

## ‘A Good Night Out’

### When Political Theatre Aims at Being Popular, Or How Norwegian Political Theatre in the 1970s Utilized Populist Ideals and Popular Culture in Their Performances

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#### **ABSTRACT**

Bertolt Brecht stated in *Schriften zum Theater: Über eine Nichtaristotelische Dramatik* (Writings on Theatre: On Anti-Aristotelian Drama) that a high quality didactic (and political) theatre should be an entertaining theatre. The Norwegian theatre company Hålogaland Teater used Brecht’s statement as their leading motive when creating their political performances together with the communities in Northern Norway. The Oslo-based theatre group, Tramteatret, on the other hand, synthesised their political messages with the revue format, and by such attempted to make a contemporaneous red revue inspired by Norwegian Workers’ Theatre (Tramgjengere) in the 1930s. Hålogaland Teater and Tramteatret termed themselves as both ‘popular’ and ‘political’, but what was the reasoning behind their aesthetic choices? In this article I will look closer at Hålogaland Teater’s folk comedy, *Det er her æ høre tel* (This is where I belong) from 1973, together with Tramteatret’s performance, *Deep Sea Thriller*, to compare how they utilized ideas of socialist populism, popular culture, and folk in their productions. When looking into the polemics around political aesthetics in the late 1960s and the 1970s, especially lead by the Frankfurter School, there is a distinct criticism of popular culture. How did the theatre group’s definitions of popular culture correspond with the Frankfurter School’s criticism?

#### **KEYWORDS**

Political Theatre; Popular Culture & Theatre; Adorno; Gramsci; Brecht; Dario Fo; Tramteatret; Hålogaland Teater.

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

The political movement of populism and left-wing political theatre might seem uneasy bedfellows today. However, in Norway, in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, this was a natural connection. In this article, I will shed some light upon the short-lived socialist-populist movement in Norway and its influence on political theatre. Furthermore, I will discuss how political theatre groups viewed and utilized concepts of popular and folk culture and popular theatre forms in their productions, and how these interpretations of popular and folk culture are connected, or not, to the socialist populist movement. I will focus on the Northern-Norwegian regional theatre, Hålogaland Teater (HT), and the independent theatre group, Tramteatret. Hålogaland Teater and Tramteatret both set out to make a popular and political theatre that could be the mouthpiece for political change for the communities that they served. However, their concepts of popular theatre and their ideas of what constituted a 'people's theatre' had different inspirations and aesthetic outcomes. While both of the groups political awakening was influenced by the populist movement, the two companies differed

greatly in artistic schooling, aesthetics and, to a certain degree, in the organisation of their theatre companies.

In this article I will look closer at Hålogaland Teater's folk comedy, *Det er her æ høre tel* (This is where I belong) from 1973, together with Tramteatret's performance, *Deep Sea Thriller* from 1977, to compare how they utilized ideas of socialist populism, popular culture, and folk culture in these productions.

## HÅLOGALAND TEATER

The consensus-driven theatre, Hålogaland Teater, was established in Tromsø in 1971. The actors, who mainly came from the two national theatre institutions in Oslo and Bergen, had sized upon the opportunity of running the new regional theatre, which the government had granted for the Northern region.<sup>1</sup> The young and politically motivated actors saw this opportunity of running Hålogaland Teater as a possibility to create a 'people's theatre', a theatre for the working- and agrarian- classes and not for the bourgeoisie. The theatre company was connected to various parties on the left: from the Norwegian communist party (Norges Kommunistiskeparti, NKP), the socialist party (Sosialistisk Folkeparti), and to the Maoist Party, Arbeidernes Kommunistiskeparti-marxist-leninister (AKP(m-l)). Hålogaland Teater was run collectively between the years 1971-1986.<sup>2</sup> However, despite the theatre group having a formal structure of consensus, there were always some group members who were more influential than others, and one such member was Klaus Hagerup. He was a part of the first generation of actors and playwrights who travelled up to Northern Norway in 1971, and stayed with the theatre until the late 1970s. Hagerup, who was both an actor and playwright for the group, was also in the repertory working-group, and through his role there, he managed to influence the rest of the collective in a major way. Hagerup was a member of AKP(m-l), and even though there were

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<sup>1</sup> Hålogaland Teater is a regional theatre institution, which is still running today. However, the theatre abandoned their consensus leadership model in 1986 due to internal strife. Since then, the theatre has gone over to a more traditional leadership model of having an employed theatre director.

<sup>2</sup> The company still runs today as an institutional theatre. However, it is now (since 1986) lead by an artistic director.

no formal structures of censorship within AKP(m-l), Hagerup was clearly influenced by their political dogma. This is most evident through Hagerup and Hålogaland Teater's choice of using a social realistic style of theatre as well as Brecht's later theatre theories.<sup>3</sup>

## **TRAMTEATRET**

Tramteatret was founded at a AKP(m-l) summer camp in 1973, and continued making protest songs and red revues as a part of the Student Theatre Society at the University of Oslo. The founding members were Liv Aakvik, Terje Nordby, and Arne Garvang. Garvang had started off his political theatre career in the EEC No-campaign in 1972 as one of the musicians in the cabaret *Et Syngespill mot EEC* (a Cabaret against the EEC).<sup>4</sup> The Oslo Student Society was also dominated by AKP(m-l), making Tramteatret a definite child of the Marxist-Leninist movement in Norway. However, these close ties between the party and the group members were reduced in 1976 when the members wished to form an independent theatre group. Liv Aakvik has, in an interview we had in September of 2015, explained how the local branch of the AKP(m-l) attempted to ban the theatre group members from establishing an independent theatre group with threats of exclusion from the party if they decided to go independent. She has also cited Carlos Wiggen as being one of the theatre groups 'midwives'. Wiggen was the conductor of the Red Choir in Oslo. In this capacity he attempted to reinstate and teach the methods used within the workers theatre movement before the Second World War. Tramteatret was inspired by his teachings in choosing red revues and epic forms of theatre, when creating their performances.<sup>5</sup> However, this form of aesthetics was not popular with the leadership of AKP(m-l), who preferred a more social realistic style of acting.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Klaus Hagerup, interview, Oslo, 8 November, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> The EEC stands for European Economic Community, today known as the EU.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Liv Aakvik, Oslo, 29 September, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> Vercoe 1973.

## **SOCIALIST POPULISM**

The connection between socialism and populism is rare as populism, as a political movement, tends more often to be connected to the right, and even to the far right. This was the case in the 1960s and 70s and even more, perhaps, today.<sup>7</sup> However, in 1966 the sociologist Ottar Brox was, according to Tor Bjørklund, the first to instigated populism in Norway. Ottar Brox's interpretation of the term *populism* derived from the Latin term 'populous', meaning 'people'. Brox used the term of 'populous' as a signifier for the opposite of 'the elites'. If we look to the equivalent of 'people' in the Norwegian language, it is the word 'folk'. And in the adjective 'folkelig' we can see the same opposition as in 'people vs. elites', since 'folkelig' connotes something that is un-snobbish – a culture or a way of living that derives from the 'people'.<sup>8</sup> However, due to Brox's definitions of 'populism' and 'the popular' being so closely related to concepts of 'folk culture', which cannot be wholly compared to 'popular culture', I will attempt to demonstrate both the similarities and differences between folk culture and popular culture in relation to political theatre and especially in connection with Hålogaland Teater's and Tramteatret's own interpretations of folk culture and popular culture.

## **HOW POPULISM IMPACTED NORWEGIAN POLITICS**

In 1966, when Brox wrote his greatly influential book: *Hva skjer i Nord-Norge? En studie i norsk utkantpolitikk* (What is happening in Northern-Norway? A study in Norwegian regional politics), the term *populism* was new in Norway and was not taken up by any other political party or movement. Ottar Brox was a part of the socialist party, Sosialistisk Folkeparti (SF, the Socialist Party), and had managed to turn the parties' regional politics from merely copying Arbeiderpartiet (AP, the Labour Party), which had an aim of creating economic growth and of mass industrialisation of the rural Norwegian districts, in order to lift these regions up to the same standards of wealth as the towns and cities of Norway. According to Brox this was conducted through an elitist and techno-

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<sup>7</sup> Selstad 1977, 170.

<sup>8</sup> Bjørklund 2004, 410.

cratic ruling. In addition, these political policies, in Brox's opinion, would lead to overproduction and the desolation of Northern Norway. In *Hva skjer i Nord-Norge?*, Brox proposed ways of countering AP's industrial policies through ideas of greater local autonomy, focusing on sustainability in production through maintaining traditional fishing and farming practices.<sup>9</sup> Brox was writing from a Northern-Norwegian context, a region that had, for decades, been seen as a "problem", an underdeveloped and poor region. In Morten A. Strøksnes' book (2006) with the same title as Brox's, Strøksnes describes the politics of southern Norway towards the Northern regions as a form of orientalism. In Norwegian literature, stemming from the mid nineteenth century, Northerners are described as: "more superstitious, spontaneous, venereal, irrational and less civilised and cultivated than people from other places in the country."<sup>10</sup> According to Strøksnes, it is these cultural attitudes towards Northerners which underlied the Labour Party's elitist and technocratic political policies in the three most northern counties in Norway. The AP's main aim was to eradicate what they saw as the highly primitive living conditions of the Northern-Norwegians, a population which for the most part was mainly living off a combination of seasonal fishing and farming, and who lived in small communities along the coast. AP's answer to this "problem" was to make a plan of urbanisation and industrialisation. This plan was known as the *Landsdelsplan for Nord-Norge*, (Regional Plan for Northern Norway), and in it, it was clearly stated that in order to modernise the region, the government aimed at moving the population into larger centres, which would contain no less than 1000 inhabitants. AP wished to dismantle the small-scale farming and fishing, replacing it by large collective farms, and fishing done by large trawlers, in addition to supporting the setup of industry, mining, and shipping companies in order to maximise income and increase the GNP of the inhabitants of Northern Norway.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Strøksnes 2016, 9.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Brox 1966, 10.

Arbeiderpartiet, which had governed Norway since 1935, (excluding the years of Nazi occupation, 1940-45), had, in their eagerness to build a social democratic state in the spirit of Keynes, adopted a class-collaborative line, bringing their policies more in line with a centre-right political stance, both in their cultural policies and, as before mentioned, in their district and industrial policies. The Norwegian historian, Jens Seip, coined the post-war politics of AP as being “a one-party state”. Even though there was a formal opposition to the Labour Party, Seip pointed out that AP had “absorbed all political power” and thus made it difficult for the opposition to form an alternative governmental constellation.<sup>12</sup> However, by the late 1960s, this social democratic elitism gained a left-wing oppositional resistance, especially among students. While the resistance was not only confined to the growing student population, popular resistance movements grew out of a variety of political, counter cultural, and grassroots organisations. For example, the anti-hierarchical student movement, various anarchist groups, ecological, and environmental organisations, the youth wings in all but Høyre (the Conservative Party), to the ‘mother’ parties, such as Senterpartiet (the Farmer’s Party), the Kristelig Folkeparti (Christian Democrats), and Sosialistisk Folkeparti, and lastly various grassroots and local organisations, such as farmer’s interest groups and their youth wing, Bondeungdomslaget and Noregs Ungdomslag, and the language-movement Noregs Mållag, which under other circumstances would not naturally have collaborated. However, they found one common cause that could join them all: the fight against Norwegian membership of the European Economic Community (EEC).<sup>13</sup> The arguments that the dispersed parties and organisations could agree upon rallied around local autonomy and democracy, tapping into the fight for national independence dating as far back as to the creation of the Norwegian constitution in 1814, and the break with the Swedish union in 1905.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Seip 2001, 260. “Det fins en annen type (ettpartistat) hvor ett parti har oppsugd all politisk makt” [...] “Hvor det riktignok er en opposisjon, men hvor dens utsikter til å bli regjeringsdyktig er meget små.”

<sup>13</sup> Bjørklund & De Europeiske 1982, 110.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 118.

This joint movement crossing party lines, named *Folkeaksjonen mot EEC* (the peoples action against the EEC), was founded in 1970, and was especially active in the run-up to the EEC referendum in 1972.<sup>15</sup>

However, the movement quickly died out and dispersed after the referendum, despite a victorious result. According to Tor Selstad in his article "Populismens vekst og fall" (1977) (The growth and fall of Populism), there was little to unify such a dispersed political movement, especially since the organisers of the populist movement kept to more anarchistic organisational structures, with no attempts at creating a central committee or a political party that could front populism as a political alternative. This resulted in a reinstatement of the left-right axis in Norwegian politics after the EEC-referendum. However, even though the populist movement died out, the renewed political interest and national and regional sentiment, which had developed from the joint fight against the EEC, was not totally lost. There were several political parties and interest organisations who profited from this political engagement amongst the younger generations.<sup>16</sup>

### **AKP(M-L) NATIONALISM AND FOLK-CULTURE**

One of these party projects was the Maoist party AKP(m-l). The party had started off by criticising both *Folkeaksjonen mot EEC* and the populist-movement for their nationalism, accusing them of running errands for the capitalist classes by invoking the making of the Norwegian constitution in 1814, and the dissolution of the union with Sweden in 1905 as symbols of local autonomy and democracy. The Maoists would not use these symbols of liberation, due to the mentioned movements having been, at the time, led by the land-owning and capitalist classes in Norway. However, since the populists, together with the

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<sup>15</sup> Norgeshistorie.no, Dag Axel Kristoffersen, «Norges nei til EF i 1972». Retrieved 23 May, 2017 from <http://www.norgeshistorie.no/oljealder-og-overflod/artikler/1945-norges-nei-til-ef-i-1972.html>. The Norwegian Labour Party, which was in government, was surprised by the result of the referendum. There was a slight majority (53,5) against joining the EEC. The Labour Party had initiated negotiations for joining the EEC, and had not expected such opposition to their (technocratic) ruling.

<sup>16</sup> Selstad 1977, 170.

cross-party network of *Folkeaksjonen mot EEC*, had such success with the former tactics, the Maoist party adopted their nationalist strategy and, according to Lars Kjetil Køber, took it even further. In many ways, it seems like AKP(m-l) carried on the ideals of the socialist populist movement when it died out after the 1972 referendum. 'The people', similar to the populist movement's definition, were the farmers and fishermen of the rural districts of Norway.<sup>17</sup> AKP(m-l) wanted to mobilise the people of the districts together with the workers of the cities and towns for the forthcoming revolution. The only trait that AKP(m-l) had not adopted from the socialist populist movement was their anarchistic form of organisation. AKP(m-l) was a hierarchical party, using democratic centralism as their organisational form. As Køber points out, no dissent or divergence from the party's official politics would be tolerated by the party leadership.<sup>18</sup>

### **THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF THE MAOIST-MOVEMENT**

Interestingly, a similar move occurred in literature, music, and theatre, which AKP(m-l) supported, as had happened in their political strategy – that is to say, a move from an international to an increasingly national focus. This national focus on culture that AKP(m-l) promoted and supported, predominantly meant making art and culture synonymous with folk culture: traditional music, folk-song, literature, and theatre with a connection to rural communities, and promoting the use of local dialects as a base for the language on stage. This traditional and rural connection in the arts and culture was to act as a bulwark against the more urban forms of culture, which AKP(m-l) deemed as imperialist and capitalist, such as pop and rock music.<sup>19</sup> AKP(m-l)'s harsh resistance towards popular music, for instance, caused problems for Tramteatret, who were predominantly inspired by, and wished to perform different types of popular music, such as rock, blues, and reggae in their red revues.<sup>20</sup> In contrast,

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<sup>17</sup> Mork 1998, 64.

<sup>18</sup> Køber 2002, 186.

<sup>19</sup> Mork 1998.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Terje Nordby, Oslo, 29 April 2016.

Hålogaland Teater's focus on folk culture and social realist theatre was highly praised by the party.

This is evident from the cultural journal *Profil*, which was taken over and edited by AKP(m-l) between 1970 and 1980. The journal focused especially on Nationaltheatrets Oppsøkende Teater (The National Theatre's Outreach Group) and on Hålogaland Teater. Jahn Thon describes how the journal followed the two companies' productions by "summing them up, interviewing the playwrights and the actors and discussing theoretical questions related to the productions."<sup>21</sup> Hålogaland Teater's production, *Det er her æ høre tel*, was especially followed and commented on. One of the debates around this production revolved around the use of social realistic aesthetics in the performance and the traditional portrayal of women's roles. The author and conductor, Carlos Wiggen, wrote a critique of Hålogaland Teater's performance for the journal, where he attacked the theatre company's Brecht-interpretation, and especially the lack of *Verfremdung* in the performance.<sup>22</sup> One of the editors of the journal, Eli Vercoe, defended Hålogaland Teater's reactionary portrayal of women and social realistic aesthetics by accusing Carlos Wiggen of being a bourgeois city-dweller (from Oslo) with no knowledge of the reality and the cultural tastes of the (Northern-Norwegian) people portrayed in the performance. On the issue of the lack of *Verfremdung*, Vercoe defended Hålogaland Teater and Klaus Hagerup's choice of utilizing the later theories of Brecht (dialectic theatre). In contrast, Wiggen was shot down in flames for bringing up the pre-war Brecht-Lukács-debate on Marxist and working-class aesthetics. He was made to feel that he was behind the times for adhering to Brecht's anti-Aristotelian theories on the epic theatre, for the reason that Brecht had moved on since then, and in his later performances such as *Die Gewehre der Frau Carrar* (*Señora Carrar's Rifles*, 1937) he had gone over to a social realistic style of theatre. In addition, in Verco's opinion, social realism was to be preferred since it was more 'folkelig'

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<sup>21</sup> Thon 1995, 186.

<sup>22</sup> Wiggen 1973, 49.

(popular in the sense of non-elitist).<sup>23</sup> This debate shows how the populist movement's ideals had been turned reactionary by the AKP(m-l).

The debate around Hålogaland Teater's performance, *Det er her æ høre tel* in *Profil*, clearly shows AKP(m-l)'s aversion towards experimental and urban forms of culture.

Jahn Thon, in his analysis of the "Maoist-period" of the journal, describes how AKP(m-l)'s cultural tastes can be seen as being nostalgic and conservative.<sup>24</sup> However, by hiding behind Brecht's later theatre theories, such as Verco does, AKP(m-l) could uphold that their preferred aesthetic, social realism, was more modern than the experimental and avant-garde forms of theatre, such as Brecht's epic theatre, together with their arguments that traditional and folk-culture was more liked by 'the people' of the districts, and that the urban popular culture were imperialist. This could be one of the explanations for the lack of mention and praise of Tramteatret by AKP(m-l) and *Profil*. Despite the initial support for the theatre group, Tramteatret endorsed more urban forms of popular culture in their performances and, in addition, one of their early mentors was Carlos Wigen, whose preference for epic theatre was not in line with AKP(m-l)'s cultural politics.<sup>25</sup>

In the following, I will look closer at some definitions of popular culture, and how they correspond with the aesthetic choices in Hålogaland Teater's folk comedy *Det er her æ høre tel* from 1973, together with Tramteatret's performance *Deep Sea Thriller* from 1977.

## **DEFINITIONS: POPULAR CULTURE VS. POLITICAL THEATRE**

Within the field of political theatre there has been a tradition of theatre practitioners and theoreticians endorsing popular culture and popular theatre forms, such as from Commedia dell' arte, pantomime, street and market theatre, to twentieth century cabarets and revues. Inspired by these traditions were theatre directors such as Meyerhold, Piscator, Bertolt Brecht, and Joan Littlewood.

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<sup>23</sup> Vercoe 1973, 50.

<sup>24</sup> Thon 1995, 186.

<sup>25</sup> A. Berg 1977, 46.

More contemporary theatre makers who also have endorsed popular culture are Dario Fo and John McGrath, and in Norway: Hålogaland Teater and Tramteatret.

However, the definitions of popular culture and, within this wider term, the definition of popular theatre are not straightforward. For what makes theatre popular? Is the definition purely numerical, or is there a quality judgement embedded in the term 'popular'? Is popular theatre a style of theatre? Are there certain aspects within popular culture that are more applicable, lending themselves more easily to political theatre than others? Holt N. Parker writes in his article, "Towards a definition of popular culture" (2011), of the troubles he has had in finding an accurate definition of popular culture.<sup>26</sup> Parker has, by discussing several terms and comparing them, especially the terminology found in John Storey's book, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* (2009), come up with some useful pointers to what popular culture is and what it is not, and where the terminology stems from. I will use three definitions from Parker's article which are closely related to political theatre as a framework for discussing how Hålogaland Teater and Tramteatret wanted to identify themselves with popular culture, or utilize strategies from popular culture in their performances.

### **POPULAR CULTURE IS THE CULTURE THAT 'ORIGINATES FROM THE PEOPLE'**

The definition of popular culture, which lies closest to populism, and especially Brox's brand of socialist populism, is popular culture seen as originating from 'the people'.<sup>27</sup> The 'people', in this definition, are seen in Marxist terms as a 'resisting people'. The supporters of this definition of popular culture turn to 'folk-culture' for inspiration, seeing the production of arts and crafts, traditional music, theatre, and dance as the ideal, precluding more urban and industrial forms of culture. What is defined as *popular* is not seen in terms of how many people consume a cultural product, but rather by *who* produces and consumes it. In this definition, 'the popular' is connected to 'the people' in the same way as

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<sup>26</sup> Thon 1995, 186.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 153.

Ottar Brox defined populism – ‘the people’ are in opposition to ‘the elites’. Therefore, a cultural product is popular if it is produced and consumed by the non-elites, and seen to be a product or an event that ‘resists’ the elites.<sup>28</sup>

This definition clearly fits Hålogaland Teater’s (HT) audience approach. In an article from 1977 titled “Om arbeidet på Hålogaland Teater” (About the work at Hålogaland Teater), Klaus Hagerup writes about their aims with their work and for whom they were making theatre: “We are talking about a resisting people, a resistance in the meaning of popular resistance.”<sup>29</sup> Hålogaland Teater defined the idea of ‘the people’, in line with the populist writings of Ottar Brox, as being the oppressed people of Northern Norway.

They would fulfil their ideals of making such a theatre by portraying the “most burning conflicts in Northern-Norway at the time,” in addition to speaking ‘Northern-Norwegian’ (dialects) on stage.<sup>30</sup> Hålogaland Teater’s language practice thus contrasted the theatre institutions of the south, which used the standard east Norwegian dialect on stage. In this way, the Hålogaland Teater picked up the populist movement and AKP(m-l)’s district politics as their ideal for making a ‘peoples theatre’.

### **HÅLOGALAND TEATER – NOT ‘OF THE PEOPLE’, BUT ‘FOR THE PEOPLE’**

Holt N. Parker points out that the definition of popular culture seen as ‘originating from the people’ becomes problematic when the idea of ‘the popular’ and ‘the people’ are defined by someone else than ‘the people’.<sup>31</sup> This was precisely the case in relation to Hålogaland Teater: all the actors, except one, were born and had grown up in southern Norway, mainly around the Oslo-area. Only Nils Utsi came from Northern Norway, growing up in the county of Finnmark. All of the actors had been educated at Teaterskolen, the national theatre school in

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<sup>28</sup> Parker 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Hålogaland Teater 1977, 4. Original quote: “Vi snakker om et kjempende folk og en kjempende betydning av *folkelig*.”

<sup>30</sup> Hålogaland Teater 2000. Original quotation: “Vi ville lage et folketeater for Nord-Norge, hvor vi skulle ta for oss de mest brennende konfliktene i den nordnorske samtiden” [...] “Man ville være nær samfunnets puls, ta opp problemstillinger som folk var opptatt av og tale folkets språk.”

<sup>31</sup> Parker 2011, 153-54.

Oslo. And despite expressing a strong will to bridge the gap between the stage and stalls by using Northern-Norwegian dialects on stage,<sup>32</sup> there is no way of getting around the fact that the actors who founded Hålogaland Teater had been handed the task by the Ministry of Culture, through the artistic director of Riksteatret (the National Touring Theatre) Erling Hjelmtveit.<sup>33</sup> This created a lot of conflicts in the beginning, especially since cultural activists from Northern Norway had been working to establish a professional theatre of their own since 1946 without getting any funding.<sup>34</sup> A central figure in this work was the socialist and cultural activist Lars Berg from Tromsø. His aim was to found a professional theatre in Tromsø where the actors would speak in Northern-Norwegian dialects. Berg worked tirelessly on this until his death. In 1967, only two years before his death, he wrote the following opinions of how the people of Northern Norway have been neglected and oppressed:

Northern Norway is an underdeveloped region and should preferably remain as such. Therefore, all our youth have to leave, and the ones we need the most, do not come back. In relation to theatre, we are given productions from the south – and it is with the performances, as with trade, we get ready-made products from Oslo, and what could we do but receive the little we were given, and gratefully keep quiet.<sup>35</sup>

Lars Berg did not see his vision come true within his lifetime, and when Tromsø and the three Northern-Norwegian regions finally got their theatre, it ended up being run by southerners who were attempting to speak in a Northern-Norwegian dialect. In this respect, it is clear that the first generation of actors at Hålogaland Teater had adopted AKP(m-l)'s ideals more than the populists approach, when wanting to create a 'people's theatre', *'for the people'* rather than *'of the people'* of Northern Norway. However, the theatre managed to

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<sup>32</sup> Torrissen 2017.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Klaus Hagerup, Oslo, 8 November 2015.

<sup>34</sup> Eilertsen & Røe 2005, 45.

<sup>35</sup> Original quotation: "Nord-Norge var den underutvikla laandsdelen og skulle helst være det. Ungdommen vår måtte ut, og den vi trong mest, kom ikkje igjen. Når det gjalt teater måtte vi få framsynigane sørfra. Det var med dem som med handelen, vi fekk feridgvarer frå Oslo, vi hadde vel bare å ta imot, og så tie stille."

change their approach to their audiences by 1973 when they staged the folk-comedy, *Det e her æ høre tel*.

### HÅLOGALAND TEATER'S DET E HER Æ HØRE TEL

During the next couple of years, from 1971 to 1973, Hålogaland Teater struggled to find their feet and their audiences. Their first performance, Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*, received critical acclaim. However, the audience was truly absent from the stalls. Only sixteen people, including both paying and invited guests, turned up for the premiere.<sup>36</sup> *Adressavisen* describes the situation on 29 October 1971: "It is claimed that the reason behind the audience failure is partially due to the fact that many people are scared away by the word opera (!) But – is not *The Three Penny Opera* more known than that? Perhaps not – Brecht is not popular reading, and will probably not become such either."<sup>37</sup> One could deduce from this that the audiences communicated what they felt about being 'educated' by not attending the theatre. Hålogaland Teater had forgotten to research the theatrical tastes of 'the people' they wanted to reach out to.

After the low audience attendance at *The Three Penny Opera*, Hålogaland Teater searched for new material to make a performance that would be more in tune with 'the people' of Northern Norway. They searched for signs of 'a resisting people' to devise a play from. The perfect story appeared in the form of a news bulletin reporting that the villagers of Senjahopen had started a tax-strike. The villagers were attempting to pressure their local councillors to keep their promise of building a road that would connect the road-less coastal village to the mainland in order to secure the villagers access to food, medical supplies, hospitals and higher education, also in the winter when the sea was too stormy

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<sup>36</sup> Jens Harald Eilertsen, "1970-tallet: En rødglødende stjerne", Retrived from <http://www.ht.tr.no/index.php/article/articleview/3287/1/565>, d.n, uploaded 27 October, 2016

<sup>37</sup> Unknown theatre critic, "Tolvskillingsopera på nord-norsk turné – Ros til ensemblet-ris til (det fraværende) publikum" *Adressavisen*, 29th of October, 1971, 5 " Original quote: "Det påstås at publikumssvikten delvis kan skyldes at mange skremmes av ordet opera (!) Men – er ikke "Tolvskillingsoperaen" bedre kjent enn som så? Kanskje ikke – Brecht er ikke folkelesning, og vil vel ikke bli det."

for travel. The local council had promised such an infrastructure. However, due to the Government's *Regional Plan for Northern Norway*, the road-construction had been wilfully delayed. The village of Senjahopen did not consist of the mandatory 1000 inhabitants, which the *Regional Plan* cited as the minimum, so despite local politicians seeing the need for such a road the villagers were striking for, the politicians hands were tied due to governmental orders.<sup>38</sup>

Hålogaland Teater had now found their story and their 'resisting people', so the company travelled out to interview the inhabitants in Senjahopen. When the company proceeded to choose the format in which to present the story in, they could have drawn inspiration from Nationaltheatrets Oppsøkende Teater performances *Svartkatten* (The Sacking ) in 1971, and *Pendlerne* (The Commuters) in 1972, and create a red revue.<sup>39</sup> However, the actors and playwright at Hålogaland Teater wanted to avoid the disjointed and direct agitational propagandistic style of red revues, instead they wanted their performance to have more of an Aristotelian narrative. The company had not left Brecht totally out of the picture; their main inspiration when devising new plays was still Brecht. However, it was the later Brecht and his post-war theories of a *dialectic theatre*, together with Rudolf Penka's method of fusing Brecht and Stanislavsky, that the ensemble utilized.<sup>40</sup> Klaus Hagerup and several of the other actors at Hålogaland Teater had first encountered Penka at a Nordic theatre seminar in Stockholm in 1967, called the Vasa seminar (after the Finnish city where it was first held). At this seminar, Penka, who was a theatre pedagogue at the Ernst Busch Theatre School in East Berlin (then a part of the GDR), had demonstrated his synthesis of Stanislavsky and Brecht through showing a scene from *Herr Puntila und sein Knecht Matti* (Mr Puntila and His Man Matti.) In this scene, performed several times, Penka demonstrated how one could interpret a scene in order to

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<sup>38</sup> Ketil Zachariassen, "Rethinking the Creation of North Norway as a Region." *Acta Borealia* 25, no. 2, 2008: 130-131

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Janken Varden, Copenhagen, 7 December, 2015. Varden was the the artistic dierctor of the outreach group from 1969-1973.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Klaus Hagerup, Oslo, 8 November, 2015.

accentuate the class conflict by the use of *social gestus*.<sup>41</sup> This demonstration left a lasting impression on the actors who later were to form Hålogaland Teater. Penka was invited to work with Hålogaland Teater and the Norwegian Theatre Academy several times during the 1970s.<sup>42</sup> It seems very likely that *Mr Puntila and His Man Matti* was the model for Hålogaland Teater's *Det e her æ høre tel* (1973).

Brecht's play can be characterized in German as a *Volksstück*, a 'play for the people', a term which is not easily translatable into English. However, a Scandinavia derivative of *Volksstück* is *folkekomedien*, 'comedy for the people/folk-comedy'.<sup>43</sup> *Folkekomedien*, in difference to other comic theatre forms such as revue, cabaret and vaudeville, is a narrative based play with a singular plot, which unfolds during the performance.<sup>44</sup> In difference to the 'refined' *salongkomedie* set in the homes of the bourgeoisie, *folkekomedien* tends to be placed in rural settings, revolving around characters from the working and lower classes. In addition, *folkekomedien* tends to contain more burlesque types of humour with the use of slapstick and physical gags. By using the format of *folkekomedien* Hålogaland Teater was using a form of popular theatre well known to their audiences, and could therefore safely say that their theatre was a 'people's theatre', also in relation to the increase of people attending the theatre. The performance, *Det e her æ høre tel*, was shown 56 times and seen in total by 21.000 people.<sup>45</sup> At the same time, Hålogaland Teater's ideological analysis was embedded in the form of theatre they had chosen by using the Penka-method together with Brecht's interpretation of the *Volkstück* when constructing the play. Interestingly, Brecht has criticised his own work for not being burlesque enough, a criticism that can also be pointed to Hålogaland Teater's production of *Det e her æ høre tel*.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> L. Berg 1967, 203.

<sup>42</sup> Solgård 1982, 59.

<sup>43</sup> Hagerup 2006, 58.

<sup>44</sup> Hagnell 1980, 55.

<sup>45</sup> Indahl & Hall-Hofsø 1976, 53.

<sup>46</sup> Fo 1972, 292.

*Det e her æ høre tel* is mostly performed in a socialist realist vein and less in a comic or burlesque way – where the villagers of the fishing community are portrayed as the heroes, while the outsiders, the two characters representing bureaucrats and experts from southern Norway, are the villains of the play. The former characters were performed in a realistic mode in contrast to the latter characters, who were performed in a more burlesque and theatrical style. The play tells the story of how the fishing community went on a tax-strike. The play has a happy ending, where the villagers' fight ultimately grants them the long sought-after road to the mainland. The conflicts of the play are on two levels, both within the community: the difficulties of persuading all the members of the community to join the strike, and on an outer level: the villager's resistance to the experts from the south.<sup>47</sup>

As mentioned before, *Det e her æ høre tel* was criticised by Carlos Wiggen for its lack of dramatic suspension and for the sentimental portrayal of the villagers. In addition to the choice of music, which did not contrast this romanticised portrayal of the fishing community with the use of compositions for accordion and guitar, inspired by folk music, there is little to be seen of Brecht's *Verfremdung*. The exception is the calypso inspired tune, which the two Southern bureaucrats sing, where the lyrics are based on the text of the *Regional Plan for Northern-Norway*.<sup>48</sup> This tune is performed in a very comic way, only accompanied by the bureaucrats themselves beating on rhythm sticks.<sup>49</sup>

As mentioned before, Klaus Hagerup was very influential in the theatre company, through his capacity of being the playwright. In an interview I had with Hagerup in Oslo on 8 November 2015, he told me that shortly before writing *Det e her æ høre tel*, he had been studying Mao's text "On Contradiction", a text which apparently Brecht himself had seen as central and had used in his theories relating to 'dialectic theatre'. Hagerup had utilized both Mao and Brecht's interpretation of dialectics when writing the play – seeing the central

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<sup>47</sup> Høyer 1983, 92.

<sup>48</sup> Wiggen 1973, 49.

<sup>49</sup> Hålogaland Teater in Einarsson 1974.

conflicts in the play as a form of “simple (Maoist) dialectics”. In hindsight, Hagerup has himself criticised his play and the conflicts within it for being “to shallow.” He thought that the characters and their conflicts were not psychologically in-depth enough. However, at the time, and for the target audience, Hagerup thought that the play worked well.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, the performance, *Det e her æ høre tel* can be described more in the vein of Brecht’s “un-burlesque” *Volkstück* or a community play, and less of a (folk) comedy, in the sense that the performance had given a community a voice, but included long descriptive passages that were not particular funny, nor meant to be so . Its popularity could be ascribed to the fact that the community of Senjahopen, and many similar communities in Northern Norway, felt that Hålogaland Teater took them seriously and mirrored their struggles on stage.<sup>51</sup>

### **POPULAR CULTURE SEEN AS A BRICOLAGE**

Returning to Parkers definitions of the popular, his next definition: “popular culture seen as a bricolage” is related to the former description of seeing popular culture as a ‘culture of resistance’. Whereas the former definition could be said to view popular culture and ‘the people’ in romantic terms, the latter definition looks at the actual makeup of popular culture. This definition looks at how cultural elements are used and recycled within popular culture in the way of bricolage: whereby elements of high culture and/or dominant culture are refashioned by the ‘popular audiences’ to express their way of life, or a community’s hopes and desires.<sup>52</sup> Popular culture seen as a bricolage is mainly accredited to Antonio Gramsci. He sees the capability of ‘collective’ adaptation and refashioning of cultural expressions as the basis for creating an alternative cultural

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<sup>50</sup> Interview with Klaus Hagerup, Oslo, on the 8<sup>th</sup> of November, 2015

<sup>51</sup> Haugen 1985, 9.

<sup>52</sup> Indahl & Hall-Hofsø 1976, 53. Parker problematizes Marx and the Marxists’ tendencies to romanticise ‘folk-culture’, seeing it as synonymous with a pre-modern culture, a culture untarnished by capitalism. He writes: “This romantic concept of “the people” is of course, far from any historical reality: folk products have never been created in isolation from the centres of urban culture nor from elite culture. That was true for Hesiod as for Theocritus, for Vergil as for the English ballads.”

hegemony. In Gramsci's theories, the stress is laid on the receiver, the audience, and how they translate and adapt the cultural expressions. Even though Gramsci has not made a theory that looks at popular culture specifically, his theory of *hegemony* looks at how the ruling elites reinforce their power and world view through culture and culture-producing institutions. Gramsci, therefore, considers culture a strong vehicle for developing ideas and identities, looking to how subaltern groups have formed their own communities with their own culture of resistance through a bricolage of cultural expressions, both containing elements of high and low culture. The Gramscian theory of *hegemony* and of the *organic intellectuals* has, since the 1970s, been used especially within the field of cultural studies, where the focus is shifted from the cultural producer to the cultural receiver. Cultural theoreticians look for the ways that the powerless receive the dominant culture.

### **TRAMTEATRET – AND 'THE PEOPLE'**

Tramteatret identified with the 'people' they played for, the members were all from working-class backgrounds, and in their revues and their TV-series they always sided with the working class and the oppressed youth, while their biting sarcasm and criticism was directed towards the elites and the powerful in society.<sup>53</sup> In their radio and TV-productions for young people, the aesthetics could be seen as nonsensical and playful, though their politics and critique of capitalism lay as an undercurrent in the work. Yet, this was done without any form of didactics. Terje Norbye describes Tramteatret and their members as having a non-dogmatic inclination: "we never thought: lets make political theatre in a correct way, so as to influence people. It was a mix of wanting to make political theatre, together with the aim of reaching out to our audiences, while having fun!"<sup>54</sup> The difference between Hålogaland Teater and Tramteatret is clearly in their disposition and their status in relation to their audiences. While the actors

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<sup>53</sup> Walliss & Newport 2014, 73.

<sup>54</sup> Interview with Terje Nordby, Oslo, 29 April 2016, Original quote: "vi tenkte aldri: nå skal vi lage politisk teater for å gjøre det riktigst mulig for å kunne påvirke folk. Det var en blanding av at vi ville lage politisk teater og vi ville nå ut til folk, og ikke minst ville ha det gøy!"

of Hålogaland Teater were the strangers from the south that had to familiarize themselves with the language and the culture of their audiences, Tramteatret had an approach to making theatre that is more similar to a rock band, where the members create the performances and the music that they like, and hope that the audience will agree with. Tramteatret did not see theatre as a dogmatic tool, but rather as a playground where they could express their own opinions on politics together with performing the humour and the music they liked.

### **TRAMTEATRET'S ATTEMPT AT SUBVERTING POPULAR CULTURE**

The members of Tramteatret were of a younger generation than the actors at Hålogaland Teater. It may seem like the older generation saw the importance of connecting with their audiences through a more nostalgic and culturally conservative aesthetics through their use of the folk-comedy genre as their primary influence. In contrast, the members of Tramteatret were more inspired by contemporary and urban cultural expressions, and products of 'the culture industry', they wanted to make theatre utilizing the music and the films they liked. Their choice of name for the theatre group had historical, and perhaps nostalgic overtones, since they adopted the name Tram(Teatret), which was the name of the agit-prop amateur players of the union movement and the Labour Party's youth organisation in Norway in the 1930s.<sup>55</sup> However, the members of Tramteatret have stated that there was less of a sense of nostalgia over their name choice, and more of a tribute to these former agit-prop players.<sup>56</sup> Tramteatret did not see themselves as re-enactors of an old tradition, but rather as a group adapting and building upon an older theatre form, by seeking inspiration for making their political revues, which dealt solely with contemporary issues. This is evident in their choice of topic matter for their debut performance as an independent theatre group, *Deep Sea Thriller*, a political revue about the effects of drilling for oil in the North Sea.<sup>57</sup> The title of the revue was taken from the oil platform Deep Sea Driller, which was the first platform within Norwegian territory to be

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<sup>55</sup> Lohne 1977, 35.

<sup>56</sup> Tramteatret 1978, 19.

<sup>57</sup> *Deep Sea Thriller* premiered on 27 April 1977.

involved in a serious accident.<sup>58</sup> It was not only the theme of the revue that was topical, but also their references to contemporaneous popular culture. For example, the poster of the performance, which was painted by Billy Johansson, bears a close resemblance to the poster of the Hollywood film, *The Towering Inferno* (1974). Both posters show buildings engulfed in flames and have an apocalyptic feel to them. Even though apocalyptic fiction is most often seen as having Christian connotations, in the instance of *Deep Sea Thriller*, the apocalyptic is more in line with the secular, which John Walliss refers to in his essay, "Apocalypse at the Millennium," as a form [...] of cautionary tale of what could happen in the future."<sup>59</sup> *Deep Sea Thriller* definitely can be interpreted as 'a cautionary tale' of what could happen with the Norwegian oil industry if continuing in the way it had by the time the performance was staged in 1977. In the matter of preserving nature and the fishing stock in the North Sea – Tramteatret was in line with populist politics. However, their aesthetic choices were not of folk culture and social realism: as mentioned they had more of an appetite for urban forms of popular culture and theatre. Tramteatret was highly inspired by the farce and comedy of Monty Python, whose humour can be described as "impatient with the old formal rules", with their characters portrayed in a surrealistic and absurd way. The absurd comedy of Monty Python is a combination of language driven non-sense together with physical gags and unexpected juxtapositions. This unexpected and surreal type of humour acts in similar ways to the estrangement techniques of both Brecht and Dario Fo, one laughs at the obvious and everyday made surreal.<sup>60</sup> Tramteatret used this type of surreal juxtaposing in both their revues and in their radio- and TV-shows. Sometimes just as silly nonsense, but mostly as a way of making a political satirical point, such as when the playwright Terje Nordby chose to make an allegorical sketch for *Deep Sea Thriller* using the Norse gods to represent the different interested parties within the oil industry in Norway. Tramteatret also used other popular

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<sup>58</sup> Vinnem 2011.

<sup>59</sup> Hebdige 2012, 33.

<sup>60</sup> Free 2013, 82.

cultural references in *Deep Sea Thriller*, such as detective-series, evening news programmes on TV, and the popular music quiz-show: *Kontrapunkt*.<sup>61</sup> What all the references have in common is the framework of popular and common cultural references either from older folklore or from programmes aired on the Norwegian State Television (Norsk Rikskringkasting; NRK). Despite using figures from Norse mythology, which can be seen as folkloric – the way these figures were portrayed, in a cabaret-like and slapstick style – does not connote sentimentality or social realism. As is common for revues, there was not one single plot, but many sketches, which were all connected to a criticism of the different aspects of Norwegian oil exploration. However, as mentioned before, one through line in the revue was the use of TV-references, especially TV-Programmes aired on Norwegian State Television, which was the only TV channel in Norway up until the late 1980s. When looking at Tramteatret's use of the NRK-programmes in *Deep Sea Thriller*, there are two aspects that seem clear. Firstly, that these references form a common ground between the theatre group and the audience that would make the audience feel at home with the performance. A typical trait of revues is that the sketches start from a common understanding to then present a twist, or a surprise, which gives a new angle to the commonplace. This twist in *Deep Sea Thriller* can be seen as the facts and information about the oil industry and the Norwegian Government's (The Labour Party) and their handling of the oil exploration, which to most people was little known, the linking of the well-known and the unknown, could act as a bridge, and bring the audience in sympathy with Tramteatret's controversial message. Tramteatret had been researching the topic of Norwegian oil exploration for nearly two years before the premiere of *Deep Sea Thriller*. The group had been in contact with environmental groups as well as oil workers, and they had seen the critical documentary film *Oljeeventyret* (The Oil Adventure) by Wam & Vennerød, which NRK refused to broadcast.<sup>62</sup> Secondly, the way Tramteatret juxtaposed their song lyrics with references taken from the State TV-channel,

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<sup>61</sup> Tramteatret 1977, 9.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Liv Aakvik, Oslo, 29 September, 2015

like in the sketch *Ingenting* (Nothing), it is clear that Tramteatret is critiquing NRK. In *Ingenting*, the group sings a song about the lack of information that had been broadcast on the effects of oil exploration. This song is juxtaposed with an actor playing a news anchor from the evening news programme on the State channel speaking nonsense. This combination aimed to infer that NRK omitted important information from their news, which, in effect, since they were the only TV-channel, meant censoring the news.<sup>63</sup>

The mix of references between the fictional-historical and the real together with a vaudeville style of acting was not a staple comedy-diet in Norway, and this made Tramteatret stand out.<sup>64</sup>

Tramteatret's approach to popular culture is clearly one of a bricolage, where they mix both older cultural references, such as the workers agit-prop theatre, together with contemporary cultural expressions, the music genres of rock and reggae. In addition, they mix folklore with references taken from mass produced products of the 'cultural industry', such as Hollywood films and TV-series. This approach to making political theatre clearly worked, and made Tramteatret very popular. However, this popularity came with a cost. In the next definition of popular culture, I will address the Frankfurter School's Marxist critique of popular culture and the 'culture industry'.

## **HORKHEIMER AND ADORNO'S CRITIQUE OF POPULAR CULTURE**

Key members of the Frankfurt School, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno are known for their Marxist critique of popular culture. In their opinion, popular culture is synonymous with 'mass-culture' in the sense of commercialised and commoditized 'culture industry'. Horkheimer and Adorno argued that mass-produced culture – whether popular or not – was a threat to class-consciousness and the communist revolution. Their theories and antagonisms towards the working classes ability of free thought were built on the analysis of the mass produced culture and propaganda developed under the Nazi-regime in Ger-

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<sup>63</sup> hobbyhumoristen 2016.

<sup>64</sup> Leinslie 2013.

many and within the Northern American culture industry of the cold war era.<sup>65</sup> Adorno criticised the mass produced and popular culture's bias towards choosing entertainment and comedy over tragedy, and for the content of the cultural artefacts which tended to portray reality as a 'prearranged harmony', and by this eliminating all negative elements and all possibilities for critical thought.<sup>66</sup> Adorno and Horkheimer focus on analysing the contents and dissemination of the popular novel, TV-programmes, and popular music, all forms of culture which are mass-produced and (if popular) massively consumed.<sup>67</sup> In Adorno and Horkheimer's opinion, high culture and the fine arts were the best tools of education against the perils of capitalism.

However, Horkheimer and Adorno's support of the fine arts, classical music, and tragedy was contentious amongst many left-wing and socialist theatre-makers in the 1970s, since the mentioned forms of culture were seen as both carrying and deriving from the values of the bourgeoisie, something that they actively worked against. Even though the socialist populist movement and AKP(m-l) could agree upon Adorno and Horkheimer's views on the perils of mass-produced culture and 'the culture industry', they did not share their condemnation of the masses as being gullible receptacles of the capitalist cultural industry (for example, Hollywood). Their understanding of the people was in a more positive and perhaps 'romantic' vein. In many ways, the socialist populists, and the Maoists especially, bypassed Adorno and Horkheimer's critique of popular culture by simply reclassifying popular culture – from mass-produced and mass-consumed culture to the culture seen as 'originating from the people'. In contrast, the supporters of 'popular culture seen as bricolage' criticised all parties (Adorno, Horkheimer, the socialist populist, and the Maoists) for excluding and bypassing urban and mass-produced forms of popular culture as a possible vehicle of resistance and political analysis. In their opinion, it is possible to use what is popular and widely accessible, therefore what 'the people'

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<sup>65</sup> Swingewood 1977, 13.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 1977.

<sup>67</sup> Nordby 2003, 41.

know and enjoy, in conveying an oppositional political message and in attempting to subvert the dominant powers. However, due to the mechanisms of capitalism and the cultural industry, which Adorno and Horkheimer pointed out, the effect of the subversion through popular culture can easily be dissipated. This is evident in the way that the culture and fashion industry has managed to absorb and commercialize most of the subcultural movements in Western Europe and North America – like the hippie and punk- movements. Joseph Chiarra describes how corporations have seen the chance to tap into rebellious youth movements and subcultures, and thus create new markets and increase their profits: “It becomes increasingly difficult for subcultures to keep their identities while they are becoming encompassed in popular culture.”<sup>68</sup> For oppositional political movements, attaining popularity and becoming a part of popular culture therefore acts both as a blessing and a curse. Although the wide-spread attention that popularity gives helps to spread the oppositional political message, the corporation’s commodification of the counter culture – through the fashion, music, and film industries – tends to remove the original oppositional message from the counter-cultural signifiers (such as the clothing and music which the members of the counter culture identify with) in order to make them ‘sellable’. By this, the counter culture loses its subversive power – since anyone can buy into its style. Yet, for political theatre groups such as Tramteatret, the dangers of becoming a part of popular culture is in the balancing act between keeping ones original ideals and integrity intact, and, at the same time, using the popular along with the entertainment industry as tools to make profits in order to earn a living and reproduce political theatre. As Horkheimer and Adorno point out in their theories on the ‘culture industry’, capitalist production values are not in favour of subversive political messages, which makes Tramteatret’s balancing act, a hard one.

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<sup>68</sup> Joseph 2012, 49.

## TRAMTEATRET – BECOMING POP-IDOLS

In many ways Tramteatret can be described as a theatre group of a ‘do-it-yourself’ spirit, being autodidacts and having no formal music, or theatre education. However, this was not an easy undertaking in Norway in the 1970s when there was no infrastructure or funding for independent theatre groups.<sup>69</sup> One of the main reasons that Tramteatret managed to survive financially as an independent theatre group in Norway for almost ten years is due to their sudden fame. Unexpectedly, Tramteatret became popular over night after the premiere of *Deep Sea Thriller* in April 1977. When the members of the theatre group search for reasons for their sudden fame, which for a group of amateur actors with political views to the far left was not a given, they pin it to two main aspects. Firstly, ‘lucky timing’, as the premiere of *Deep Sea Thriller* came only two weeks after the first major blowout accident on the Norwegian continental shelf, the Bravo-blowout, on 22 April 1977, which resulted in an oil spillage of over 20 tons.<sup>70</sup> Since ‘all eyes’ were on the accident – and Tramteatret had created a revue - *Deep Sea Thriller*, on the topic of the oil industry, with its ‘cautionary tale of the Norwegian oil-adventure, was given a flying start.

Secondly, their playful take on political events drew a large audience, they appealed to a much wider audience than they themselves had expected. Initially, Tramteatret thought that their revue would only appeal to radical students. Consequentially, perhaps due to the fame they had grabbed by their lucky timing, they were given the chance to make radio-programmes and TV-series for young people, and this made the theatre group a household name in Norway.<sup>71</sup> The group also did well on the musical charts, getting several number one hits with the music from their cabarets and TV-series. Another source of in-

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Kristin Øye Gjerde, ”Bravo-utblåsningen”, *Kulturminne Ekofisk*, Norsk Oljemuseum, NetPower Web Solutions AS, 2002-2004. Accessed 13 November, 2016. [http://www.kulturminneekofisk.no/modules/module\\_123/templates/ekofisk\\_publisher\\_template\\_category\\_2.asp?strParams=8%233%2376817841581196211031%23854&iCategoryId=486&iInfold=0&iContentMenuRootId=1011&strMenuRootName=&iSelectedMenuItemId=1167&iMin=361&iMax=362#](http://www.kulturminneekofisk.no/modules/module_123/templates/ekofisk_publisher_template_category_2.asp?strParams=8%233%2376817841581196211031%23854&iCategoryId=486&iInfold=0&iContentMenuRootId=1011&strMenuRootName=&iSelectedMenuItemId=1167&iMin=361&iMax=362#).

<sup>71</sup> Op.cit., 43

come for the group was the large number of concerts they played. The group toured venues all over Norway on the popular entertainment circuit, where they were booked to headline the entertainment at fun fairs and local festivals. The income from the box office, record sales, and the TV-series was crucial to the group, without which they would not have survived. In 1978, one year after their debut, the group applied for funding from Kulturrådet (the Norwegian Arts Council), and were only given a meagre 15.000 Norwegian kroner (NOK).<sup>72</sup> In contrast, Hålogaland Teater was given a budget of 705.000 NOK in their first year of operation (1971).<sup>73</sup>

However, according to Liv Aakvik, the group's fame was not only a blessing, it also caused conflicts. Whereas before the group became famous, they had a strong focus on the political message in their productions, Aakvik saw a decline in the group's political analysis as the 1980s ascended. The constant media attention, interviews in the papers, and entertainment programmes together with the extensive touring, resulted in money in the coffers, but it also restricted the group from taking the time to develop their artistic skills and political analysis. Due to their teenage idol status, it was also much harder for the theatre group to be taken seriously by funding bodies such as the Norwegian Arts Council. The problem of getting funding from Norsk Kulturråd was not particular to Tramteatret, but was general for all the independent theatre groups in Norway. The Norwegian cultural funding system was biased to the institutional theatres and their classical theatre repertoire. The cultural policies of Arbeiderpartiet had, since their class collaborative line after the Second World War, focused on the dissemination of high culture and the national canon to 'the people' through funding the institutional theatres and Riksteatret (the National Touring Theatre). In difference, the independent groups, when they appeared in Norway during the 1970s, were most often reckoned to be low culture and amateurish by the funding bodies due to the theatre groups lack of formal theatre education. In addition, the Norwegian state had a long practice of seeing entertainment and

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<sup>72</sup> Nordby 2003, 42.

<sup>73</sup> Parker 2011, 152.

revue theatre as forms of culture to be taxed by the state, and not supported through funding.<sup>74</sup> This placed Tramteatret in a double bind, both due to their status as an independent group and in relation to their chosen theatrical form, the revue. This made the theatre group appear amateurish, in the eyes of Kulturrådet. However, as it was playing revues, Tamteatret should, according to Kulturrådets opinion, be able to finance its own productions through ticket sales; therefore, Tramteatret was not worthy of being fully state funded.

This turned into a vicious circle, where the group members could not afford to take the time needed for making more artistic and politically refined productions, resulting in extensive touring and productions of what they mastered well, TV-series for young people and more light-hearted cabaret and revues, which, in Liv Aakvik's opinion, were getting less politically affective. Both the exhaustion and the group members differing ambitions led to the group splitting up in 1986.<sup>75</sup> In some ways Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the 'culture industry' being an enemy of class-consciousness fits Tramteatret. Even though Tramteatret's socialist politics did not prevent them from becoming popular, the entertainment industry did not support the group's need for reflection, education, and artistic development. The cons of being able to reach a wide audience were weighed down by the strains of constantly having to produce. However, the audience feedback that Tramteatret were given, especially after they closed down in 1986, was that many people had grown up with Tramteatret, that they had felt an identification with the group, and that Tramteatret's take on politics was dearly missed.<sup>76</sup>

## **CONCLUSION**

Hålogaland Teater interpreted popular theatre and populism to be the culture and way of life of their audiences. An audience made up of oppressed but 'resisting people', living in the districts of Northern Norway. Through their political theatre work, their aim was to be a mouthpiece for their audience, and by

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<sup>74</sup> Frisvold 1980.

<sup>75</sup> Interview with Liv Aakvik, Oslo, 29 September, 2015

<sup>76</sup> Interview with Terje Nordby, Oslo, 29 April, 2016

lifting up their problems and opinions bring them onto the national agenda. However, Hålogaland Teater had a rocky start reaching out to their audiences and in making the ideal 'peoples theatre' due to the fact that the theatre company were reproducing the colonial structures, which the Northern-Norwegians were oppressed by. Nonetheless, through their performance, *Det er her æ høre tel*, Hålogaland Teater managed to make theatre that became popular with their preferred audiences. The performance utilized the popular resistance against the Labour Party's *Landsdelsplan for Nord-Norge*, (Regional Plan for Northern Norway), which had been the focal point of criticism in Ottar Brox's book *Hva skjer i Nord-Norge? En studie i norsk utkantpolitikk*.

While Tramteatret's Arne Garvang was initially a part of the populist movement through *Et Syngespill mot EEC*, Tramteatret did not, in the same way as Hålogaland Teater, embrace the regional and nationalist ideals of socialist populism and the Maoist-movement. Tramteatret was more inspired by urban forms of popular culture, which in fact went against the preferences of AKP(m-l). While the Maoist party embraced the aesthetics of Hålogaland Teater, Tramteatret was discouraged from becoming an independent group and from using their preferred style of music and theatre. However, Tramteatret defied the AKP(m-l), and managed through 'lucky timing' with their red revue, *Deep Sea Thriller*, to reach the news headlines. Through this favourable media attention, the group managed to gain popularity and a wide audience. However, the popularity that Tramteatret gained would also act as a curse. They would suffer under the contradiction of their pop-idol status, which allowed them to play for large audiences and turned them into a household name through their children's television productions. The money from ticket and record sales together with TV-fees, however, was not enough to sustain the theatre group in the long run. When applying for funding through the Norwegian Arts Council, their independent theatre and pop-idol status made the group come across as amateurish and undeserving of state funding. Tramteatret, therefore, had to solely rely on earning money through the entertainment industry, the production values of which do not support a theatre company's need of further education.

Even though the two theatre groups saw their theatre as being informed by popular culture, they approached this in different ways. Whereas Hålogaland Teater tended to use the folk-comedy and social realism as their model, Tramteatret chose the red revue and political satire as their format. Despite their different approaches to popular culture, where Hålogaland Teater can be seen as fitting the definition of popular culture as ‘originating from the people’, and Tramteatret’s theatre can be seen to use a bricolage of popular cultural references in their red revues, both groups attempted to defy Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s critique of popular culture. Adorno and Horkheimer claim that it is impossible to make political and working-class conscious art and culture through the means of popular culture and the culture industry. Hålogaland Teater managed to bypass this criticism by reclassifying what is seen as popular culture, from mass-produced and urban forms of culture, such as music and film – to regional traditional forms of art and culture, such as the folk-comedy – culture and arts that are in line with the ideals of Ottar Brox’s socialist populism. Tramteatret attempted to create political and popular theatre precisely by using the forms of popular culture which Hålogaland Teater had discarded. However, Tramteatret became trapped in the mechanisms of the ‘culture industry’ – which Adorno and Horkheimer had criticised – leading to Tramteatret’s demise.

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