

Theatre and the Popular

Introduction

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At the conference of the Association of Nordic Theatre Scholars (ANTS) in Helsinki in 2015, a discussion on the status and future challenges of the field of theatre studies in the Nordic/Baltic region took place, which included a dialogue on neglected themes of research. Among these themes was the complex yet often overlooked topic of the Popular. Resulting from the discussion, a proposal was made to host the third annual ANTS conference in Iceland on Theatre and the Popular in the following year. The current issue of *Nordic Theatre Studies* is dedicated to the subject, containing ten articles developed from papers given in the conference panels.

The conference on Theatre and the Popular was held at the University of Iceland in Reykjavik on 11-13 March 2016. It was co-organised by ANTS and the Institute of Research in Literature and Visual Arts at the University of Iceland and ran alongside the university's annual humanities conference. As the first international theatre studies conference ever to be held in Iceland, the aim of the conference was not only to bring together a variety of scholars active within or dealing with the Nordic/Baltic region to discuss aspects of the Popular in relation to theatre and performance, but also to promote and support theatre studies as an independent field of studies within the Icelandic academic community.

The conference was divided into two parts: firstly, panels of paper presentations and, secondly, a workshop led by Elaine Aston, professor at Lancaster University and vice-president of the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR), who also gave a keynote lecture at the beginning of the conference. The aim of the workshop was to bring context and deeper perspective to the papers given in the conference panels, and to allow a loop of knowledge and inspiration to feed from the papers back into the workshop sessions. The first two days of the conference opened with a workshop session, and the last day the workshop concluded the conference. This way of organizing the workshop turned out to be highly successful, inspiring and encouraging discussions, generating a sense of coherence, which is rarely seen at conferences. In addition to the workshop sessions, the conference was divided into eight panels accommodating 22 papers. In total, 32 delegates registered for the conference, representing not only the Nordic/Baltic region, but also countries such as the UK, Switzerland, Bulgaria and the United Arab Emirates. The workshop and conference received important financial support from the Centre for Research in the Humanities at the University of Iceland as well as from the International Federation for Theatre Research.

The workshop and the panel papers clearly accentuated the complexity of the theme and the difficulties of confining the Popular to a clearly framed definition. Usage of 'popular' tends on the one hand to refer to mass or commercial culture, as related to events created to entertain a large audience, but on the other hand it also indicates and privileges certain aesthetic forms, such as the musical, farce, circus etc. Furthermore, 'popular' may suggest a reference to class, to theatre created by and for the people (often in terms of 'lower' classes). In contemporary approaches to popular culture, as can be seen in a number of contributions to this volume, Pierre Bourdieu's theories of cultural distinction have proven valuable in analysing relations between culture and class, depicting distinctions of legitimate 'highbrow' art related to the elite and educated classes in contrast to illegitimate 'lowbrow' culture associated with lower classes.

Due to the reference to popularity and mass culture, renowned scholars and critics have often been sceptical of popular forms of culture, from Theodor Adorno's critique of the culture industry to Clement Greenberg on avant-garde and kitsch, often deeming the popular seen as unoriginal, mechanical, inauthentic, even vulgar, or at worst: populist. In cases of scholarly research where popular theatre forms indeed have enjoyed attention it has primarily been legitimized through politics, avant-garde, innovation or appropriation in legitimate art forms. For example, Peter Brook's acrobatics in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Mnouchkine's circus and *commedia dell'arte* acts, Dario Fo's politicized farce celebrate popular forms by appropriating them into other fields.

In order to re-examine the notion of the Popular, rather than focusing on distinct existing theories, the conference workshop discussions proposed three sets of frames for consideration when defining and investigating the Popular in relation to theatre: the field of *production* – focusing on activities behind the stage, issues such as marketing, target audience and location of the event; the field of the on-stage *performance* – indicating distinct 'popular' forms, aesthetics and use of cultural references; and the field of audience *reception* – demographics, number and behaviour of the audience, drawing attention to the ritual and event of the 'good night out'.

The articles of this issue of *Nordic Theatre Studies* address the theme of the Popular in a variety of approaches by focusing on different sets of these frames. Three of the articles entail attempts at historiographical re-evaluation by drawing attention to aspects of the popular in relation to past theatrical events, particularly by questioning the divide between 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow'. Rikard Hoogland investigates the success story of Albert Rafn's 1893 production of the folktale play *Ljungby horn*, emphasizing the importance to include popular theatre (in terms of successful entertainment) in historical research to understand the development of theatrical systems. Guðrún Kristinsdóttir looks at the quarrel of Corneille's *Le Cid* in terms of notions of the public and Jon Nygaard discusses the distinction of 'highbrow' and 'lowbrow' and class-divided audiences in relation to Henrik Ibsen's 1859 production of Erik Bøgh's *En Kaprice*.

One of the key issues of the notion of the popular in relation to theatre discussed in within the workshop in Reykjavik touched upon the aspect of entertaining the political. This aspect is evident in the understanding of the popular as aimed at an audience of 'the people' (meaning working class) but also in the possibility to subvert or the usage of popular forms as a tool for ideological reasons. Two articles in this issue address the popular in relation to political theatre. Mikko-Olavi Seppälä discusses the Finnish amateur Workers' Stage as a part of left-wing activism in the 1930s and Anna Watson compares different approaches of two Norwegian political theatre groups from the 1970s, Hålogaland Teater and Tramteatret, to utilize populism and popular and folk culture in their performances.

The use of popular theatre forms is also central in Rūta Mažeikienė's contribution on post-soviet theatre in Lithuania. Mažeikienė demonstrates how contemporary Lithuanian theatre artists have utilized historical popular forms, such as puppetry and mime, with the aim of revitalizing theatre and reexamining the relation to the audience. A different kind of popularization in the theatre is the issue of the article by Daria and Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen, exploring relations between science, theatre and the popular. Their contribution compares two recent examples of science theatre, the Swedish *Svarta hål* by Engelkes and Bjurman and Hotel Pro Forma's *Kosmos+*, and demonstrates their different approach to communicating science to the public.

Two articles examine participation in the theatre from very different angles. Ine Therese Berg investigates the performance of Rimini Protokoll's *Home Visit Europe* at Bergen International Festival in 2015, revealing the complexities of contemporary participation strategies. In a different approach to the question of participation, Gerður Halldóra Sigurðardóttir asks why people participate in amateur theatre, drawing on interviews with amateurs in Selfoss, Iceland, as well as her own experience. Lastly, Ott Karulin looks at the concept of the popular from a more economical perspective, defining 'popular' theatre with the use of Bourdieu's field theory in terms of economic capital. Karulin looks at data

from the Estonian theatre field 2010-2015 investigating inner- and outer-field success of specific case studies.

The 2016 Reykjavik conference on Theatre and the Popular as well as this issue reveal the variety of approaches in theatre and performance scholarship in the Nordic/Baltic region to the notion of the popular. The articles as well as the variety of conference paper show a lively engagement with a field of theatre studies that has often been neglected or deemed less worthy of academic research. It is our hope that this issue contributes to further investigation and critical examination of the fruitful relationship between theatre and the popular in the region and beyond.