

Rethinking Nordic

An Introduction

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According to the third edition of the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1973), “Nordic” is defined as “Of or pertaining to the type of northern Germanic peoples represented by the blond dolichocephalic inhabitants of Scandinavia and the north of Britain.” It gives the etymological root of Nordic as the French word “nord” meaning north. The same dictionary defines Scandinavian as “Of or pertaining to Scandinavia, a geographical term including the three countries Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. Also as sb., one connected ethnographically with one of the three countries.”

Thus, according to the Oxford Dictionary, the term contains phenotypical, geographical, and ethnographical meanings. What it omits, amongst other aspects, are the linguistic, geopolitical, and cultural implications of the term. For example, Finland includes itself within the group of Nordic countries because of its history as part of Sweden and its second national language being Swedish. Furthermore, Iceland claims an affinity as a result of its history as part of Denmark, and its Icelandic language being related to Old Norse. Moreover, the term Nordic encompasses economic and geopolitical implications. The European Free Trade Association (EFTA), created in 1960 as an alternative to

ISSN 2002-3898

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Open access: <https://tidsskrift.dk/nts/index>

Published with support from Nordic Board for Periodicals in the Humanities and Social Sciences (NOP-HS)

DOI: 10.7146/nts.v33i2.132868

the European Economic Community (the predecessor of the EU), established closer economic links between five Nordic countries (Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, and Iceland) that continued until most of these countries joined the EU. Nowadays, the Nordic Region is among the richest regions in the world and associated with social equality, high living standards, high levels of technological development, and vast natural resources. The World Happiness Report 2022 ranked all the Nordic countries among the ten happiest countries in the world¹.

Nordic is also an aesthetic brand used in the context of 'Nordic noir' which is ascribed to popular crime films, television series, and crime fiction. Whereas the notion of Scandinavian (including Finnish) architecture and design implies democratic values, functionalism, minimalism, high-quality products, and organic material, the stylistic features of Nordic noir feature slow and melancholic pace and the systematic reduction of expressive local elements such as low light (November darkness instead of midsummer sun light), regional landscape (forests and lakes), and a northern climate. According to Jaakko Seppälä, the concept of Nordic noir is an oxymoron: while Nordic refers to the happiest countries in the world, the French word *noir* stands for darkness and a pessimistic world view².

In this issue of *Nordic Theatre Studies*, we wanted to investigate what Nordic means in a theatrical context. One suggestion was to apply the concept of "hygge", the Nordic word for taking a moment to feel good and happy, as a metaphor describing how theatre can become a place for experiencing time and community spirit in a manner that resists social acceleration. The democratic aspects of theatre and the need for political change was at the heart of all the other articles as well. Instead of characterizing style or aesthetic choices, the authors of this issue regard theatre as a social art form: reflecting, promoting or, in this case, neglecting change in society. During the last decades the Nordic countries have seen several important changes, among them the remarkable increase in the diversity of the population in terms of religion, ethnicity, and national origin. Several authors in this issue question whether the shift in ethnic and cultural diversity has become sufficiently visible in the performing arts and cultural institutions. Nordic as a region of supposedly blond inhabitants, as mentioned in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* quoted above, seems to be the prevailing conception despite the Nordic region having undergone considerable transformation in the past fifty years, with immigrants in some major cities outnumbering the native population. Contributors ask whether white Scandinavians express resistance to demographic change as a result of xenophobia, religious intolerance, and general paranoia? Several articles in this issue recognize the theatre industries' reluctance to present different ethnicities on stage. The authors of this issue call for a new attitude and to make visible greater ethnic diversity. "It is time to break the cycle of the white colonialist structure of Nordic culture," says Swedish-Syrian dancer, actor, and

1 World Happiness Report 2022.

2 Seppälä 2020.

activist Ninós Josef in Tiina Rosenberg's article.

Rosenberg reflects on the Black Lives Matter movement in Sweden and claims that a general understanding of systematic and systemic racism has not sufficiently developed in Sweden. According to her, Swedes have a tendency to ignore race, ethnicity, and religious affiliation and the national self-understanding sees Sweden as the home of neutrality and equality. In her vigorous article Rosenberg asks if this colour-blindness and antiracist position could also be seen as an active process for keeping the image of the nation white. She alludes to white melancholia and white fragility and detects the strategies of resistance that have impeded change in white cultural institutions. She introduces us to some anti-racist performers and activist-groups who address racial injustice, and she encourages theatre organizations to expand the representation of POC artists, develop a politics of intersectionality, and increase their critical understanding of hegemonic whiteness. The ensuing articles reinforce Rosenberg's position.

Rikard Loman takes us back to the roots of nationalism and considers its role and effects during this period of globalization. Following Benedict Anderson, he characterizes nations as social constructs and reminds us how theatres were involved in building national identity. Loman updates his discussion by examining a Danish-Swedish theatre production *Stockholms blodbad* (*Stockholm Bloodbath*), which was staged in the border region of Skåne, at Malmö City Theatre in autumn 2016. The production is based on a 500-year-old historical event in the intertwined past of the two countries. Loman explores how the historical event was exploited to articulate national differences during the centuries and how the production in 2016 made fun of nationalistic sentiments and contested the idea of a shared Nordic identity. However, Loman problematizes the premises of the production by highlighting the context of the performance. The "flyktingkrisen" (The European refugee and migrant crisis) in the spring of 2015 and the multi-ethnic inhabitants of Malmö are contrasted with the almost all-white casting in the production and the narrative of a shared Nordic community. Loman regards the normative notion of Nordic identity as problematic and reconsiders it in the light of globalization and immigration.

Dirk Gindt continues the discussion by introducing us to Jonas Hassen Khemiri's debut play *Invasion!* at the Stockholm City Theatre in 2006 that was one of the first intercultural theatrical events on a mainstream Swedish stage. The entire cast had an intercultural and international background, with the stage populated by actors from the Middle East, North Africa, South East Asia, and Sweden. The performance confronted audiences with the consequences of stereotypical representations of Muslim men as fundamentalist terrorists and criticized the notion of "Swedishness" as a silent, yet powerful, signifier of whiteness. Interestingly, the production that is rooted in a distinctly Swedish cultural context and challenges hegemonic whiteness in Sweden, travelled all around the world and became a successful theatrical export. In his empirically focused article, Gindt uses the concept of cultural translation and analyses how the play has migrated and adapted to different national and linguistic contexts in new theatrical productions, engendered new creative networks

and transnational dialogues as well as unfolded multiple layers of cultural translations in the process.

In contrast to these articles which address artistic works, Daria Skjoldager-Nielsen turns to the audience and investigates how the audience development practice of *theatre talks* could reflect cultural policies, support inclusion, democratize art, and offer subverting powers for a dynamic world that requires constant productivity. Skjoldager-Nielsen playfully uses the pop-cultural Nordic word *hygge* referring to slowness, having a break, and taking a moment to feel good and happy. She draws parallels between *hygge*, theatre performance as an uninterrupted, nonproductive moment and Hartmund Rosa's concept "oasis of deceleration" which is resistant to the temporal structures of society in a constantly accelerating world. Theatre can offer an uninterrupted, nonproductive moment which is reinforced by the practices of theatre talks where the members of the audience have a free discussion after the performance. Skjoldager-Nielsen claims that theatre talks reflect and reinforce the basic elements of democracy, such as public discussion and participation.

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