

Introduction: Theatre and Democracy

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Theatre is, and has always been, a resource for society's self-reflection. As such, it is intertwined with democracy and its development. In the words of Danish media sociologist Lars Qvortrup, it may be said to serve the function of, "communicating the otherwise non-communicable, i.e. of creating that difference in materiality, which makes a difference that society's other social practices cannot make".¹ In other words, theatre makes processes perceptible that might otherwise not be accessible to reflection. Rather than simply mirroring society, it potentially challenges our assumptions and preconceived views by staging, i.e. making perceptible, the very social processes and constructs that lie behind those preconceptions.

Theatre's reflexivity not merely facilitates, in an intellectual sense, social analysis and criticism, achieved in a cool Kantian or Brechtian distance to its object; it is already obtained in its phenomenological capacity for engaging members of society in intensive events that strategically – dramaturgically – often replicate, infiltrate and subvert, in one form or another, social performance. Subjective spectating involves an audience both actively and passively in processes that effectuate the making of meaning, through bodily sensations, affects, emotions, associations, ideas, and thoughts,² and these reactions may, to a certain extent, explain the participants' emancipation both as spectators³ and as citizens. Every one of us brings to a performance our own ways of living in society, our experiences and knowledge, and we more or less react in accordance with those contexts, given the specific nature

of the performance. Yet, as the collection of articles in this volume shows, there is a desire among many contemporary theatre-makers to make the theatre a site for political activism, by expanding the scope of the theatrical event and turn it into a cultural performance, exploiting the fact that no clear boundary separates the aesthetic from the social.⁴

This activism, which in different ways attempts to turn spectators into (social) performers and non-professionals or marginalized citizens into actors, and even actors into politicians, is not necessarily in conflict with an understanding of theatre as reflection that otherwise leans towards a strict differentiation between social practices (cf. Qvortrup quoted above),⁵ nor with Jacques Rancière's idea of participants who are already emancipated through life experience and intelligence and need not be activated by over-zealous political theatre projects; in fact, this activism may create exactly what Rancière sees as the goal, promoting the equality of intelligence amongst participants both in the theatre and outside:

"In all those performances in fact, it is a matter of linking what one knows with what one does not know, of being at the same time performers who display their competences and visitors or spectators who are looking for what those competences may produce in a new context, among unknown people. [...] An emancipated community is in fact a community of storytellers and translators."⁶

By actively acknowledging that it is a form of cultural performance, theatre may promote the participants' self-reflection and sense of person-

al responsibility for the shared 'stories' and their translation into social actions that is so central to democratic culture. The articles in this volume aim at describing and understanding how this has been attempted.

Louise Ejgod Hansen discusses the ways in which theatre has been regarded as the most 'democratic' art form, with specific reference to the ideal of theatre as 'participation' in the cultural policies of the Nordic countries. Rather than simply assuming that going to the theatre makes us democratic, Hansen examines how it does so, asking in what way people should participate if experiencing theatre is to contribute to the democratization of society. Her area of interest is the small focus group interviews known as 'theatre talks' that were conducted immediately after a number of selected performances in Jutland, Denmark. These interviews gave the audience an opportunity to reflect on their aesthetic experience and develop their understanding of the theatrical event.

Magnús Þór Þorbergsson examines quite a different way in which theatrical participation has contributed to the democratization of society, or rather to Icelandic nation-building from 1907 and into the 1920s when nationalism and internationalism intertwined in the repertoire and reception of the Reykjavik Theatre Company.

Two articles examine how recent cultural policies in Norway have led to the use of applied theatre aiming, through the collaboration between professionals and amateurs, to further the integration of marginalized groups into society. Ellen Foyn Bruun writes about the theatre project P:UNKT at Akerhus Teater conducted between 2007 and 2012, in which theatre was used as a tool for the integration of immigrants. Oddbjørn Johansen and Ellen Saur write about Teater nonSTOP in Namsos, established in 2009, in which all the actors employed had learning disabilities. This not only posed democratic challenges to the ways staging concepts were developed and rehearsals conducted, but also aesthetic challenges to audiences, since health-and-care purposes went hand in hand with a desire for artistic exploration.

Theatre as a site of resistance for minorities is also the topic of Ken Nielsen's article, though the

activities he examines occurred on an initiative that was distinctly private, even underground. In the years 1985-87 the Copenhagen-based gay amateur theatre group Buddha og Bagbordsindianerne reacted against the hetero-normativity of mainstream gay culture, and specifically against the conformist tendencies flourishing during the AIDS epidemic, by promoting promiscuity as a possible model for homosexual citizenship.

As is the case with most of the theatrical events analyzed in this issue, the political dimension of the German documentary-theatre production *Third Generation* (originally produced at Schaubühne in Berlin in 2009) is closely related to the background and identity of the performers. In her analysis of a 2011 Danish guest performance of the production, Tine Byrdal Jørgensen examines how the show's juxtaposition of German, Israeli and Palestinian actors broke down the barrier between politics and theatre within the context of the theatrical performance, and raised issues of ethical obligations in the way we receive and perceive the Other in social interaction.

In the last two articles, the barrier between politics and theatre is broken down in a more radical way since they deal not with actors bringing their social or cultural backgrounds onto the stage, but with actors who literally go into politics and thereby expose the theatricality (in the negative sense) of popular elections in times of social and democratic crises. Eva-Liisa Linder surveys the history of the Tallinn-based Theatre NO99 from its founding in 2005 and up to the political-theatrical event *Unified Estonia* in 2010, in which the postdramatic theatre group seemingly founded a political party; the purpose of which was to expose the hypocrisy and corruption of the 'real' politicians. In the same year the Icelandic comedian Jón Gnarr went even further when he founded what was at first regarded as a 'joke party', the Best Party, but who actually became Mayor of Reykjavik, a position he holds until May 2014. In her article about Gnarr's election campaign, Sigríður Lára Sigurjónsdóttir discusses how this controversial actor-mayor, who has consistently identified himself as an artist and political activist rather than a politician, exposed a lack of belief in the functioning of democratic institutions in the wake of the financial crisis.

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No. 25 is not just another volume in a series of publications; it marks the silver jubilee of the journal. For twenty-five years *Nordic Theatre Studies* has provided a platform for presenting the variety and quality of research on mainly Nordic – and lately Baltic – theatre produced by scholars both from the region and elsewhere. The journal's back-issues cover a wide range of themes within theatre and performance studies, such as genre, historiography, Ibsen, Bergman, acting/life, currents and trends in scholarship, musical theatre, the spiritual, emotions, the artist-as-researcher, performance art, culture politics, phenomenology, etc. The volumes not only reflect the developments of scholarship through the years but those of the performing arts and cultural performances as well.

It has always been the aim of *Nordic Theatre Studies* to reflect novel research within theatre and performance studies and to draw attention to overlooked topics within established areas of the discipline, addressing questions of theoretical and methodological innovation. The Association of Nordic Theatre Scholars wants to continue this tradition and to strengthen the journal and the community surrounding it.

From 2014, the publishing frequency will be increased; in addition to the usual annual volume, a special issue will be published. It is the aim of The Association of Nordic Theatre Scholars to publish a special issue each year dedicated to conferences, seminars, summer schools, special events, etc. Both volumes are included in the subscription or membership fee. The Association will also be increasing its activities, as it will seek to convey information on research, publications and events through its on-line fora, as well as organizing conferences and special events for its members.

One of these conferences will take place in April 2014, when the Association is co-organizing, with the University of Helsinki and the University of Lapland, a train-conference from Helsinki to Rovaniemi on the theme "Theatre and the Nomadic Subject". The conference call for papers received a tremendous response from scholars not only in the

Nordic and Baltic countries but from all over Europe, the Middle East and the USA. Selected papers from the conference will be published in the planned special issue for 2015.

As the current volume is the last one edited by us, we would like to take this opportunity to introduce the new editors. Anneli Saro from the University of Tartu, Estonia, succeeds Magnus Tessing Schneider as editor-in-chief, and Ulla Kallenbach from the University of Copenhagen follows Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen as co-editor. Magnús Þór Þorbergsson from the Iceland Academy of the Arts is the new review editor after Dirk Gindt.

The next two planned volumes for 2014, No. 26 and the special issue, will deal with technology and theatre and the poetics of playing, respectively.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Lars Qvortrup, *Det lærende samfund* (The learning society), Gyldendal, Copenhagen 2001, p. 254. Our translation.
- 2 Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance*, Routledge, London and New York, p. 155.
- 3 Jacques Rancière, “The Emancipated Spectator”, original paper presented at the 5th International Summer Academy, Frankfurt, 20 August 2004, <http://digital.mica.edu/departamental/gradphoto/public/Upload/200811/Ranciere%20%20spectator.pdf> (retrieved 2 December 2013).
- 4 Willmar Sauter, *Eventness*, STUTS, Stockholm 2008, p. 15.
- 5 Ovortrup is critical of activism that blurs the borders between art and other social spheres. One of his examples is the Danish artists’ collective Superflex and their biogas relief project for Africa. He is concerned about the ethical and aesthetic implications of such projects. Qvortup, *op.cit.*, p. 251.
- 6 Rancière, *op.cit.*, p. 11.