

# Turning Points and Conflicting Interests An Analysis of Changing Visions for Teaterhuset Avant Garden

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## **ABSTRACT**

Teaterhuset Avant Garden (TAG) was a theatre in Trondheim that co-produced and presented the work of independent performing artists and groups from Norway and abroad. By taking a closer look at events between 1993 and 2003, this article situates TAG within broader aesthetic, organizational, and political contexts and analyses the impact of these events on visions for the theatre's future. The article is based on archival research for a forthcoming book on TAG that deals with the period 1984–2018. In 2019, TAG changed its name to Rosendal Teater in honour of the historic building where it has since relocated.

## **KEYWORDS**

Archival research, institutional history, institutionalization, artistic practice, cultural policy

# Turning Points and Conflicting Interests

## An Analysis of Changing Visions for Teaterhuset Avant Garden

In researching the history of Teaterhuset Avant Garden (TAG) for a forthcoming book, I spent some time reviewing material in the theatre's newly formed archive.<sup>1</sup> I knew in advance there had been some turbulence in its past that had to do with the transition from a production space and stage that was centred on the work of four core theatre groups, to a venue with a curated programme of co-produced works and touring performances by selected artists. What I initially assumed would be a clearly defined shift from one model for theatre organization to another, the archived material indicated was more complex.

In this article I explore the question: What internal and external factors have shaped the vision for Teaterhuset Avant Garden's identity and mission as a theatre space for the independent performing arts? The scope of the investigation is limited to 1993–2003, a period that is framed by two notable events. In 1993, TAG opened in a new theatre space after prolonged negotiations with local authorities to find a suitable location. In 2003, TAG secured annual funding from the Ministry of Culture for the first time, while rumours of impending financial crisis at the theatre circulated in the media. Between these two events, management of the theatre switched hands four times, and the theatre severed ties with its founders.<sup>2</sup> As the artistic leadership of TAG changed, so too did the vision for the theatre.

I discuss this change in situation from aesthetic, organizational, and cultural policy perspectives and focus on the impact of three turning points in the theatre's history: the restructuring of the public funding system for the independent performing arts that took place between 1995 and 1997, the aesthetic impact

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1 *Navnet forplikter. Teaterhuset Avant Garden 1984–2018* is scheduled to be published by Fagbokforlaget early 2022. Rosendal Teater's archive, which includes the years it was known as Teaterhuset Avant Garden, is registered as a private archive and located at Interkommunalt arkiv Trøndelag: TIK/PA-1253.

2 Between 1993 and 2003, TAG was led by Kai Erik Jensen (1994–95), Berit Rusten (1996–97), Kristian Seltun (1998–2001) and Silje Engeness (2001–07). Ask Brantenberg Cold filled the position of general manager temporarily until Jensen started in 1994.

of the festival concept Bastard that was introduced at TAG in 2000, and the situation leading up to the dissolution of legal ties between TAG and its founders in 2003. Underlying each of these events were conflicting interests that caused friction at the theatre as they came into play. As an additional context I also provide a brief description of the theatre's early years and the circumstances of its founding in 1984.

### **Archive as trace, guide, and new ground**

Teaterhuset Avant Garden's archive has only recently been collated, catalogued, and deposited at Interkommunalt arkiv Trøndelag, which is the official archival institution for the county in which the theatre is located. I approached the newly formed archive with open questions: What traces of TAG would I find there? What had been saved throughout the years? My objective was to gain an understanding of the theatre's path, the people involved, the issues it faced, the choices that were made, and how they shaped the theatre's artistic aims and priorities.

Theatre theorist and historian Erika Fischer-Lichte reminds us that constructing theatre history always entails a partial perspective and requires clarification of subject matter:

*Everyone must delimit the subject area of their theatre history in accordance with their specific epistemological interests and competence, select the events that are likely to be productive in terms of the questions they are asking, and construct their history from their examination of the documents related to these events.<sup>3</sup>*

She also points to the need for research questions or the articulation of a central problem to justify the selection of source material and method of analysis. In my case, I was interested in the history of one particular theatre organization and its situation within broader aesthetic, organizational, and political contexts. More specifically, I wanted to gain an understanding of its transition from a production space and stage with resident theatre groups, to a venue for co-production and guest performances. I focussed on archival documents, existing literature, and exploratory interviews with figures associated with the theatre, as well as cultural policy documents and reports.<sup>4</sup> When combined, I found this material suitable to shed light on the theatre's development as it became a fixture on the local and national performing arts scene.<sup>5</sup>

Since I was working with a newly created archive, I was mindful of how available documentation and archival method shape knowledge production.<sup>6</sup> By handing over its documentation to an accredited archival institution, I would argue that TAG's past is assigned value as part of a broader cultural and social history that extends beyond the specific artistic context of the theatre organization

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3 Fischer-Lichte 2004, 3.

4 See Buresund & Gran 1996; Bergsgard & Røyseng 2001; Arntzen 2004; Velure 2014.

5 TAG was also a part of Nordic, European, and other international contexts, but these topics are outside the scope of this article.

6 Hammergren & Sauter 2017, 6–7.

itself.<sup>7</sup> This is significant because it counters the assumption that Teaterhuset Avant Garden, given its location outside the capital city and connection to the independent field of performing arts, is a minor institution. The independent performing arts scene has often been overshadowed by the national and regional theatre institutions that, generally speaking, work within a dramatic theatre tradition. While the national and regional theatres that belong to the Ministry of Culture's portfolio were designated or established through political processes and incorporated into official cultural policy, artists and ensembles, interest groups and associations, students and scholars, initiated their own theatre spaces, venues and festivals on an independent basis.<sup>8</sup> TAG is one such theatre.

The path to professional recognition and political legitimacy for independent endeavours can be a long one, as TAG's experience demonstrates. Although TAG built up a solid standing in Trondheim and in independent performing arts circles in Norway and abroad, it was the last of the three "programming theatre venues" (BIT Teatergarasjen, Black Box teater and Teaterhuset Avant Garden / Rosendal Teater) to receive public funding directly from the Ministry of Culture.<sup>9</sup> In a Norwegian context, these three theatres have contributed to the development of an infrastructure of venues for the independent performing arts, and are often seen in relation to each other. From 1999–2008, they even worked together in a formalized network to bolster their capacity to receive touring productions that visited their respective cities. Kristian Seltun, who was artistic director and general manager at TAG from 1998–2001, was one of the driving forces behind the network initiative. Network cooperation was more than a practical consideration, it also signalled the merger of artistic interests between the participating theatres and acted as a political platform to strengthen their respective situations.

While the similarities between these theatres are often emphasized, it is important to note that this observation only considers the period from the late 1990s and onwards. This is rarely clarified as the basis for comparison.<sup>10</sup> By focussing on similarities, salient differences with respect to their origins and histories are obscured. I would argue that such differences should be given more attention. In the case of TAG, its particular history and position in local and national artistic, political, and social contexts has played a role in defining expectations for the theatre and continues to impact its development up to the present day.

Whereas Black Box teater and BIT Teatergarasjen have, albeit in different ways, initiated documentation and analysis of their histories, there has not yet been substantive historical research and analysis of the situation for

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7 Elisabeth Egseth Hansen and Ingrid Rognes Solbu should be credited for initiating the archive project. Lillian Iren Arntsen took on the task of sorting and cataloguing the material.

8 Arnestad, Gladsø & Langdalen 1995.

9 Dansens Hus, Norway's national stage for contemporary dance, is structurally similar to the three theatres BIT Teatergarasjen, Black Box Teater and Rosendal Teater. Due to differences in its historical and political situation, and since it exclusively presents dance, I have not included it for further discussion in this article.

10 Arntzen 2004 does however clarify differences in the theatres' origins.

Teaterhuset Avant Garden.<sup>11</sup> TAG's archive can potentially open histories and alternative viewpoints that can realign perceptions of activity within the independent performing arts scene in Norway. This article, and the book on which it is based, are therefore contributions to new knowledge production, both with respect to the specific history of TAG, and with respect to existing research on the development of a specialized theatre infrastructure for the independent performing arts.

The archive contains, among other things, notes and minutes from formal and informal meetings, correspondence, contracts, funding applications, official documents, cultural policy documents, budgets and accounts, plans and strategies, programming overviews, newspaper clippings, and visual material such as photos, posters, season catalogues, and fliers. Both the theatre groups who founded TAG, and the theatre organization itself, were part of local and national contexts. This is also reflected in the archival material.

Mindful of the bias the researcher brings to bear on historical documents, I have attempted to approach the archive critically and with an awareness of my own blind spots. For example, I was more familiar with TAG's identity, programming, and organization in the 2000s than earlier decades. Between 1984 and 1998, and to a certain extent between 1998 and 2003, I found that the archive contains multiple voices that made it possible to identify opposing ambitions, aesthetic preferences, and approaches to running a theatre, as well as documentation concerning external events such as changes in funding structures and shifting political priorities at local and national levels. An important consideration was therefore how to deal with internal disagreements over the direction of the theatre that was articulated in these documents. I wanted to acknowledge these differences without assuming that the outcome was inevitable or necessarily a sign of progress. In this regard, I have benefited from theoretical perspectives from new institutionalism.<sup>12</sup> They have served as a reminder of how organizations can become socialized to existing norms, values, and expectations as they seek to strengthen their legitimacy and acquire institutional status.

### **Theatre pioneers in Trondheim**

At the end of the 1970s, three newly formed theatre groups in Trondheim found themselves in need of rehearsal space. Petrusjka Teater was established in 1978. It worked with puppet theatre and aimed to challenge the conservative bent of the puppetry tradition in Norway.<sup>13</sup> Det Lille Musikkteater was founded in 1979. It worked with a variety of theatrical forms spanning from musical reviews, to visual expression, to writing new plays. Students at a private theatre school started Studio Teater in 1978, before it became a professional ensemble in the early 1980s. Studio Teater worked with dramatic texts, physical theatre, and commissioned new plays. Members of the ensemble also created their own

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11 Buresund & Gran 1996. For information about BIT Teatergarasjen's publication 25 that marked its twenty-fifth anniversary, see <http://bit-teatergarasjen.no/om-oss> accessed 28 October 2021.

12 Kangas & Vestrheim 2010, 267–286.

13 Zaitzow 2016, 40–45.

material. Children and youth were important audiences for all three theatre groups, but they also produced work that was aimed at adult audiences or that appealed across generations.

Petrusjka Teater, Studio Teater and Det Lille Musikkteater founded Teater Avant Garden (TAG) as an umbrella organization, rehearsal space, and stage. TAG was originally part of a multidisciplinary, artist-run space called Avant Garden that opened in 1984. The space came about on the initiative of the three theatre groups who joined efforts with representatives from other artistic disciplines. Together they formed a committee to lobby municipal authorities with the aim of acquiring workspace on terms that were sensitive to artists with little income.<sup>14</sup> At Avant Garden, TAG occupied an entire floor that served as office, production, and performance space for the three theatre groups and as a stage for occasional performances by visiting artists. In addition to the theatre groups, visual artists, writers, arts organizations, and other cultural workers rented workspace at Avant Garden.

Getting Avant Garden off the ground was no easy feat; it required sustained negotiation with the local authorities. When the building finally opened in 1984, Sigurd Bakken, a bureaucrat who worked in the municipality's cultural administration, hailed the event as the start of a more active cultural policy towards independent artists and cultural workers.<sup>15</sup> Maintaining the space turned out to be a challenge, despite the positivity surrounding its launch. A mere three years later, in 1987, Avant Garden found itself embroiled in a political battle to save its workspace from being sacrificed to the site of a new cultural and commercial center, which was intended for Trondheim Symphony Orchestra. Shops and a hotel were also planned for construction. This triggered a cultural debate in Trondheim that pitted art against commerce and high culture against what was deemed to be more accessible forms of cultural activity.<sup>16</sup>

The crisis took its toll. As the motley collective at Avant Garden gradually disbanded in the late 1980s and early 1990s, TAG looked to secure a space of its own with the support of the municipal authorities. After several attempts to find a new location, the theatre groups and their tiny administration settled on the former site of a newspaper printing press, a short walk from the building they had previously shared with a multidisciplinary community of colleagues. In connection with the impending move, TAG restructured its organization. What had started as a loose administrative framework, was now organized as a foundation with articles of association, a board of directors, and a general manager. Cirka Teater, a theatre group known for its visual theatrical language and spectacular mechanical installations, joined TAG as the fourth theatre group and co-founder.<sup>17</sup> The core theatre groups were ensured representation on the board, workspace, and performance opportunities.<sup>18</sup>

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14 "Nye Avant Garden", s.a., Privatarkiv TAG, TIKa/PA-1253/D/Da/L0001.

15 Nyrønning 1984.

16 TAG compiled newspaper clippings from the period. See "Avant Garden – et tilbakeblikk", s.a., Privatarkiv TAG, TIKa/PA-1253/Q/Qa/L0001.

17 Of the four core members, Cirka Teater is the only group that is still active as of 2021.

18 Cirka Teater maintained its own workspace separate from TAG, but used the theatre for performances and workshops.

## Growing pains

Throughout the 1990s, the independent field of the performing arts expanded. Not only were more artists and groups applying for public funding, they were developing artistic practices that pointed in new aesthetic directions. Artists who worked with practices that were often given labels such as post-dramatic theatre, visual dramaturgy, post-modern dance, conceptual approaches to dance and theatre, and interdisciplinary performance were gaining prominence.

Expansion put pressure on the system for public funding. Arts Council Norway assumed responsibility for this funding in 1995.<sup>19</sup> The core of the funding system had been operational subsidies (*driftsstøtte*) that were awarded annually to professional theatre and dance groups who worked in continuity and maintained a certain level of activity. Financial support was awarded for one or three years and on the basis of more or less objective criteria. Despite the growth in the artist population, the funding budget had not immediately followed suit. As more groups qualified, the distribution of funds became thinly stretched. There was also a project-based scheme (*prosjektstøtte*) that supplemented the operational funding. Project grants were awarded to individual productions and artistic projects with a defined time frame.

The idea of awarding annual funding on the basis of activity was closely tied to the notion of stable, professional performing arts groups as the heart of the independent scene. Artists claimed that this kind of financial support enabled them to establish and sustain a long-term base for their work, an opportunity that was especially important for artists who lived and worked outside of Oslo.<sup>20</sup> Artists seemed to associate the availability of annual, operational funding with the possibility of continuity and longevity for their work. As long as theatre and dance groups remained active, they were secured a minimum of financing.

Critics of the existing system pointed to a generational gap and claimed that the funding procedure tended to favour established groups, making it difficult for less established groups and artists who organized their work differently to break through and receive annual subsidies. Operational funding was also said to be less suited to the individualized practices and new forms of collaboration that were emerging throughout the 1990s, and were seen as a departure from established aesthetics and ways of working. These developments challenged the notion of *independent (theatre or dance) groups* – more or less stable units marked respectively by a collectively determined artistic identity – as the ideal for organizing artistic work. Instead, the notion of *independent performing arts* gained traction: a dynamic artistic field made up of individual artists, groups, and collaborations who had varying aspirations, needs and degrees of duration, continuity and stability in their work situations.<sup>21</sup>

The expansion in the artistic field became a catalyst for change. By restructuring the funding system, the aim was to provide greater flexibility to consider the

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19 Bergsgard & Røyseng 2001 provide a thorough overview of funding administration in their evaluation of the new project-based structure. See also Fidjestøl 2015, 213–221.

20 Comment from TAG, 11 January 1996, Privatarkiv TAG, TIK/PA-1253/Q/Qa/L0003; Velure 2014, 173–181.

21 Fieldseth 2015, 9.

needs of each individual artistic project. The Arts Council proposed a project-based model in which grants would be awarded for a duration of maximum four years. The most radical change, however, concerned the implementation of new evaluation criteria. Project proposals were now to be assessed on the basis of the originality and quality of the artistic idea. In other words, on the basis of subjective rather than objective criteria that emphasized artistic potential rather than previous works and activity.<sup>22</sup>

Artists who opposed these changes mobilized. TAG was eager to be at the forefront and proposed meetings and activism to make their voices heard. Opposition was organized around four main arguments. One argument was that changes to the funding structure privileged cities rather than outlying areas. In less populated areas, working in groups was seen as the most sustainable organizational practice, and in some cases independent theatre groups produced the only theatre productions that were offered in the area. Another argument held that the new funding model would be detrimental to theatre and dance for children and youth audiences. This argument assumed that such work would struggle to be prioritized on the basis of the new criteria, which were seen as valuing more experimental aesthetics. A third argument, which dealt with dance specifically, was based on concerns that the new funding model would provide insufficient support to an art form that lacked an institutional infrastructure. A fourth argument held that the new model would weaken continuity of artistic practice. Consequently, the independent theatre tradition would be a less viable alternative to national and regional theatre institutions.<sup>23</sup>

Both general manager Berit Rusten and most of the theatre groups at TAG broadly agreed with these arguments. But theatre professor Svein Gladsø, who had served on TAG's board of directors, read the artistic and political landscape differently. He saw an opportunity and a necessity for TAG to assume a role as a regional stage for the independent performing arts. In his view, the theatre's structural model was not equipped to deal with the change in policy at the Arts Council, nor with the shifting dynamics in the artistic field. His analysis was controversial, even though it was meant to strengthen the position of the theatre organization artistically, financially, and politically. His plan would entail a stricter policy for the artistic programme that emphasized quality, prioritized artists from around the region, and subsequently loosened the ties to the four core theatre groups. The last point was the most radical proposal. In order to ensure greater flexibility for the theatre organization, Gladsø claimed it had to exist as an autonomous entity.<sup>24</sup>

Changes to the funding system and evaluation criteria impacted TAG directly; two of the four core groups did not receive a final round of operational funding as expected. This did not lead to an immediate restructuring of the theatre organization itself as Gladsø had proposed.<sup>25</sup> Although documentation in the

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22 Bergsgard & Røyseng 2001.

23 Velure 2014 discusses arguments and reactions, 152–194. See also Beverfjord 1997.

24 Letter from Svein Gladsø to the board of TAG dated 13 February 1997. Privatakiv TAG, TIKAI/PA-1253/A/Ab/L0003.

25 Beverfjord 1997.



archive does not elaborate on the specific consequences for the standing of these groups at the theatre, the lack of stable funding contributed to a gradual weakening of their role. By the late 1990s, the groups performed less frequently at TAG, and their contracts with the theatre were increasingly under pressure.<sup>26</sup>

The discourse surrounding the necessity of overhauling the funding system also framed the change in aesthetic terms. The concept of the “project” was seen in context with experimental aesthetics and new dramaturgical approaches, and implicitly in opposition to theatrical forms that were prevalent among previous generations such as physical theatre, puppetry, and street theatre.<sup>27</sup> More broadly, a polemic of artistic innovation versus tradition, concept versus craft, also began to emerge. It is debateable whether there is a substantial connection between the “project” model and new aesthetics beyond the rhetorical connection. Nevertheless, the discussions sparked by the changes, both at TAG specifically and among artists and other professionals in general, made clear that a recalibration of the artistic field was underway.

### **A theatre for artistic renewal or heritage?**

Teaterhuset Avant Garden’s response to the changing dynamics of the artistic environment was complex. Alliances and individuals within the theatre proposed different visions for the theatre’s future. Often they were guided by their own particular interests and needs.

Svein Gladsø was not alone in his vision for Teaterhuset Avant Garden’s future, although it was vigorously opposed by the founding theatre groups, who cast themselves as the foundation and common thread that held TAG together.<sup>28</sup> The push for more autonomy had started as early as 1994, and was often a source of conflict between different stakeholders associated with the theatre. There were three main lines of influence within TAG: the founding theatre groups, general managers and artistic directors, and board members. The municipality of Trondheim was an early ally and source of funding, and also had a hand in determining the theatre’s direction. Each of these stakeholder positions had their own vision of what kind of theatre structure TAG should adopt: Should it be artist-based and artist-run? Should it be centred around resident theatre groups with a supplementary programme of guest performances? Should it be a workspace and stage for locally and regionally based artists? Should an artistic director determine the theatre’s artistic profile? Should the theatre present a mix of Norwegian and international work? What should the ratio of locally produced performances be? Who did the theatre see as its audience? Adults, families, children and youth? Locals or visitors? General public or an audience with specialized interests? At one time or another, Teaterhuset Avant Garden tried out models or approaches

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<sup>26</sup> Studio Teater had difficulty with the transition from operational to project funding and experienced financial trouble. Letter from Studio Teater dated 6 September 1999, Privatarkiv TAG, TIK/PA-1253/Q/Qa/L0006.

<sup>27</sup> Velure 2014.

<sup>28</sup> Letter from Petrusjka Teater, “Forslag til endring av framleiekontrakt og bruksavtale mellom TAG og de faste gruppene”, 11 March 1997, Privatarkiv TAG, TIK/PA-1253/A/Ab/L0003; Letter from Magna Vox, “Ang. bruksavtaler, fremleieavtaler og langsiktig strategi”, 20 April 1997, Privatarkiv TAG, TIK/PA-1253/A/Ab/L0003.

that proposed answers to all of these questions.

Berit Rusten, who led the theatre at the time of Gladsø's proposal, agreed by and large with the need for greater autonomy. When she took over as general manager in 1996, her aim was to make TAG accessible to a broader public. That meant increasing the relevance and availability of the theatre space and its programme in the community. She was a theatre artist and activist who understood theatre as a social practice.<sup>29</sup> She was keen on continuing the theatre's tradition of programming for children and youth, and also wanted to include underprivileged communities. In addition to these ambitions, she presented artists based in Norway and abroad – dance artists, theatre artists, and musicians – who were exploring new artistic practices. The Flemish theatre collective, Tg Stan, was one such example. By 1997, TAG's artistic profile was changing, and productions by the core groups comprised a smaller portion of the programme than before.

TAG increasingly embraced new aesthetics and dramaturgical approaches that had been gaining prominence both in Norway and abroad. When a new general manager, Kristian Seltun, joined the theatre in 1998, the aesthetic transformation of the artistic programme accelerated. Norwegian collectives and companies such as Verdensteatret, Baktruppen and Ingun Bjørnsgaard Prosjekt were invited to perform. He also sought out artists connected to Trondheim Academy of Art, who were interested in sound art and multimedia performance. The title of his position was soon changed to artistic director and general manager, perhaps as a reflection of his strengthened role in defining the theatre's artistic profile and aesthetic interests.

Seltun's contribution to the development of TAG is perhaps best summarized by the festival concept *Bastard*, which he introduced in 2000. *Bastard* was an interdisciplinary performance festival. As Seltun explained: "*Bastard* is a junction, a mixed breed [...] untouched by inbreeding and hereditary defects. Similarly, performance can be said to be a bastard. [...] It breaks through genre borders and pumps fresh blood into art."<sup>30</sup> This was a radical departure from the theatre's past, not only due to the interest in performance art as a genre and artistic influence, but also the desire for "fresh blood" marked a decisive departure from the heritage of TAG's founders.

Prior to joining TAG, Seltun had worked as a dramaturg after completing studies in theatre science at the University of Bergen. BIT Teatergarasjen was a source of inspiration that Seltun bore in mind when he moved to Trondheim.<sup>31</sup> BIT Teatergarasjen started as a festival in the 1980s, but moved into its own theatre space in 1991. It developed a curated artistic programme and actively sought out cooperation within international networks. Seltun slowly implemented a similar approach to the artistic programme at TAG, but was conscious of the fact that the theatre was still a production space for the core theatre groups as well as other associated artists.

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29 Svendsen 1996.

30 TAG catalogue, spring 2000. Rosendal Teater, Sceneweb. Accessed 1 March 2021 from [https://sceneweb.no/nb/organisation/2607/Rosendal\\_Teater-1984-1-1](https://sceneweb.no/nb/organisation/2607/Rosendal_Teater-1984-1-1). My translation.

31 Kristian Seltun, 4 June 2019.

Seltun did not break completely with TAG's past. The core theatre groups and other local artists continued to perform there, although some have claimed it became more difficult to get Seltun to agree to performance dates.<sup>32</sup> He also continued to present theatrical forms, for example puppetry, object theatre, and physical theatre, that resonated with TAG's aesthetic history. But there is no question that Teaterhuset Avant Garden was gradually becoming a more autonomous theatre organization with fewer long-term commitments and that paid less attention to maintaining a heritage.

### **A legal technicality**

When TAG struck out on its own after Avant Garden disbanded, the municipal authorities entered into an agreement with the core theatre groups that stipulated they perform a set number of days per year. Although the city supported TAG financially, it also expected the theatre to generate supplementary income by renting its new stage to other performing arts groups and cultural activities. One of the first tests of the new organization after it opened in 1993 was to find the balance between the general manager's responsibility for the whole of the programme and the production and performance needs of the core theatre groups. But TAG had limited resources, and so did the artists. Managing TAG was constantly a balancing act between what often seemed to be incompatible ambitions and expectations.

Ultimately it was a legal issue, a change to the law that regulated foundations, that forced a permanent change to TAG's organization in 2003.<sup>33</sup> The updated law aimed to ensure the independence of foundations from their founders. As a result, members of the founding theatre groups were no longer guaranteed a seat on the board or access to the theatre facilities. TAG was no longer under obligation to offer long-term contracts to locally based artists or groups, a practice that had defined the theatre for years. Artists in Trondheim had for some time expressed frustration with the fact that the city seemed to channel its support for the independent performing arts through TAG, even when it became clear that the theatre was taking steps to ensure greater autonomy.<sup>34</sup> Despite the fact that the restructuring of the organization was due to a legal issue, some theatre groups found it difficult to accept, especially those who had founded TAG. They had already felt the slow shift in Teaterhuset Avant Garden's direction for a number of years. To them it was the final step in an ongoing process of detachment between the theatre organization and its roots.

However, even after 2003, local theatre artists and groups continued to exhibit an investment in TAG, especially when they disagreed about the theatre's development. TAG's artistic choices and priorities remained a source of debate.<sup>35</sup> The expectation that TAG should support and provide opportunities to local

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32 Anne Marit Sæther, 1 March 2019; e-mail correspondence 22 April 2020.

33 See for example «Undersøkelse om eier- og styringsform for et fremtidig Teater Avant Garden», s.a. 2002, Privatarkiv TAG, TIK/PA-1253/A/Ab/L0005, or 25/02, Eier- og organisasjonsstruktur, 25 April 2002, Privatarkiv TAG, TIK/PA-1253/A/Ab L0005.

34 Lundemo 2004.

35 See for example Wallum 2007a and 2007b.

artists never really disappeared. The sense of ownership among the local theatre community remained strong. At the core of the debate was always the question of the theatre's identity. Who and what was TAG, who should be permitted to take the stage, how should the theatre function, who was its audience?

### **Adapting a theatre organization**

Teaterhuset Avant Garden was founded out of necessity. Over the years, it endeavoured to find a working model for a theatre organization that could attend to the needs of independent performing artists and build an audience for their work. The desire to define these needs, and how the theatre could or should address them, has been at the heart of the tension that continuously played a role in the theatre's inner workings. Between 1993 and 2003, TAG was in a prolonged state of negotiation between competing ambitions that pushed and pulled the theatre towards different aims and visions. At the same time, TAG endeavored to establish itself as a permanent presence on the independent performing arts scene and acquire both professional recognition and political legitimacy. I have attempted to demonstrate this by discussing three situations in the theatre's history in which conflicting interests within the theatre organization, along with broader aesthetic, organizational, and cultural policy developments, became a catalyst for change.

TAG was embedded in the ideas and issues that were up for debate both locally and nationally, but it also played a role in forming them. This is clear from TAG's involvement in establishing network cooperation with BIT Teatergarasjen and Black Box teater. Their partnership helped solidify the idea of the programming theatre venue as an infrastructure for the independent performing arts. For TAG, this entailed transitioning from a production space built around resident artists, to a theatre venue that co-produced and presented guest performances. This decision was based on the situation at the time. Teaterhuset Avant Garden's history demonstrates that theatre organizations are capable of adapting to changing circumstances.

The situation for the independent performing arts is once again in flux. At present, there is a wide-ranging debate that calls into questions ways of organizing and supporting artistic work, how to balance between artistic renewal, diversity, and continuity, and attend to infrastructural needs. Perhaps this article can serve as a reminder that the independent performing arts field has grappled with similar questions before.

#### **AUTHOR**

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## Interviews

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Kristian Seltun, 4 June 2019. Interviewed by Melanie Fieldseth.