that the performance took over four hours during the first night compared with three hours in Gothenburg. It seems likely that they had problems in making smooth set changes between the acts, but it could also be that the intermissions were longer in this popular summer theatre. The city of Stockholm, thanks to its larger population than Gothenburg, could provide a more varied repertoire. The critics, therefore, could demand a higher quality of production in terms of the plays produced. This occurred during

³² D.F. [pseud.] *Aftonbladet* 1894.

³³ Teater-Nisse [pseud.] *Söndagsnisse*, 1894.

the beginning of the formative years of the theatre in Sweden, where calls for a higher artistic quality at Stockholm's theatres emerged both in the press and politics.

THE SUCCESS STORY

Despite the remarks in the reviews, the performance in Stockholm was an enormous success and it ran for over 70 performances, when it was cut short in order to go on tour. This meant that a large number of the citizens of Stockholm saw the performance. In 1894, Stockholm had nearly 265,000 inhabitants and the performance was seen by around fifty thousand in the city that same year. Justus Hagman, who played the dwarf Didrik, is said to have played his part over 600 times. It can be compared with the original Danish version of *En Folkesagn*, which is seen as one of the most popular productions at Folketeatret and reached 53 performances. In the daily newspapers across the country, the tour was covered along with reports of its success. When Hagman wrote his memoirs in 1922, a whole chapter was about the tour with *Ljungby horn* that lasted from September 18 until May 30. Even though they had several other plays in the repertoire, it was *Ljungby horn* that attracted full houses. Justus Hagman writes that it was performed 11 times in Kristianstad, a small city near Ljungby in Skåne:

Extra trains were arranged for the countryside people, and it was beautiful to see the auditorium filled with old farmers, women and children that certainly never before had visited a theatre performance.³⁴

The interest for *Ljungby horn* was tremendous in the southern and middle parts of Sweden, but according to Hagman it was less popular in the northern part of the country. Despite Hagman's account, it was still in the repertoire when it was on tour in some northern cities. In Härnösand it was performed four times and seven times in Sundsvall.³⁵ When the tour ended in Trondheim in Norway, it was still in the repertoire and received good reviews in the town's daily paper *Adressavis*. The review gives the background for the performance and tells

³⁴ Hagman 1922, 110. [my translation].

³⁵ Rosenqvist 1998, 37, 98.

about the triumphant success it had had in Sweden stating that in Trondheim, too, the performance had taken the audience by storm.³⁶ The performance is compared with the performances from three other touring companies, which had visited Trondheim during the spring, concluding that Ranft's troupe out-classed them all. The critic is astonished by the performance's spectacular quality and the richness in the decoration. The performance was prepared for in advance through advertisements as well as an article that reprinted a review from Stockholm. It was also mentioned that the production of *Ljungby horn* had been performed over 257 times.³⁷ In Trondheim it was performed eight times.

To summarize the different ways the play was valued by reviewers, it is clear that the critics in Stockholm were less favourable. Could this be seen as a sign that the separation between popular, commercial theatre, and high art theatre had begun? The critics in Stockholm neglected the quality of the performance, while all the critics outside Stockholm emphasised what they found as quality on all levels. One of the reasons could be that the critics in Stockholm took more note of the text, while the critics outside Stockholm looked more at the spectacular and the audience reactions. Interestingly, the critic in *Vårt land* wrote about the audience in Stockholm and how their reactions differed depending on whether or not they had paid more or less for their tickets. What he wanted to say was that the wealthy people had a more elaborate taste than the less wealthy.

POPULAR THEATRE

In his book, *Modern Popular Theatre*, Jason Price argues that the risk of the term 'popular' is that it becomes too wide and, thus, ends up being unusable. He sets the term in relation to folk and mass culture in an attempt to narrow the term down:

Unlike folk culture, which apparently comes from the people without coercion or influence from power, mass culture is produced by the dominant and imposed onto

³⁶ s.n. *Trondheims adressavis* 1895b.

³⁷ s.n. *Trondheims adressavis* 1895a.

the subordinate classes. Popular culture, therefore, stands as the middle point between the two.³⁸

In the case of *Ljungby horn* it is of importance how this early form of commercial mass culture used the folk culture tradition with oral history telling and songs as a starting point. But this falls outside Price's guideline for selection, "popular theatres are of interest to or operate on behalf of subordinate social groups."³⁹

Joel Schechter, in his introductory chapter to *Popular Theatre*, also argues that the term is still "associated with democratic, proletarian, and politically progressive theatre,"⁴⁰ but of interest in this case is the relation to folk traditions and how "[p]opular theatre forms lend themselves to adaption, reinterpretation and changes of content because they originate in unwritten and improvised performance traditions."⁴¹ This also goes back to Price's comment, based on the cultural studies of researchers Hall & Whannel, that mass culture is "influenced significantly from the folk cultures from below."⁴² According to the definition of popular theatre outlined by these two researchers, the performance of *Ljungby horn* cannot be included and should be looked at more as a commercial mass culture phenomenon. But what should be noted is the huge popularity the production had in the countryside, probably because it connected so well to folk traditions. I would argue that the production could have functioned as a comfort for subordinated groups in society due to the fact that a part of their oral history was put on stage. The performance met these audience groups both in the countryside (where groups that had opposed the drive of urbanisation lived) and the new rootless working class and middle class groups in the towns (that had been urbanised in the process of industrialisation). The production could both strengthen those who stayed in the countryside and those who needed to re-connect with their history when they felt alienated in the expanding industrial

³⁸ Price 2016, 13.

³⁹ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁰ Schechter 2003, 3.

⁴¹ Ibid., 10.

⁴² Price, 15.

cities. The audience was given the opportunity to remember their former country life with its traditions and storytelling.⁴³

Bruce McConachie argues, in his book about melodrama, that in fairy-tale plays, it is rather the meaning the audience takes from a performance more than the escapism that is of particular interest:

In a sense, we need to understand not what audiences were escaping from, but what they escaped to, and what impact this willing suspension of disbelief may have had on their lives. When theatrical communication succeeds, spectators identify with and affirm certain roles, values, and assumptions represented on the stage.⁴⁴

The production of *Ljungby horn* cannot be included in a narrow definition of popular theatre, such as Jason Price, for instance, proposes, which states that the performance should include values that support a social uprising or be used for building up subordinate social groups' identities. However, what the production did was to reach a new theatre audience and establish a new large theatre company. The performance did attract a large audience that were not wealthy and well educated in both the countryside and the cities, and used its spectacular effects. The story could also work as empowerment for the audience. This type of performances is at risk of being expelled from both traditional and popular theatre history writing, despite the importance it had during its time.

THEATRE HISTORY WRITING AND LJUNGBY HORN

Ljungby Horn was one of the largest audience attractions during the turn of the nineteenth century, clearly drawing people to theatre houses. Should a performance that took such a substantial place in the repertoire also take a substantial part in theatre history? When considering the books written about Swedish theatre history, the answer seems to be no.

The critics' judgement of the play and the performance of *Ljungby horn* has shifted over years and across stage, city, and repertoire, including its categori-

⁴³ Karin Helander has written about another success play from the nineteenth century, *Värmlänningarna* and the surrounding cultural climate, Helander 2004, 71-83.

⁴⁴ McConachie 1992, x.

zation. Ranft himself used the genre term “romantic fairy tale play” when he made a register over his repertoire in Stockholm 1892-1921.⁴⁵ Plays like Strindberg’s *Lycko Per* or Maeterlinck’s *Pelleas and Melisande* only receive the genre label “fairy tale play”. The critics of 1914 describe the play as a “melodramatic fairy tale”.⁴⁶ Georg Nordensvan, in his Swedish theatre history from 1918, describes the play as attractive for the audience and also used the term “romantic fairy tale play”.⁴⁷ Nordensvan only mentions the play as something that attracted audiences during its first run at Djurgårdsteatern in Stockholm 1894.⁴⁸ He does not mention that it had its premiere in Gothenburg, or the successful tour, nor how many times it was performed.

In a book about the prominent actor Anders de Wahl, the production is only shortly mentioned as one of the foundations for Ranft’s theatre imperium. The reason for the audience attraction seems only to be due to de Wahl’s young, attractive knight. The authors, Per Lindberg and Sten af Geijerstam, also refer to a talk given by the poet and member of the Swedish Academy, Anders Österling, about the impact de Wahl’s knight had on him and other young schoolboys in Malmö.⁴⁹

Gösta M. Bergman’s book, *Den moderna teaterns genombrott 1890-1925* (The breakthrough of the modern theatre 1890-1925), only mentions Ranft in connection with productions of Strindberg’s plays. Furthermore, when it comes to Vasateatern and Svenska Teatern during Ranfts regime, he gives all the credit for the high quality repertoire to the director Harald Molander, which is only partly true.⁵⁰

In the case of more contemporary ways of writing theatre histories, a more elaborated way of describing Ranft’s importance and the production of *Ljungby horn* can be seen. Claes Rosenqvist writes in *Ny svensk teaterhistoria* that the production “succeeded in transforming the cultural elite’s national romantic feel-

⁴⁵ Ranft 1921. [my translations], 28, 50, 61, 72, 78.

⁴⁶ s.n. *Göteborgs Handels och Sjöfartstidning* 1914 [my translation]

⁴⁷ Nordensvan 1918,. 428. [my translation]

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Lindberg & Geijerstam 1946, 28-29.

⁵⁰ Bergman 1966, 264, 276, 299.

ings into a popular form.”⁵¹ When it comes to the description of the twentieth century in the same book, however, the production is forgotten and Ranft is mostly described in the same way as in Gösta M Bergman’s book: Ranft’s connection to Strindberg, his conflict with the director Per Lindberg (old against young, businessman against genius), and the bankruptcy of the theatre company in the 1920s.⁵² There is a short mention of the artistic competition between Ranft and Dramaten, but it is clear that the history is more concerned with the modern breakthrough.

Rosenqvist has written more extensively about Ranft in a book about touring theatre companies in Sweden. There he notes that *Ljungby horn*, with its romanticism and ambience, was similar to the popular works of the cultural elitists of the 1890s. Ranft could therefore base his enterprise both amongst the popular masses and the advanced cultural elite.⁵³

If we also include popular and mass culture in theatre history writing, what will we gain more than a loss of old governing guiding principles? Jacky Bratton writes in her *New Readings in Theatre History*:

The notion of ‘the popular’ as opposed to ‘the Drama’ in fact vitiated dramatic writing, and turned all the exuberant life of the theatre in the early nineteenth century into ‘entertainment’. A new history would seek the lost drama of the Victorians – the parodic, the experimental, the alternative – in the halls [...]⁵⁴

A more inclusive way of writing will give us a better understanding of how actors’ reputations were built up, which values were dominant on the stage, how the audience’s taste was cultivated, and how the theatre systems functioned as well as how and why it was changed. For this, we need to include popular theatre performances alongside ones that have been declared to be classics. New knowledge could lead to a renewed interpretation of what has been labelled as the modern breakthrough.

⁵¹ Rosenqvist 2007, 345 [my translation].

⁵² Ek 2007, 156-157.

⁵³ Rosenqvist 1990, 124.

⁵⁴ Bratton 2003, 169-170.

CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that the remembrance of it has almost fallen into oblivion, the production of *Ljungby horn* was clearly one of the most important theatrical events in Sweden during the turn of the nineteenth century. During this period, the notion of “high art” theatre emerged, while theatre that mainly had as its purpose to entertain was seen as having less value. As shown in the article, even a so-called “entertainment play” could have both the possibility to empower oppressed people and to educate them to maintain old moral values. Through this way of viewing the play, *Ljungby horn* can be seen as an example of popular theatre, even if it did not embolden the members of its audience to take steps against their oppressors. The play also succeeded in bringing new audience groups into the theatre.

In works on the history of Swedish theatre, the play has been almost completely neglected and, if it is mentioned at all, has nothing to do with the Swedish theatre during the twentieth century. Theatre history needs to be rewritten and augmented. This will broaden our understanding of how particular audiences were constituted and how they understood theatre. The developing subsidised theatre system and the struggle against Ranft’s successful private enterprise will thus be seen in another light. This will also lead to more interest in how actors and directors built their careers through shifting between different theatre genres and companies.

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