

Transnational Influences An Introduction

**HANNA KORSBERG, ANNELI SARO & MIKKO-
OLAVI SEPPÄLÄ**

While theatre activities have always crossed borders, theatre studies have often been written from local or national standpoints. In recent scholarship this pattern has been broken and scholars have paid increasing attention to transnational connections, artistic migrations, and transcultural influences across geographical boundaries. The scholarship has focussed on individual and collective efforts in artistic exchange and touring, border crossing, transnational connections and the blurring of national and transnational identities.

The concepts of international and transnational are debated and sometimes used as synonyms. In our understanding, however, we separate the terms following the definitions of Janelle Reinelt and Pierre-Yves Saunier. According to Reinelt, the concept of international “signifies more than one nation, and implies cooperation or at the least negotiation between and among multiple entities called nations.”¹ In his turn, Saunier stresses that, in the field of international relations, transnational history is widely considered as the study of non-state actors working across state boundaries, for example, transnational advocacy networks.² Thus, in principle, the term ‘international’ designates formal connections and collaboration between bigger corporates like nations or states while transnational refers to similar kinds of connections and networks between informal agents.

The term ‘transnationalism’ first surfaced in a discussion of migration and identity in the United States in 1919. During subsequent decades, transnationalism migrated from books on Anglo-American economic relations to the study of law. In the 1970s, the term became an important topic of study

1 Reinelt 2008, 4.

2 Saunier 2013, 15, 32.

in the social sciences and since the 1980s, historians have used the paradigm to break free from dominant national paradigms.³ The transnational perspective rose in the 1990s in the Post-Cold War situation as the hegemonic paradigm of nation states did not meet the changing world of increasing integrity and accelerating interactions on all levels of society across national borders. At that time, as Saunier has pointed out, in addition to transnationalism, scholars came up with similar concepts of network, hybridity, diaspora, and rhizome. Besides international relations and the study of migrations, the notion of transnationalism has been applied in cultural studies according to Saunier as “a way to qualify, observe, assess or prophesy a new multipolar, multicultural and post-national world.”⁴ Saunier suggests that the transnational approach, regardless if it is economic, social, or cultural nature, looks especially at connections, circulations, and relations, and even transnational formations. The actual object of study can be almost anything: goods, ideas, people, art works. Even Steven Vertovec and Alejandro Portes argue the utility and versatility of the concept ‘transnational’ as an umbrella term in analysing global networks and patterns of social relationships.⁵

In theatre and performance studies, transnationalism has been a very popular topic in the twenty-first century, although the phenomenon has always existed. Often, the research has focused on the questions of cultural exchange, theatrical trade routes, and migration. For example, the volume *Theatre, Globalization and Cold War*, edited by Christopher Balme and Berenika Szymanski-Düll (2017), discussed the reconceptualization of theatre in terms of transnational processes. Several other research projects, anthologies, and books have also discussed the transnational connections of theatre.

This issue of *Nordic Theatre Studies* has its background in a research project between the universities of Helsinki and Tartu, which discussed the cultural and theatrical relationships between Finland and Estonia.⁶ In the project, we noticed that the cultural exchange was multifaceted from the translation of plays and theatre visits to cultural diplomacy and hybrid performances. In March 2019, the project hosted a conference of the Association for Nordic Theatre Scholars on the theme “Transnational Influences” at the University of Helsinki. The call for papers for this issue was circulated after the conference.

Aligned with Saunier’s above suggestion, the articles in this issue focus on connections, circulations, and relations in the field of theatre and dance across the Baltic Sea area and also further. We encouraged the authors to deal with current or historical theatrical encounters, especially ones in which tangible evidence can be adduced showing the effect of these transnational exchanges. These could include transnational migrations of writers, directors, actors, dancers, plays, productions, and theatre companies or ideas and ideologies and their effect on their new environment, e.g. theatrical developments as a result

3 Clavin 2005, 433–436.

4 Saunier 2013, 14.

5 Vertovec 1999, 459; Portes 1998, 1.

6 Cultural and theatrical relationships between Finland and Estonia, funded by Kone Foundation.

of transnational theatrical exchange. Theoretical frameworks that embrace the articles are related to social network analysis, international politics, identity politics, memory, and trauma studies, etc. Many articles trace flows of artists and artistic ideas in the intercultural transnational sphere.

Transnational relations are often characterized as border crossings of artworks, people, and institutions. Following the same manner, the articles in this number are divided into three sections: travelling plays, travelling artists, and cultural diplomacy through theatre exchange. The authors of the first three articles investigate how certain plays have crossed state and cultural borders, and how they have been received in different countries.

Zoltán Imre tracks the first productions of Ibsen's play *Ghosts* all over Europe and North America between 1889 and 1908 with special attention on Ibsen's reception in the Hungarian theatre. According to the author, *Ghosts* belonged to the repertoire of various independent theatres and became a litmus test of social tolerance. With the help of Stephen Greenblatt's term 'cultural mobility', Imre demonstrates how Ibsen's play, media, and travelling companies acted out as agents of theatrical and cultural networking both at the regional, national, and transnational level. Since European theatres have established their working conditions within transnational/intercultural contexts, Imre suggests to open the horizon of national theatre histor(iograph)ies towards European and even globally transnational perspectives.

In her article, Pirkko Koski surveys the production of a play *Departure* (*Lähtö* in Finnish, *Minek* in Estonian) by Estonian playwright Rein Saluri at the Finnish National Theatre in 1988, during the last few years of the Cold War. She aims to analyze how the theatre production connected to Estonian traumatic history and how national memory was understood and perceived in a country with different historical and contemporary backgrounds.

The same play, Rein Saluri's *Departure*, is also discussed in Piret Kruuspere's article entitled "Travelling of Dramatic Texts and Memory Patterns. The Case of Estonian Memory Theatre". In addition to *Departure*, productions of Merle Karusoo are also analyzed with some references to the memory plays of Madis Kõiv. Relying on Astrid Erll's concept of travelling memory, Kruuspere investigates how certain stories, memory patterns, and mnemonic practices have crossed cultural and national borderlines launching hidden or blurred memories.

Performing artists and theatre companies have always toured across national borders in order to learn their profession, make their living, and increase their audiences. Whitney Byrn examines a classic case of a learning journey and the interaction between artistic centres and the periphery in her article "The Grand Tour of Europe: The Impact of Artistic Travels on Nineteenth Century Danish Scenography". Focusing on Danish scenographer C. F. Christensen's travels in 1838–1839, Byrn is able to pinpoint a direct influence on later productions at the Royal Danish Theatre.

Paradoxically, launching an international career as a performing artist might have required national branding. In her article "Performing Nordic White Femininity: Two Swedish Divas in the U.S. in the Nineteenth Century", Hélène

Ohlsson analyses how Swedish female singers, during their American tours, made use of their nationality, social values, and racial features in order to stand out as distinguished celebrities, even identifying themselves with queens.

Keeping track of a mobile transnational artist always requires digging for historical sources in various countries which often leads to transnational cooperation of researchers. This was the case as the scholars Astrid von Rosen, Eugenia Klimova, and Olga Nikolaeva reconstructed the career of Russian dancer Anna Robenne. The scholars interacted in tandem with Russian, Swedish, and Finnish archives in order to reveal and bring together material and knowledge pertaining to Robenne. The article highlights the Russian legacy of Robenne fusing it with the previous historiography that has been disinterested in following the careers of non-canonized migrating artists in the Nordic-Baltic region.

During the paradigm of nation states in the short twentieth century, along with the number of independent countries, diplomatic activity also increased and entangled itself with many kinds of advocacy groups. The need for cultural diplomacy and the exercising of soft power was felt also in theatre, pressuring especially leading art institutions. At the same time, cultural diplomacy offered possibilities for theatres and artists to reposition themselves, widen their operational space, and find new resources.

Hanna Korsberg explores theatrical exchanges as part of the cultural diplomacy of recently independent Finland. She argues that the visits were different in terms of the visiting productions. While in Stockholm in 1936 and in Tallinn in 1937, the Finnish National Theatre showcased its work, during the bilateral exchange with the Estonia Theatre in 1931, the audiences saw two hybrid performances of the two productions. Therefore, she proposes that the visits could be discussed in terms of international and transnational exchange.

In his article "Theatre against Stagnation: Theatre Exchange between Soviet Estonia and Finland during the Cold War", Mikko-Olavi Seppälä considers how the multifaceted cooperation across the Iron Curtain launched by directors Matti Tapio and Kaarel Ird eventually benefited their respective institutions.

In a heated political atmosphere, cultural diplomacy might convert to artistic intervention and cause scandals. In his article "Inside Frozen Geographies: Baltic-Russian Theatre Exchanges after 2014", Edgaras Klivis investigates the controversial theatre exchange between Russia and the Baltic countries after the annexation of Crimea. He explores the rhetoric of both opposing parties – those who stress the autonomy of arts and those who take a political stance excluding any kind of collaboration with Russia.

International festivals can be seen as utopian spaces where social interaction and the exchange of ideas become accelerated and transnational identities are created in an elevated atmosphere. Luule Epner and Anneli Saro explore the construction of transnational Finno-Ugric identity through the theatre festival Mayatul and the performative strategies of Estonian stage director Anne Törnpu. Finno-Ugric identity is believed to be based on similar characteristics of languages and environment that shape the close-to-nature lifestyle and the particular perception of the world. The transnational Finno-Ugric identity

safeguards minority identities against cultural and political hegemony and theatre festivals like Mayatul act as tools and manifestations of identity politics.

Transnational relations in theatre have often been explored in connection with travelling plays and/or with great actors or actresses giving guest performances abroad. Usually, this kind of research is carried out from the perspective of one nation or country and sometimes the agents are merely showcasing their work abroad. However, transnational investigations need multi-perspectivity, since the objects of study are located between persons, institutions, networks, cultures, nations, countries etc. One possibility to achieve such multi-perspectivity is through transnational interdisciplinary networks – research that the current issue aims to encourage.

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