

Scenographing Resistance: Remembering *Ride This Night*

ASTRID VON ROSEN

ABSTRACT

In 1942 Vilhelm Moberg's (1898–1973) highly successful historical novel *Ride This Night!* (1941) was adapted for the theatre and premiered at several Swedish theatres as well as being distributed as a film. While Sweden maintained what was termed a neutral position during World War II, Moberg's novel, together with its various performances, facilitated a mood of resistance against Nazism. In recognition of this, the focus of my article is the much-celebrated first performance of *Ride This Night* at the City Theatre (*Stadsteatern*) in Gothenburg on 14 October 1942. To explore this performance as theatrical memory of World War II, I draw on recent scenography theory emphasizing the holistic role of material and affective relations between bodies, objects and environments. By doing so, the article contributes an historical case study to the international field of critical scenography, and challenges the ways in which previous Swedish art and theatre historiography has theoretically understood and explored the powers of scenographic traits of past performance.

KEY WORDS

Scenography theory, Rachel Hann, resistance, World War Two, *Ride This Night*, Vilhelm Moberg, Knut Ström.

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INTRODUCTION

In 1942 Vilhelm Moberg's (1898–1973) highly successful historical novel *Ride This Night!* (1941) was adapted for the theatre and premiered at several Swedish theatres as well as being distributed as a film. While Sweden maintained what was termed a neutral position during World War II, Moberg's novel, in tandem with its various performances, facilitated a mood of resistance against Nazism.¹ In recognition of this, the focus of my article is the much-celebrated first performance of *Ride This Night* at the City Theatre (Stadsteatern) in Gothenburg on 14 October 1942.² It was famously directed by Knut Ström (1887–1971) who was also responsible for the scenography, at the time labelled as “decorations.”³ Following the première, the daily paper *Aftonbladet* referring to Ström, wrote that “Vilhelm Moberg could never have had a better co-worker.”⁴ The papers also reported a massive and passionate audience response, and in various ways described and praised Ström's staging of the drama, including the scenic context. This invites, I suggest, a more thorough revisiting of the performance as a felt, multisensory event.

To explore the Gothenburg version of *Ride This Night* as theatrical memory of World War II, I will draw on recent scenography theory emphasizing the holistic role of material and affective relations between bodies, objects and environments, rather than thinking about scenography as a set background in performance. In particular, I will take on the challenge of mobilizing archival materials to actively *remember* the performance as a scenographic occurrence. Not aiming at reconstruction, but rather striving to “account for intangible utterances that enact how certain crafted assemblages orientate, and how in turn [they] are oriented by, human bodies,” my article makes an historical and archive-centred contribution to the expanding international field of critical scenography.⁵ By doing so, it also

1 Liljestränd 2018, 272–316.

2 The exclamation mark in the book title is not used in the theatre programme. See *Göteborgs Stadsteaters program 1942–43*.

3 Ström's work included sound and costume design. This and all following translations in this article were done by me.

4 D. H-n, 1942.

5 The quote is from Hann 2018, 29. A leading scenography scholar, Hann represents the international field of critical scenography.

challenges the ways in which previous Swedish art and theatre historiography has paid less attention to the powers of scenographic traits of performance.⁶

The following research question guides my exploration: In what ways can the first Gothenburg performance of *Ride This Night* be remembered as a scenographic event? In particular I wish to reveal and expose the constellation of material, multisensory circumstances and ideological orderings and power structures that were played out during the performance at the City Theatre in Gothenburg. Empirically I employ Ström's set model, black-and-white performance photographs, prompt books, reviews and other press materials, as well as the programme, all of which are drawn from the Theatrical Collections at the Gothenburg Museum and are understood as "active agents" in historical memory work.⁷ While it is not possible (and not very interesting) to uncover exactly what it looked like on stage, I set out to demonstrate that a holistic conception of scenography helps account for the crafting of atmospheres and feelings that happen during performance.

My cardinal theoretical inspiration comes from scenography scholar Rachel Hann's recently developed framework for understanding the capacity of scenography to orientate place, produce feelings, and craft interventional acts unsettling normativity. In the following, I firstly briefly introduce Hann's scenography theory to readers not familiar with her work. Secondly, I combine recent research on Sweden's role during World War II and more specifically on Moberg, with my own previous explorations into Ström as a scenographer, to contextualize the Gothenburg première of the drama. When referring to Ström as a scenographer, I am well aware that the terminology differs depending on place, language and context. Thirdly, I combine archival resources to explore the crafting of scenographic traits during the performance and discuss the possibility of remembering the material and affective relationship between what can be described as multisensory performance ecologies and broader ideological orders of world. Again, while this has nothing to do with reconstruction, I seek to isolate scenographic traits to be able to critically engage with them.

SCENOGRAPHIC THEORY

In recent years, the concept of scenography has undergone considerable change in terms of theoretical development. Instead of striving to pin down what scenography *is*, today's leading theoreticians are more interested in what it *does*

6 Here I draw on my knowledge of the Swedish context, within which scenography studies is uncomfortably located between art history and theatre history. See von Rosen 2010, 20, for an overview of scenography studies in Sweden. While the vast majority of doctoral theses on scenography, starting in the 1960s, have been written within art history, the contributions are nevertheless few, and the subject area is marginal and in need of theoretical updating. Scenography is also a component that belongs to theatre history's models for holistic performance analysis. Despite this, scenography is rarely the focus of theatre history studies, and there has been little interest in theorizations of scenography. Thus, I suggest that recent theoretical developments in critical scenography can be helpful for solving some tensions between art and theatre history regarding scenography as well for promoting scenography as an academic topic and concept.

7 Cook 2001, 29. The visual materials, in particular various sections of the models, can usefully be studied on the Museum's publicly accessible database: <http://62.88.129.39/carlotta/web/> (15.03.2019).

as an active agent of performance.⁸ Hann's seminal and globally recognized *Beyond Scenography* (2019) not only summarizes these developments but also contributes useful scholarly clarity to a contested and complicated concept. Following Hann, three theoretical shifts are particularly noteworthy: (1) There has been a separation between scenography (set design) as part of the *mis-en-scène* process, and scenography as a holistic, durational, and relational occurrence or event. Perhaps provocatively, this means that the scenographer does not create scenography *as event*, but does of course contribute components that form an important part of scenography as an occurrence that happens and is felt.⁹ (2) The understanding of scenography as a primarily visual feature has been challenged by ideas foregrounding multisensory experience. Even as seemingly passive audience members, we are always participants in scenography as a holistic multisensory experience, rather than distanced viewers. This conceptualization of scenography encompasses not only set and environment, but also lighting, sound, costume-bodies (in performance body and costume are difficult to separate), smell and technology. (3) The concept of "expanded scenography", by which potentially any situation may be considered scenographic, has been severely critiqued by Hann. She argues that if the concept of scenography is endlessly expanded, it risks losing its theoretical sharpness, similar to what has recently happened to the idea of performativity.¹⁰ Thus, to counter this, Hann has developed two interconnected concepts: scenography and scenographics. Scenography, as a concept of and for the theatre, addresses how theatre methods orientate place to craft atmospheres, feelings and worlds. Referring to interventional acts of exposing and unsettling normativities and ideologies, scenographics can be used for the theatre, but also for extra-daily situations where theatre methods proper (such as lighting design) have not been used. Combining queer phenomenology, affect and assemblage theory, ideas of world-making, and new materialism Hann urges us to focus on "ecologies", or felt relational interdependencies of material circumstances within and beyond the theatre.¹¹ Although Hann is not concerned with historical exploration, I bring her scenography theory, and in particular its aspects of ecological thinking, into the realm of art and theatre historiography. I thereby contribute to the broader field of critical scenography an example of how Hann's scenography theory can be employed in the analysis of historical topics and materials. Now, let us return to *Ride this Night* and its context.

RIDE THIS NIGHT IN CONTEXT

Moberg's historical novel, or more precisely, the political, historical and allegorical folk drama *Ride This Night!* is set in the village of Brändebol in the Swedish county of Småland, where Moberg grew up. The plot plays out from spring to autumn

8 Hann 2019, 5.

9 Apart from Hann 2019, 51–65, recent discussion on separating scenography and the scenographer can also be found in Aronson 2017, 10–11, and McKinney & Palmer 2017, 7–8.

10 Hann critiques performativity and the expanded understanding of scenography on pages 29–30 and 135. For a more extensive discussion of the expanded field of scenography, see McKinney & Palmer 2017.

11 In her book (2019) Hann provides several useful examples, such as her analysis of a visit to a performance of *The Lion King* (p. 20).

1650. For readers not familiar with Swedish geography, Småland is well known for its large forests, which at times served as hideouts for bandits and rebels. Equally significant are the seemingly idyllic open landscapes with small farms, developed through hard work with the land that at times did not produce enough to feed the inhabitants. While not representative of the entire Swedish countryside, the temperament in Småland is one of independence and endurance of hardship. To better be able to stage seventeenth-century Brändebol and its surroundings, Ström completed a bicycle tour of Småland to explore the landscape *in situ*, and also a tour to the mediaeval village of Viby.¹²

First published in 1941, Moberg's book appeared at a time when Germany was rapidly conquering an increasing number of territories around Sweden. This generated intense military mobilization within Sweden together with increasing fear of occupation. In a climate marked by acute political tensions regarding the Government's submissive stance toward Germany,¹³ Moberg's book aimed to mobilize an uncompromising, freedom-seeking spirit.¹⁴ In the major daily paper *Dagens Nyheter* Moberg wrote: "The book's message is as follows: Refuse slave service in the press. Scourge the Information Directorate. Eliminate censorship. Dismiss the Press Committee. The Bidding Stick [in Swedish: *budkavle*] is on the move. Ride This Night!"¹⁵ In the Swedish and Scandinavian context, a bidding stick is a wooden object carried by a messenger to assemble people for important meetings, defence, or as in this case, for rebellion (in Figure 2 the bidding stick used in Ström's staging can be seen). At the end of 1941 *Ride This Night!* had become Sweden's best-selling book. Thus, when the audience experienced the drama at the theatre in Gothenburg, they were a well-prepared and already affectively triggered agent of performance.

After a first, rather daft and overly historicizing staging of the drama at the National Theatre in Stockholm, where the word "German" had been replaced by the broader term "foreign" in all lines where it occurred, Moberg began collaborating with Ström and the City Theatre in Gothenburg.¹⁶ Due in particular to Ström's long-term, persistent efforts to present socially relevant and critical drama in accessible and popular forms, the theatre boasted a public and radical approach that better matched Moberg's intentions.¹⁷ In addition, the City Theatre's stance fit effectively with the major local paper *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning's* acknowledged resistance against censorship. Notably, the paper's editor-in-chief Torgny Segerstedt and Moberg both attended the première. Understood as active agents of the holistic scenographic event, the two men contributed to crafting an atmosphere of resistance. The reviews testify to the Gothenburg première was a rare success in terms of ecstatic audience response. What I am interested in here is how scenographic traits form active parts of this crafting of a forceful affective atmosphere.

12 von Rosen 2010, 164.

13 German troop transports transited Sweden, Germany was allowed to buy Swedish steel, and criticism of Germany by the press was restricted.

14 Liljestränd 2018, 282–283.

15 Quoted from Liljestränd 2018, 283.

16 Liljestränd 2018, 290–291.

17 von Rosen 2010, 137.

According to the programme and the prompt books, the Gothenburg performance was structured in three acts, each divided into three scenes (in Swedish *scenbilder*). When I explore the archival materials, I will expand the notion of scenes into scenography, that is, crafted multisensory and affective atmospheres to be experienced rather than only seen. By doing so, I contend that Ström's model can be explored as a device that crafts scenography or "place orientation", rather than only as a trace of *mis-en-scène* or "a system of interpretation and translation."¹⁸ I suggest that, when combined with the black-and-white photographs and statements in press materials regarding the performance experience, as well as with contextual analysis, the model becomes a vital agent in the activity of remembering the crafting of a resistance atmosphere in *Ride This Night*. Moreover, with its lighting devices and its carefully built and painted settings on a miniature revolving stage, the model bears witness to the crafting capacities of technology. Notably, the City Theatre was one of Europe's most modern venues, with a revolving stage, cyclorama and innovative lighting system, all constructed by Ström. For example, the cyclorama sported built-in lamps for crafting a starry night-time sky.¹⁹

The central conflict in *Ride This Night* concerns the forced serfdom of the free landowning farmers of Brändebol by a new German regime. Coerced into performing day labour instead of taking care of their own property during a period of bad harvest and starvation, the farmers initially agree to stand up against the enemy. However, due to threats of severe punishment, the men continue with the day work instead of fighting the oppressive forces. Refusing to submit to the oppression, the rebellious Svedje flees into the forest.

For the first act, the settings of the action are a place by the village well where the critical situation is discussed, the cautious Elder's house, and Svedje's house. As a place, *Svedjegården* [Svedje's farm] may be said to symbolically connote Sverige/Sweden, and the character Svedje signifies a tenacious spirit of resistance in the face of fear, threats and defeat. The second act likewise begins at the village well, followed by scenes at Svedje's hideout in the forest and the Elder's house, where the will to resist the oppression is checked by both fear and rationalization. The hesitancy to take action mirrors the Swedish government's cautious policies. On the micro-level Svedje's warm relationship with his fiancée Botilla, the Elder's daughter, is destroyed. The third act begins at an inn where a prostitute is treated badly, adding yet another layer to the decaying morals and increasing brutality within the community. The setting then shifts to a swamp where Svedje and a thief are hiding. Even though Svedje has lost everything, including his fiancée, he is resolute in his resistance for which he is brutally killed. As expressed by Liljestränd, in the character of Svedje, Moberg "personified a principle, a personalized integrity: what is right is right," rather than portraying "a rebel in the conventional sense."²⁰ Although Svedje is dead, his sacrifice has transformed the farmers, and in the last scene, by the well, they unite to resist the oppression. Here, the bidding stick, formerly shamefully hidden beneath the

18 Hann 2018, 55.

19 von Rosen 2010, 139–141, 187–190.

20 Liljestränd 2018, 275.

ground by the Elder, surfaces as water gushes forth from the earth, to signify the surging revolutionary force of the farmers.

As has been observed in previous research, the emotionally charged, place-bound, pro-Swedish logic of *Ride This Night!* can easily (and anachronistically) come across as propaganda against immigration.²¹ Moreover, in the City Theatre's programme Moberg is presented as firmly grounded in the county of Småland, and his dramatic work is described as "distinctly Swedish."²² However, in this particular context, the emphasis is rather on urging people in Sweden, soldiers and others, to actively oppose censorship and German railway transport through the country, and in the event of invasion, to fight back. In the programme, the theatre direction hopes that the "passion for freedom and pathos for justice" of the book will reach the audience, also in dramatized form.²³

As suggested by Liljestränd, "the ethnocentric and naive trait" in Moberg's literary production, including *Ride This Night!* is more akin to masculinist ideals than with hostility towards migration.²⁴ The masculinist stance resonates with Ström's long-term construction of himself as a "working class hero."²⁵ In short, both Moberg and Ström were powerful public figures embodying masculinist ideals. Their presence during the performance of *Ride This Night* meant that the men would be noticed and contribute to the affective atmosphere of the event. It is worth noting that a week before the première, the City Theatre flew its flag at half-mast, because the Germans had executed Henry Gleditsch, the director of the Trøndelag Theatre in Norway. Ström stated: "We could do such things. The National Theatre would immediately have been attached by the Government, but who could order us to behave considerately towards the Germans? In Torgny Segerstedt's city our action also evoked sympathy."²⁶ With this said, it is time to enter the theatre, to engage with the affective atmosphere of the performance via archival remains and their echoes of scenographic, multisensory, ecologies.

SCENOGRAPHING RESISTANCE

According to the notations, symbols and small drawings in the prompt books, the revolving stage smoothly shifted scenes from village community, to homes and the forest, while the actors, in historically inspired costumes, interacted with the settings. For example, the performance starts with Svedje's old mother Sigga, walking down a hill, to meet up with the younger widow Annika, who is an ambiguous and even malicious character, by the well. To the sound of a cuckoo – this is clearly marked in both Ström's and the stage's promptbook – the women comment upon the starvation they have to endure. The example described here demonstrates the close entanglement of spoken dialogue, physical movement and multisensory environment employed in *Ride This Night*.

21 Liljestränd 2018, 276.

22 *Göteborgs Stadsteaters program 1942/43*, 4–5.

23 *Göteborgs Stadsteaters program 1942/43*, 4–5.

24 Liljestränd 2018, 276.

25 von Rosen 2010, 145.

26 Perpetua 1959.

Further exploring the soundscape, today considered a vital part of scenography, the prompt book for the stage contains notations as to when to start the gramophone that provides the often occurring sounds of galloping horses and gunshots.²⁷ Together with the spoken, embodied dialogue, these scenographic methods helped forge an atmosphere of agrarian life threatened by oppression and pervaded by hostile or dangerous interference. As previously mentioned, the audience reacted unusually enthusiastically to both the dialogue and the setting: “Time after time, scenes and lines of dialogue trigger storms of applause” *Göteborgs-Posten* wrote.²⁸ While concerned with a very serious matter, the dialogue also effectively satirized the war policies, creating an adventure with thrilling, violent scenes interspersed with equally thrilling relational and sensuous encounters. In terms of smell, in one of the indoors scenes, rye bread (the words triggers a sensation) became an active agent for the Elder’s shameful liaison with the enemy.



FIGURE 1. Model (GTM: 719) by Knut Ström for *Ride This Night!* (1942). Set for the scenes by the village well. The proscenium has been removed so that the revolving stage is visible. Courtesy of Teatersamlingarna, Göteborgs Stadsmuseum.

CRAFTING A MOOD OF RESISTANCE

In the following, I will explore examples of the scenographic ecology crafted during performance. First I will engage with the affective atmosphere of the scenes at the village well [Figure 1]. To the left is a slightly stylized yet quite realistic seventeenth-century cottage with an exterior corridor, and further away stretches an open landscape with fields and a farm. A fence with a pointed stake contributes to the impression of a typical Swedish rural setting. In the foreground is a mound topped with boulders, and a well with a distinctive lever used for accessing water. Each and everyone of the reviewers found Ström’s combination of abstraction and

27 On sound and scenography, see Hann 2018, 47.

28 Es An 1942.

realism effective, and the newspaper *Aftonbladet* stated: “The mere sight of the first scene by the village well, where the Swedish farm is located in an archetypal slope with grey stone slabs and dark forest edges, rendered the atmosphere decidedly appealing.”²⁹ Photographs depicting actors in various groupings, and individuals are silhouetted against the sky.

An important action, involving the materiality of place and earth, occurred in the second act when the Elder, in a both cautious and cowardly fashion, buried the bidding stick that had arrived in the village. The prompt books describe a mental image where the Elder “casts a wide-eyed glance at the fence stakes, as if he saw his head on one of them.”³⁰ From a scenographic perspective, the fence, a normal feature of idyllic rural landscapes, becomes part of an unsettling landscape of imaginary fear and brutality. In the model and in photographs (GTM 5086: 15, 18, 30, 31) the fence and a particularly sharp stake are seen silhouetted against the sky. The sharpness of the stake, I suggest, is a place-orienting detail that can be registered and felt by the audience but does not need to be directly spoken about or interpreted as a representational sign.

I suggest that in the model, the place where the bidding stick is buried can be sensed in-between the building and the lever. Although the object symbolizing active resistance – the bidding stick – is shamefully hidden, the audience knows or feels where it is and, importantly, the lever points both down at the place where it is buried, and also up towards the sky. Again, while the distinct connection between earth and heaven crafted by the lever might not be interpreted as meaning anything special during the performance, it does possess scenographic power. What I am proposing here is that the lever’s relational interplay with other place-orientating devices is observed and felt, and thus shapes audience experience. In combination with the rhythm of the downward pointing angle of the roof and the same angle repeated by the stairs to the left, the angle of the lever crafts a felt, but oblique and half visible V-shape built into the seemingly normal rural village setting. Following Hann, I argue that scenographics are at play here, in that the V belongs to “that which orientates interventional acts of worlding.”³¹ Borrowed from Kathleen Steward, Hann’s notion of worlding refers to meaning-making processes that make up and are made by worldly encounters. What is crafted in *Ride This Night*, is not an ordinary or innocently stereotyped Swedish landscape, but a forceful othering device, orientating place and producing feelings that feed into the audience’s apparent longing to act out and express a mood of resistance.

Towards the end of the performance, after Svedje’s murder and burial in the misty swamp, the farmers again gather around the well, now set against a stormy and cloudy sky. Exploring lighting as a scenographic method, photographs (GTM: 18, 30, 31, 32) demonstrate how the sky is increasingly filled not with random and blurry clouds, but with clear and sharp “brushstrokes” that resemble powerful forces and soaring fires. As demonstrated by scenography scholar and designer Scott Palmer, lighting is a crucial, but in retrospect often difficult-to-access co-

29 D. H-n, 1942.

30 Prompt book, 86.

31 Hann 2018, 17.

creator of scenography.³² While I am in agreement, I also think that attention to scenography as a holistic endeavour effectively helps us detect traces of lighting in archival remains.



FIGURE 2. Performance photograph (GTM 5086:18), *Ride This Night*, 1942. The farmers are holding the bidding stick. Photographer not credited. Courtesy of Teatersamlingarna, Göteborgs Stadsmuseum.

Further investigating the photographs from the final scene, against the sky to the right, a massive, dark, emerging shape is crafted, resembling a gigantic fir tree (in Swedish *gran*), the shape of whose branches resonate with the clouds. The atmosphere has changed from one of fear and cowardice, to a regretful and firm mood of resistance, no matter how dangerous it will be to openly oppose the new rulers. Svedje's steadfast refusal to submit to oppression and his sacrifice have somehow empowered the remaining farmers to take action against the oppression and cruelty. I suggest that the landscape, including the giant fir, fence, lever, and clouds, plays an important part in the fostering of this reawakened mood of resistance. What has effectively happened is that underground currents of water have caused the buried bidding stick to surface and re-enter the circulation of resistance, as can be seen when the men grasp it [Figure 2]. What emerges here is an affective assemblage, including the intense audience response, materializing the idea that time has come to fight for what is undeniably just.

My argument for the scenographic—material and affective—force of the orientations of the landscape and the resonating V-shape (see the previous discussion about the

32 Palmer 2013.

relational interplay between the building, the lever and beyond) is supported by the war context. While the V might be obliquely suggested and not entirely perceptible to the audience, I suggest that its durational, rhythmic crafting can be felt, and that it thus possesses agentic, scenographic force. By 1942 the emblematic V-symbol had spread to become a common symbol for the spirit of resistance, the will to fight back, and belief in victory. Indeed, on 29 August 1941, Vilhelm Moberg himself signed a letter to his friend Curt Berg, “V sign believer.”³³ Of course, the “V” in Vilhelm feeds into the larger mobilization of resistance. In the Anglo-Saxon world, V-signs were produced and embodied in various ways on posters and other mediatized images such as photographs. In occupied Norway, the V-sign was frequently used; it could be painted on roads for example [Figure 3].³⁴



FIGURE 3. A V-sign on a road in Norway during World War II. Permission granted by Riksarkivet (National Archives of Norway) @ Flickr Commons.

The picture can be accessed here:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/V_sign#/media/File:H%C3%A5kon_7._malt_i_veien.jpg (16.03.2019)

In his interpretive strategies, Ström was certainly aware of the power of the V-sign, and I suggest that he constructed the scene and the setting so that the spirit of resistance would contribute to the crafting of the scenography, and take

³³ Liljestrand 2018, 282.

³⁴ The picture can be accessed here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/V_sign#/media/File:H%C3%A5kon_7._malt_i_veien.jpg (16.03.2019).

on interventional, but not too obvious, vibrating qualities. Thus, the mobilization of an atmosphere of Swedishness through a slightly abstracted rural setting is pervaded by the symbolic force of resistance and even a promise of victory. The agrarian collective will finally fight back, and it is the reverberating force of this V, growing out of blood, water, earth, wind and fire, that gives them strength. In the following, I will further explore how scenography was actively involved in the making of what *Afton-Tidningen* called “a flaming sermon on justice [*en flammande rättspredikan*],” a world where the audience passionately embodied what I suggest was a feeling of being active, brave and just.³⁵

FIR TREE AND FREEDOM FORCE

Both the second and the third acts contain scenes set in the vast forests of Småland, where Svedje lives his life in hiding until he is hunted down and brutally murdered. Turning to the model, for the second act Ström has constructed an intimate rendering of a clearing with soft green moss and stones underneath the branches of large fir trees, extending outside the frame of the scene – metonymically linking up with all the forests in Sweden. Light filters through the branches. This prepares, I suggest, for a return to the issues concerning lighting for *Ride This Night*. It is worth noting that Ström was famous for his inventive skills with lighting. *Ride This Night* was no exception, and as reported by *Aftonbladet*, “using small means Ström tones down or bestows light on his scenes.”³⁶ I suggest that the crafting of lighting that is not really warm, but evokes chilly autumn air, in combination with the soft, yet damp and cold moss, can lead the audience to sensuously experience and potentially sympathize with Svedje’s free, yet difficult forest life.

During the mobilization of 1942, camping in the woods and training for war were the reality of many Swedish men and some women. Notably, women could enlist for Voluntary Defence Service as well as participate in efforts closely linked with the men’s duties. Media such as newspapers, radio and film – and the theatre – both followed and engaged with the mobilization activities. In October 1941, for example, Ström had staged a Swedish drama called *Beredskap* (Mobilization) featuring men in arms, in a realistic, typical Swedish forest setting.³⁷ Thus, leaving behind an understanding of the forest as a natural asset or dangerous place, during the war the Swedish woods took on a different, more active and affectively charged dimension. In *Ride This Night* this context arguably contributes to how the audience would affectively engage with Svedje’s life in the forest and its symbolic connotations for the people training in warfare in the Swedish forests.

When the audience directly applauded the staging of the swamp in the third act they also actively contributed to the crafting of a holistic scenographic experience.³⁸ *Afton-Tidningen* wrote: “knotty pines and rampantly growing fir trees loomed in the background. Fog was produced on the moors, and the stars of heaven spread

35 Gsven 1942.

36 D.H-n, 1942. The original is difficult to translate: “Med små medel tonar Ström av eller skänker ljus över sina bilder.” Here, I have translated the Swedish “*bilder*” (pictures) short for “*scenbilder*” (literally scene-pictures), with “scenes”, as it makes most sense in this context. However, for future research I suggest that the pictorial dimension of the terminology is worthy of further exploration.

37 von Rosen 2010, 166.

38 Gsven 1942.

their shine over the big and deep forest.”³⁹ The reviewer informatively compared Ström’s staging with the Stockholm production of *Ride This Night*. Apparently a symbolic darkness was a key component of the third act of the drama, and in Stockholm it had literally been very dark on stage. In Gothenburg, however, Ström had used more lighting, but “nevertheless produced the darker tone [for the swamp] by a technologically skilled arrangement with the revolving stage.”⁴⁰ I will now explore this more closely.

The model [Figure 4] and photographs (GTM: 5086: 16, 17) show the lower part of a gigantic fir tree to the far right. In front of the tree there is space for the actors. While the dark-green branches or arms of the fir, with their upward striving ends, are silhouetted against the sky, the distant swamp, with its smaller trees, and yellow grass, renders the setting endless. By combining the cyclorama with lighting effects, a misty atmosphere was crafted, and the model shows that a movable piece of the set behind the revolving stage would produce a slow, almost unnoticeable shift in the landscape.⁴¹ In addition, the photographs demonstrate a shift towards darkness. In recognition of these scenographic methods, it is worth mentioning that in a 1942 interview on the current state of “theatrical decorations” Ström says that innovations in lighting technique have made it possible to use “cold colours”, something that according to him was not previously possible.⁴² As indicated in the model, I suggest that cold colours, in particular greyish, green and blue hues, played an important part in the crafting of the cold and increasingly dark atmosphere of sacrifice and death.



FIGURE 4. Model (GTM: 717) by Knut Ström for *Ride This Night!* (1942). Set for Flyakärret (the Flya swamp). The proscenium has been removed so that the revolving stage is visible. Courtesy of Teatersamlingarna, Göteborgs Stadsmuseum.

39 Gsven 1942.

40 Gsven 1942.

41 Perpetua 1959.

42 von Rosen 2010, 141.

In my interpretation, the misty wooded landscape generates associations with Swedish fairy tales involving trees, caves and trolls, as well as artistic renderings of “the Nordic”. Indeed, art historians have suggested that the fir tree can be thought of as a genuinely Nordic emblem.⁴³ For *Ride This Night*, I would go so far as to suggest that Ström’s giant fir takes on the role in the drama of a cosmological world tree, or a transposed Yggdrasil, firmly connected with earth and water, and thus also to the well in the village. Although Yggdrasil is normally depicted as an ash, an oak or perhaps a yew, the important aspect here is scale. In my interpretation, the sheer size of the fir and the invisible but felt extension of its top and roots craft a sense of its power to extend into other locations.

As the most common conifer in Sweden, the fir tree becomes a forceful agent of performance as it towers above the men who hunt down Svedje. When Svedje’s still living body is brutally pushed down into the swamp, it is as if water, earth and roots take hold of his symbolic power and transform it into something that can spread. I suggest that the fir embodies a growing, mystical power of resistance, and thus crafts an affective quality that the audience and actors can feel and experience rather than only see and interpret. The fir Yggdrasil reaches from earth to heaven, and can also extend its roots and spring to the ground where the bidding stick is buried. Muddy waters, previously enveloping Svedje, turn into an unstoppable force, capable of releasing blood and fire. Thus, Svedje’s mood of resistance is soaked up by the swamp and the fir tree’s roots, and is made part of the rural landscape as an active agent. At the very end of the drama, when the affective atmosphere vibrates with Svedje’s resistance, the female actors speak of him being present in every aspect of the landscape. Finally, the group of men appear against the flaming sky and the shadow of the gigantic fir to obey the command of the bidding stick and “ride this night!” What scenography crafts and mobilizes in *Ride This Night*, then, comes across as a mythic-religious Nordic-Christian blend, where seemingly ordinary rural settings and landscape features such as a well lever or a fir tree, become worlding agents of performance.

After the performance as such was over, Moberg and Ström appeared on stage together with the actors. Elsa Widborg, who played the wife of the Elder, handed over a bidding stick, sent by the Norwegians, to Moberg. The audience responded passionately, as if they would never stop applauding and cheering.⁴⁴ Here, the scenographic role of the audience in the crafting of an affective atmosphere of resistance becomes overtly evident. This also testifies to how the scenographic ecology crafts a web of relationships between theatrical performance and societal and ideological issues.

CONCLUSION: SCENOGRAPHY AS A DEVICE FOR REMEMBERING

In this article I have mobilized scenography as a device to practically and analytically remember the first performance in Gothenburg of *Ride This Night* as a holistic, multisensory event. Through a process of exposing and interpreting the constellation of material circumstances, affects and ideological orderings that are crafted and played out during *Ride This Night*, I have demonstrated that the

43 Josephson 1957 and Paulsson 1919.

44 Es An 1942.

staged rural landscape and deep forest functioned as powerful co-authors of the performance. Indeed, seemingly normal, ordinary, nicely rendered settings turned out to have strong place-orienting and interventional capacities in their context. Not only did the audience actively participate in the crafting of the atmosphere of resistance by applauding and cheering, they could also, according to my interpretation, feel and experience the more opaque and intimate, but equally formative traits of the scenography. As stated by Hann, scenographics “not only exceeds the imposed authorship of a stage image”, but is also “manifest in the potential of material cultures to evoke worlding thresholds that happen in time.”⁴⁵ To evoke the worlding of a Swedish mood of resistance, a mythic-religious atmosphere was produced. Each detail of the rural setting with the well and the lever, such as a distinctive fence stake and the flaming sky in the final scene, played a part in the making of a forceful, potentially victorious landscape. Into this fed scenographic traits crafted by the gigantic fir tree, vast forests, and underground streams, which took on anthropomorphic qualities evoking the feeling of mobilization activities involving many Swedish men and women. Thus, the rural landscape and the forest, including poignant attention triggers such as the lever and the giant fir, became active agents of performance, simultaneously clear and oblique in their ways of crafting ideologies of resistance, grounded in the forces of nature.

To draw a more general conclusion, I suggest that the performance archive becomes scenographic when multisensory ecologies are activated to be experienced and explored in the present. By mobilizing multisensory ecologies as a still underutilized asset of the performance archive, a scenographic approach can complement rather than counter, text, director, or actor-oriented ways of engaging with and analysing past performances. I contend that mobilizing scenographic remains as active agents in a multisensory understanding of past performances, rather than dismissing them as mute fragments of low analytic value, enables further explorations into how crafted feelings and ideologies intersect and involve bodies during performance.

AUTHOR

Astrid von Rosen is an associate professor of Art History and Visual Studies, at the University of Gothenburg, Sweden and joint coordinator of the Archives Cluster in the UGOT/UCL Centre for Critical Heritage Studies. In her research, she combines art historical and scenographic analysis with archival theory and participatory approaches to contribute to social change and transformation, methodological development and historiographical revision. Relevant publications include “On the Wire: Scenographing Affect at Sillgateteatern in Gothenburg around 1800”, in *Genres in Context: Dance, Theatre and Opera around 1800*, Routledge (2020), and “Dream-Playing the Archive”, in *August Strindberg and Visual Culture*, Bloomsbury (2018).

45 Hann 2018, 134.

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