

SCAN-AESTHETICS – Aesthetic strategies in Scandinavian and Nordic-Baltic independent theatre and performing arts: 1960-2010

An Introduction

KNUT OVE ARNTZEN AND ANNA B. WATSON

Despite the influence of Scandinavian independent theatre internationally, the field of the independent performing arts in Scandinavia and the Nordic-Baltic region has not been given sufficient academic attention. Many scholars and audiences interested in continental European theatre have heard about companies like Odin Teatret, Hotel Pro Forma, and Baktruppen. In his book, *Postdramatisches Theater* (1999), German theatre scholar Hans-Thies Lehmann gave attention to these groups, speaking about Baktruppen as a playful and not foreseeable theatre company, which made it important.¹ To meet the need, the research milieu at Theatre Studies, University of Bergen, wanted to instigate a research project which focused on independent theatre and dance in this region from the 1960s to the 2010s, which we will refer to as SCAN-AESTHETICS. A common interest in the Scandinavian area was stated at a research meeting in Bergen on 21.2. 2019, addressing these issues with their own country and city-specific applications.

This meeting was the basis for the ANTS-conference in Bergen in November 2020. This publication is the result of the conference in November 2020, which

1 Lehmann, H.-T. (1999), *Postdramatisches Theater*, Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren.

came out of the initiative of a project like that. The basic aim was to cover research gaps in relation to the study on independent theatre and performance groups in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, as well as in the greater Nordic-Baltic area which, to some extent, can also include Russia. Despite the research projects initial national character, all partners have identified the connectivity between the groups and programming theatres in Scandinavia. The partners jointly expressed their willingness to attend in 2020, as well as contributing to a volume. Some of the presentations at the ANTS-conference in November 2020 are published in this volume of Nordic Theatre Studies.

On a European level, research activities in this area have been going on for some time already, such as; *Das Freie Theater in Europa der Gegenwart: Strukturen - Ästhetik - Kulturpolitik (Independent Theatre in Europe: Structures, aesthetics and cultural politics)*.² This study's time span is 1990-2013, and for the specific German situation. Henning Fülle's contribution to this book edited by Manfred Brauneck, was about modernizing the German contemporary theatre landscape (1960-2010). The aim of this volume of Nordic Theatre Studies is to cover a similar time span in the context of Scandinavian independent theatre. The fact is that within each of the Scandinavian and Nordic countries there exists several nation or city-specific studies and publications singling out only but a few of the many independent performing arts groups, programming theatres, and performing arts festivals, which emerged in Scandinavia between the 1960s and 2010s. Other contributions are Fjeldstad and Teatrets Teori og Teknik om gruppeteater i Norden³, and the presentation of Swedish independent theatre groups in *Avantgardeteater och modernitet: Pistolteatern og det svenska teaterlivet från 1950-tal till 60-tal*⁴, *Ny svensk teaterhistoria vol.3*⁵, as well as the display of Norwegian independent theatre and performance groups in *Frie grupper og Black Box Teater 1970-1995 (Independent companies and Black Box Theatre in Oslo 1970-1995)*,⁶ While *PerformancePositioner. Mellem Billed Teater og Performance Kunst* attempts to map out theory and performative expressions mainly in a Danish context.⁷ The mentioned studies and publications have all, apart from in the last case, a sole national focus on independent performing arts in the Scandinavian countries. An anthology which stands out in this context is *Nordic dance spaces: Practicing and imagining a region vol. 4*, in this book, the editors, Karen Vedel and Petri Hoppu, map out the dance practices in the Nordic and Barents region, showing how these dance practices

2 Brauneck, M. (hrsg., 2016), *Das Freie Theater im Europa der Gegenwart: Strukturen - Ästhetik - Kulturpolitik*, Bielefeld: Transscript Verlag.

3 Fjeldstad, A. et.al. (1981), *Gruppeteater i Norden*, København: Samlerens Forlag A/S and *Gruppeteater i Norden. En Hvidbog (1972)*, Eugenio Barba (et. al.), Holstebro: Odin Teatrets Forlag, nr 17-1972.

4 Ringby, P. (1995), *Avantgardeteater och modernitet: Pistolteatern og det svenska teaterlivet från 1950-tal till 60-tal*: Gideå.

5 Forser, T. & S. Å. Heed (2007), *Ny svensk teaterhistoria vol.3*, Möklinta: Gidlunds förlag.

6 Buresund, I. & A. B. Gran (eds., 1996), *Frie grupper og Black Box Teater 1970-1995*, Oslo: Ad Notam Gyldendal.

7 Vestergaard Pedersen, H. (ed. 2001, 2006), *PerformancePositioner. Mellem BilledTeater og PerformanceKunst*, Gråsten: Drama.

and practitioners are contributing to new understandings of what constitutes the North and Nordic spaces.⁸

SCAN-AESTHETICS has identified three movements or directions within the formation of independent performing arts groups and their aesthetics in Scandinavia and the greater Nordic region:

- Performance laboratories, theatre anthropology, and indigenous theatre
- The popular theatrical expressions in social and political theatre
- Experimental performing arts and the aesthetic turn

The anthropological turn, the popular and political theatre, and experimental performing arts can be said to represent distinct clusters of collaborating artists and performance groups. These three directions can also be identified as dominant aesthetics within a certain time period and in different geographical areas. The mentioned movement or directions correspond with three narratives of independent performing arts in Scandinavia. These narratives all raise important research question to be analyzed in SCAN-AESTHETICS. An additional fourth narrative specifically on Bergen International Theatre (BIT-Teatergarasjen) is added as a case to exemplify the international networking and programming theatres which, to a large extent in Scandinavia, were inspired by KiT (Copenhagen International Theatre) and the festivals *Gjøglerne kommer*.

SCAN-AESTHETICS also take its impulse and inspiration from the anthology *Nordic Dance Spaces*; and by this, aims at filling the gaps in the research on Scandinavian and Arctic independent performing arts by broadening the scope of its study. SCAN-AESTHETICS will instigate city-specific and regional studies of independent dance, theatre, performance, and theatre venues, where the cities of Bergen, Oslo, Trondheim, Stockholm, Gothenburg, Copenhagen, and Aarhus, as well as regions of the Scandinavian Arctic such as Greenland and Sápmi will be its focal points.⁹ These studies will look closer at both the aesthetics and performing strategies of various performing arts groups connected to Scandinavian cities and regions. SCAN-AESTHETICS will connect these nation, city-specific, and regional studies, by instigating a mapping of the various affiliations and networks between the Scandinavian performing arts groups, and by conducting a comparative study of the programming theatres and performing arts festivals in Scandinavia. SCAN-AESTHETICS asks how these theatre institutions and festivals have shaped the independent performing arts field in addition to influencing cultural policymaking and the national funding bodies in

8 Vedel, K., & Hoppu, P. (2014). *Nordic dance spaces: Practicing and imagining a region* (Vol. 4, *The Nordic experience*). Farnham: Ashgate

9 Arntzen, K. O. (1995), *Hybrid and Cultural Identity – After the Mainstream*. *Arctic Theatre from Scandinavia in a Post- Mainstream Perspective*, in *Nordic Theatre Studies*, Volume 7, K. Götrick, ed.: Nordiska Teaterforskare: Gideå.

Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.

Narrative 1: Odin Teatret is one of the earliest independent theatre groups and theatre laboratories in Scandinavia (1964). This group has impacted the Scandinavian field of independent theatre to a great extent, especially in the direction of the anthropological turn. In this capacity, Odin Teatret can be seen as a midwife for several indigenous theatre groups in the Arctic area such as Sámi and Greenlandic theatre groups. Odin Teatret under the direction of Eugenio Barba has, from the outset, instigated networks and training programs for the independent theatre groups in Scandinavia and beyond. This narrative can be exemplified by Grenland Friteater¹⁰ as well as Greenlandic Tuukkaq, who both were inspired by Odin Teatret and the anthropological turn. Odin Teatret's networks and workshops (especially under ISTA, International School of Theatre Anthropology) together with the various networks emerging among the performing arts groups during the 1980s, shows the need for viewing the field of independent performing arts as a Scandinavian field.¹¹

SCAN-AESTHETICS proposes the following research questions connected to the first narrative (NRQ): NRQ-1: Why did Odin Teatret emerge in a Scandinavian context (Oslo and Holstebro), and what cultural and political considerations lay behind the refusal of supporting them in Norway and embracing them in Denmark. This will be studied in the perspective of cultural politics and general historiography. NRQ-2: What is the significance of the anthropological turn regarding the emergence of indigenous theatre in the Arctic? - Cultural and political studies and theatre anthropological research will be the leading methodological approach.

Narrative 2: Attention will be given to the use of popular theatre forms in social and political theatre as developed internationally by artists and companies such as Dario Fo, Bread and Puppet Theatre, and Théâtre du Soleil, who created a social and political direction based in physical theatre and storytelling¹². In the Scandinavian narrative, they are represented by Pistolteatern in Stockholm and by Husets Teater in Copenhagen, as well as Svalegangen in Aarhus; they all also focused on new drama.¹³ In Norway, this narrative is connected to the political theatre of the regional companies such as Hålogaland Teater. Companies using collective and egalitarian modes of leadership. Except for a very few companies, such as Perleporten Teatergruppe and Smugteatret, most of the Norwegian political theatre collectives were absorbed by the institutional theatres in Norway. Within the institutions, the social and political theatre was, to a great extent,

10 Grenland friteater (1990). Et norsk gruppeteater. Materialer. Refleksjoner. Erfaringer. 1976-1989: Friteatrets forlag.

11 Christoffersen, E. E. (2012), Odin Teatret. Et dansk verdensteater, Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag.

12 Arntzen, K. O. (1980), Gruppeteater og skuespillerkunst, Mag. Art-dissertation, Universitetet i Bergen.

13 Ringby, P. (1995), *ibid.* 14 Watson, A (2018), De politiske gruppeteatrene i Norge – Estetisk-politiske virkemidler og kollektive praksiser hos: Svartkatten, Pendlerne, Hålogaland Teater, Perleporten og Tramteateret. Ph.D Thesis, unpublished, University of Bergen.

embedded in the Brechtian acting-style, or in productions of 'red revues and cabarets', as described by Anna Watson in her PhD work on political group theatre in Norway.¹⁴ The style of 'Red Revues' in the 1970s was largely instigated by the Swedish political theatre group NJA-Gruppen, later Fria Pro Teatern.

NRQ-3: How did the political, social, and popular independent theatres and dance companies develop aesthetically and affect the avantgarde of the 1960s and 1970s, and how did they contribute to community processes and social work. What is the heritage of collective work processes of theatre aesthetics and popular theatre in later decades, and how has it affected Scandinavian societies in a transnational perspective? Methodology will be based in different theories of cultural studies and aesthetic theories. Perspectives of hybrid expressions, cross-borders, and fluidity will be central, as well as theatre and dance companies in relation to the site specific and museums. Cultural theories and dance research perspectives will be examined on a methodological basis.

Narrative 3: In the 1980s, Scandinavian Project Theatre and dance emerged, and is often termed the Scandinavian Wave, constituting postmodern theatre and dance, and referring to companies like Billedstofteater, Hotel Pro Forma¹⁵, Baktruppen, Ingunn Bjørnsgaard Prosjekt, Remote Control Productions, and others. The Scandinavian Wave corresponds to an aesthetic and experimental turn within the independent performing arts scene.¹⁶ This turn can clearly be seen in Kirsten Dehlholm's work as a director and visual artist in Billedstofteater and in Hotel Pro Forma (1977, 1986). Dehlholm contributed by creating a visual kind of dramaturgy based on her emphasis on set designs as visual art. This visual dramaturgy carried on into Dehlholm's performance strategies, making Billedstofteater and in Hotel Pro Forma a processional and site-specific style of performance, together with the group's experimentation with technology in order to give the audiences new visual experiences.¹⁷ In the work of Dehlholm through Billedstofteater and in Hotel Pro Forma, weight would be laid on an interdisciplinarity, which would connect institutions, sites, and structures in new ways of working.¹⁸

The Norwegian performance group Baktruppen, can be said to work with similar principles as Dehlholm. Though their work had more emphasis on foregrounding selected texts rather than the visual aspects of their performances, Baktruppen's work was marked by an experimentation with technology together with site-specific

14 Watson, A. B. (2021), *De politiske gruppeteatrene i Norge*, PhD-dissertation, Bergen: University of Bergen.

15 Christoffersen, E. E. (2015), *Skønhedens hotel. Hotel Pro Forma. Et laboratorium for scenekunst*, København: Hotel Pro Forma

16 Arntzen, K. O., S. Å. Birkeland (1990), *Fra Visual performance til prosjektteater i Skandinavia/From Visual Performance to Project-Theatre in Scandinavia*, Katalog vol. 1-1990, Oslo: Spillerom.

17 Salter, C. (2010). *Entangled: Technology and the transformation of performance*. London: Bit Press.

18 Lehmann, H.-T. (1999) *Postdramatisches Theater*, Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren.p. 36

work, and new ways of relating to audiences.¹⁹ Also, within the dance-projects from the 1980s and onwards, such a visual and aesthetic experimentation can be seen.²⁰ A feature which all of the mentioned groups share, is an international and trans-Scandinavian outlook.

NRQ-4: Why did the aesthetic turn in project theatre and networking become so dominant in the 1980s and early 1990s? NRQ-5: Why did informal networking have such a strong impact in competition with hierarchic models of productions? NRQ-6: How could deconstruction processes regarding means of expression, processes, and meaning have such a strong impact in this period? Cultural politics and rhizomatic theories are central methodological approaches. It would be of importance to map the performance landscape of Scandinavia by focusing on different areas in the Scandinavian region like, for instance, Copenhagen as well as the artistic exchange with other cities. This would involve theories of networking.

Narrative 4: Bergen International Theatre (BIT) has, since its beginnings in 1983, marked itself as influential in the formation and dissemination of Norwegian and European performing arts. BIT has alongside Black Box Teater in Oslo and Teaterhuset Avantgarden (TAG) in Trondheim, created a new understanding of contemporary theatre and dance in the direction of a visual dramaturgy in the 1980s, and in the 1990s and onwards in the direction of the post-dramatic in the performing arts. BIT is connected to several European performing arts networks, which play an important role in the way BIT produces and co-produces its performances. BIT can thus be seen as an example of how the influx of international networking in Scandinavia and Northern Europe have influenced both the aesthetics, the production, and the funding of independent performing arts, a trend which spread to the Scandinavian countries via the Festival of Fools and KiT in Copenhagen (Copenhagen International Theatre).²¹²²

NRQ-7: How did the development of participatory theatre and performative practices affect the director, and how does it deal with reality, and by which international impulses could the programming theatres such as KiT and BIT influence theatre in the region. NRQ-8: How independent theatre on a programming basis influence avantgarde theatre. This can be seen from the perspective of the ideas of situationism and Fluxus. Networking theory and the Rhizomatic will be methodological approaches here.

In this volume of Nordic Theatre Studies not all the above-mentioned areas of research and research questions are mentioned. We hope though it can

19 Performance Art by Baktruppen (2009), eds. Arntzen, K. O. and C. Eeg-Tverbakk, Oslo: Kontur Publishing.

20 Arntzen, K. O. (2010), «An historical outline of dance in Norway», in Independent performing arts in Norway, Oslo: The Norwegian Association for Performing Arts/Danse- og teatersentrum.

21 Fools 25 (2004). 25 års teater, dans og performance med Københavns internationale teater, red. Thiesen, L., København: Schønberg.

22 Ferdsskriveren (2003), risiko og løft, red. Birkeland, S. Å. og M. Nerland, Bergen: BIT Teatergarasjen.

give inspiration for further initiatives and deeper understanding of the SCAN-aesthetics connection to modernist movements in a broader sense, like Fluxus and Scandinavian Situationism.

In his contribution, S. E. Wilmer contributes to this in his article on the Lithuania founder of Fluxus, George Maciunas who founded the movement in New York, and which resulted in Fluxus concerts also in Scandinavia. Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen (to our great sorrow, Kim passed away January 6th) has written an article on Signa Sørensen and her *Konwaliowa Cutie Doll*, performed in Kanonhallen in Copenhagen in 2002, which is an example of immersive theatre. The article is based on the premise that there has emerged a strong interest in adopting and developing interactive and immersive aesthetics. The article is also a comparative study of Danish Signa and Sister's Academy and the Swedish Group Poste Restante.

Melanie Fieldseth from Norway has examined the history behind the programming theatre in Trondheim, Teaterhuset Avant Garden (TAG), the cultural policy behind and the infrastructure of independent theatre in Norway since the mid-1990s. Danish Karen Vedel, in her contribution, gives an outline of how dance history can be a shared project in-between archivists and the dance milieu itself. It is about an ongoing dance archival history project initiated in 2018 by choreographers in relationship to an understanding of the craft marked by the notion of expanded choreography.

Luule Epner's contribution on the independent scene in Estonia 1987-92, examines the transition in Estonian theatre history from the Estonian Soviet Republic into independent Estonia, situating it between various influences both institutionally and aesthetically. Olga Nikolava, in her contribution, examines the practice of Soso Daughters in the perspective of the representation of trauma and independent creative practice in contemporary Russian theatre. Altogether, this volume of *Nordic Theatre Studies* reflects some aspects of the topics that are to be the objectives of SCAN-aesthetics. Hopefully, others can be added in later publications.

AUTHORS

Knut Ove Arntzen, born 1950, is professor emeritus of theatre studies at the University of Bergen, Norway, a theatre critic since 1976 and assistant, associate, and later full professor in Theatre Studies since 1984. He has published a series of essays and books in Norway and internationally. He has taken part in many symposia and conferences of both academic and in artistic research and has been a visiting professor to universities and theatre academies such as in Antwerpen, Frankfurt am Main, Kaunas, Oslo, Helsinki, Yaoundé, and Yokohama. He worked with the Les 20 Jours du Théâtre à Risque festival in Montreal (Québec) and has been an international consultant to BIT Teatergarasjen. He was previously a guest editor of *Nordic Theatre Studies*, vol. 13 (2000), *Theatrical Illusion and the Text*, and together with Martynas Petrikas a guest editor of vol. 30 (2018), *Theatre Studies* 3.0.

Anna Blekastad Watson (b 1979, London, England) is associate professor in Drama and Applied Theatre at The University College in Western Norway, Department of Arts Education. Between 2013-2018, Watson was a PhD Fellow in Theatre Studies at the University of Bergen (UiB, Norway). Her PhD thesis entitled: "De politiske gruppeteatrene i Norge – Estetisk-politiske virkemidler og kollektive praksiser hos: Svartkatten, Pendlerne, Hålogaland Teater, Perleporten og Tramteatret». She has published several academic articles, theatre criticism, and book reviews in journals such as: *Norsk Shakespeare og teatertidskrift*, *Peripeti*, *Scenekunst.no*, *Teatervitenskaplige studier*, and *Nordic Theatre Studies*.

REFERENCES

Arntzen, Knut Ove. 1980. *Gruppeteater og skuespillerkunst*. Mag. art. dissertation. Bergen: University of Bergen.

Arntzen, Knut Ove, Birkeland, Sven Åge. 1990. "Fra Visual performance til prosjektteater i Skandinavia/From Visual Performance to Project-Theatre in Scandinavia". English translation: Neil Fulton. Katalog volume 1-1990. Oslo: Spillerom.

Arntzen, Knut Ove. 1995. "Hybrid and Cultural Identity – After the Mainstream. Arctic Theatre from Scandinavia in a PostMainstream Perspective". *Nordic Theatre Studies*. Volume 7. Kacke Götrick, ed. Gideå: Nordiska Teaterforskare. 69-75.

Arntzen, K. O. 2010. "An historical outline of dance in Norway". *Independent performing arts in Norway*. Oslo: The Norwegian Association for Performing Arts (NAPA). 118-147. Brauneck, Manfred, ed. 2016. *Das Freie Theater im Europa der Gegenwart: Strukturen - Ästhetik – Kulturpolitik*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.

Buresund, Inger, Gran Anne-Britt. eds. 1996. *Frie grupper og Black Box Teater 1970-1995*. Oslo: Ad Notam Gyldendal.

Christoffersen, Erik Exe. 2012. *Odin Teatret. Et dansk verdensteater*. Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag.

Christoffersen, Erik Exe, Winkelhorn, Kathrine. eds. 2015. *Skønhedens hotel. Hotel Pro Forma. Et laboratorium for scenekunst*. Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag.

Ferdsskriveren. 2003. Risiko og Løft. Birkeland, Sven Åge, Nerland Marie. eds. Bergen: BIT Teatergarasjen.

Fools 25. 2004. *25 års teater, dans og performance med Københavns internationale teater*, Lene Thiesen. ed. København: Schönberg.

Forser, Thomas, Heed, Sven Åke. 2007. *Ny svensk teaterhistoria volume 3: 1900-talets teater*. Möklinta: Gidlunds förlag.

Fjeldstad, Anton et.al. 1981. *Gruppeteater i Norden*. København: Samlerens Forlag A/S. *Gruppeteater i Norden. En Hvidbog*. 1972. Eugenio Barba. ed. Teatrets Teori og Teknik nr. 17. Holstebro: Odin Teatrets Forlag.

Grenland Friteater. 1990. Et norsk gruppeteater. Materialer. Refleksjoner. Erfaringer. 1976-1989. Tor Arne Ursin, Lars Vik. Eds. Porsgrunn: Friteatrets Forlag.

Lehmann, Hans-Thies. 1999. *Postdramatisches Theater*. Frankfurt am Main: Verlag der Autoren.

Performance Art by Bakruppen. 2009. Knut Ove Arntzen, Camilla Eeg-Tverbakk. eds. Oslo: Kontur Publishing.

Ringby, Per. 1995. *Avantgardeteater och modernitet. Pistolteatern och det svenska teaterlivet från 1950-tal till 60-tal*. Gideå.: Vildros.

Salter, Chris. 2010. *Entangled: Technology and the transformation of performance*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

Vedel, Karen, Hoppu, Petri. eds. 2014. *Nordic dance spaces: Practicing and imagining a region. The Nordic experience. Volume 4*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Vestergaard Pedersen, Henrik. ed. 2001, 2006. *PerformancePositioner. Mellem BilledTeater og PerformanceKunst*. Gråsten: Drama.

Watson, Anna. 2018. *De politiske gruppeteatrene i Norge – Estetisk-politiske virkemidler og kollektive praksiser hos: Svartkatten, Pendlerne, Hålogaland Teater, Perleporten og Tramteateret*. Ph.D Thesis. Bergen: University of Bergen.

Coverphoto shows the actress Eva Vium sitting in front of the villa where the immersive production "Salò", The 120 days of Sodom based on Pier Paolo Pasolini, by Danish director Signa, took place outside. Copenhagen in 2010.