

Nordic Gore?

Strangers, Foreigners, and the Communities We Imagine for Ourselves

RIKARD LOMAN

ABSTRACT

The idea of a Nordic community, even though it was a reality in the past and is still a quite tangible idea in the present – because all Nordic countries have striking similarities – is often obscured by the more recent idea that the nation always comes first, and for quite some time now the Nordic countries have been anxious to set themselves apart from their closest neighbour in particular.

In this paper, I will examine a rare – and at that, an unusually bloody and messy – Swedish-Danish theatre collaboration, *Stockholms blodbad* (Stockholm Bloodbath), which was staged at Malmö City Theatre, in Skåne, the southernmost of the historical provinces of Sweden, in the fall of 2016. *Stockholms blodbad* seemed to revive the idea of a “pure” Nordic community beneath the final coat of national varnish, but the intent was primarily to subvert and make fun of nationalistic sentiments while re-awakening a well-known, historical event in the intertwined pasts of these nations.

When *Stockholms blodbad* premiered in 2016, the differences between Sweden and Denmark and the sense of Skåne being a border territory had been amplified by recent events and different policies regarding what is now known as “Flyktingkrisen” (The European refugee and migrant crisis) in the spring of 2015. “Flyktingkrisen” reminded us of the fact that we now live in an increasingly globalized world. *Stockholms blodbad* seemed to deny it. As long as nationalism skews our thoughts and perceptions of the past and the present it is impossible to imagine a future that is habitable and hospitable to all humanity.

KEYWORDS

Stockholm Bloodbath, Nationalism, Nordic, Strangeness, Globalization, Performance analysis

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In our geographically and climatically subcooled, sparsely populated region of the world, “Nordic” seems like an adequate and convenient concept to demarcate a historically and culturally common ground – and a common market. There is certainly a quicker interchange of goods, values, ideas, fashions, aesthetic trends, and influences in the Nordic countries; a shared way of life, similar social structures, living standards, and belief systems. Indeed, not too long ago, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway were united in a personal union, the Kalmar Union, which lasted from 1397 to 1523. Since then, and from our perspective, however, all Nordic countries seem to have been anxious to set themselves apart from their closest neighbour in particular, in attempts to define their particular national identity within the Nordic community.

In this paper, I will examine a rare – and at that, an unusually bloody and messy – Swedish-Danish theatre collaboration, *Stockholms blodbad* (Stockholm Bloodbath), which was staged at Malmö City Theatre in the fall of 2016. In this production, actors from Sweden and Denmark worked together in an attempt to re-awaken a well-known, historical event in the intertwined pasts of each country, and to speak beyond the local community and attract a Swedish-Danish audience from the Öresund region. The production had a short run – 15 performances – and was seen by no more than 2.633 spectators. It was not particularly well received by Swedish critics and it may have been aesthetically insignificant, but the meaning of the event was not restricted to what happened on the stage; it was in fact amplified by what took place in the region at the time, in what the Swedish theatrologist, professor Willmar Sauter (2000) has called “the life world”, which includes “a vast range of things that we might consider important for a theatrical event” (p. 9), i.e. the context beyond the more immediate *conventional, structural, conceptual, and cultural* contexts.

This production was also interesting in relation to the idea of a Nordic community because our self-understanding and our understanding of this concept is strongly related to our experiences of the past, and not our own individual memories and recollections, but the stories passed on from generation to generation and, in particular, stories about shallow graves and old battles.

Furthermore, the idea of a Nordic community, even though it was a reality in the past and is still a quite tangible idea in the present – because all Nordic countries have striking similarities – is often obscured by the more recent idea that the nation always comes first. Even though we live in an increasingly globalized world, nationalism still skews our thoughts and perceptions in powerful ways, even in contexts where the intention is to subvert and make fun of nationalistic sentiments.

Stockholms blodbad

Stockholms blodbad was conceptualized some two years prior to the Malmö premiere in the small Danish theatre Mungo Park in Allerød, 35 kilometers north of Copenhagen, in an actor driven initiative called Mungo Lab where the basic idea was to rehearse and produce a quickly written play in one day and perform it only once. Swedish playwright Lucas Svensson and Danish born director Moqi Simon Troilin were involved in this project, and they were also responsible for the transitioning of the production two and a half years later into a full-scale production on the main stage (called Hipp) at the city theatre in Malmö (Malmö Stadsteater).

Most Swedes are familiar with the historical events referred to as the Stockholm Bloodbath and the year 1520 will have an impact on a Swede similar to the year 1864 to a Dane. In both these cases it becomes clear that it is not only great achievements and victories which unite a nation. Shared sorrows, losses, and defeats are equally important. In fact, in the words of French 19th century philosopher Ernest Renan, “periods of mourning are worth more to national memory than triumphs because they impose duties and require a common effort.”

The Stockholm Bloodbath was, of course, an act of cruelty and this might help to explain why we tend to remember this particular historical event in Technicolor, so to speak. The bloodbath was perhaps particularly upsetting in Swedish culture, which is said to be extraordinarily consensus seeking and anxious to avoid conflict.¹ However, this mass execution of Swedish nobles by the Danish king, Christian II (1481-1559) also marked the end of the Kalmar Union and the beginning of Sweden’s independence.

The Kalmar union was the closest we have been so far to a Nordic union and it included the three kingdoms Denmark, Sweden, and Norway under Danish paramountcy.² The union was created by Danish queen Margareta (1353-1412) and one of the goals was to form an alliance against the merchants of Lübeck and the Hanseatic League, mainly to protect the natural resources in Scandinavia.³ The Hanseatic League had a strong presence in the Baltic Sea Region from the late 1100s and a weak union lay in their interest. Hence,

1 See e.g. Åke Daun (1988). “Svenskhet”, in Ingvar Svanberg & Harald Runblom (eds.), *Det mångkulturella Sverige*, Stockholm: Gidlunds förlag, p. 412.

2 I.e. Sweden, including most of present-day Finland and Norway including Norway’s overseas dependencies, Iceland, Greenland, the Faroe Islands, and the Northern Isles of Orkney and Shetland.

3 The fish stock outside of Norway, the mining industry in Sweden, and the herring in Öresund/Øresund, the strait which is now the Danish-Swedish border.

this confederation of merchant guilds and market towns in Northern Europe encouraged and funded groups and individuals who worked against the union, e.g. members of the Sture family in Sweden.

The bloodbath in Stockholm was preceded by Christian's intervention in the "Swedish" conflict between Sten Sture the Younger and the archbishop, Gustav Trolle. Christian defeated Sten Sture and was eventually crowned by the archbishop as hereditary monarch in return for a promise of amnesty and a constitutional government. However, despite his promises, 82 people, noblemen and clergy who had supported the Stures were executed for heresy in the Stockholm Bloodbath.

After the bloodbath Christian II seemed to have Sweden under his control, but the events backfired and alienated virtually all Swedish factions from supporting the union and paved the way for Gustav Vasa (1496-1560) who was supported by the Hanseatic League. In 1523, on June 6, which is now the National Day of Sweden, he was elected Sweden's king and the Kalmar Union was dissolved.

Gustav Vasa's attempts to restore the power of the Swedish king and centralize the administration were in fact facilitated by the elimination of a great part of the high nobility in the Stockholm Bloodbath. Gustav Vasa also effectively exploited the bloodbath in his propaganda to promote the idea that Christian was indeed a cruel king who reigned against the interests of people living in Sweden. From the 1520s onwards, Christian II would be referred to in Swedish history as "Kristian the tyrant" and from this time onwards Swedishness would in many ways become what Danishness was not, and vice versa.

The historical events are well known but quite intricate and Lucas Svensson's play dealt only with the three days of partying preceding the executions in Stockholm. The play and production made no attempt whatsoever to do justice to the historical events. The director Moqi Simon Trolin's approach was consciously heavy-handed and he used sharp contrasts to highlight prejudices and stereotypes and the ambivalent attitudes that still prevail among Swedes and Danes. In this production the Danes had pork roast, the Swedes Janssons frestelse (Jansson's Temptation), the Danes listed to Kim Larsen, Swedes to Everyta Taube, the Danes challenged the Swedes to say "rød grød med fløde", while the Swedes challenged the Danes to say "sjuhundrasjuttiosju sjösjuka sjömän". The Swedes showed the Danes the traditional Midsummer dance "Små grodorna" (the small frogs) and the Danes smoked marijuana openly on the streets of Stockholm. The Danes on stage were cynical and enjoyed life, the Swedes on the other hand were naïve and enjoyed order, puritanism, and political correctness.

The program reassured the audience: "We Swedes love you Danes. The Danes love us Swedes. Cheers!" But it also cautioned spectators to wear a splash guard if they sat too close to the stage and the upcoming bloodbath.

Moqi Simon Trolin and Lucas Svensson allowed themselves to jump back and forth between the present and the past in a post-modern fashion. Norwegian designer Bård Lie Thorbjørnsen created a minimalistic, monochrome setting.

A long table ran across the stage and there was a backwall which could be used as a projection surface in the scenes where handheld cameras got close to the characters. Everyone was dressed in bright white clothes. There were no obvious differences between Swedes and Danes in this respect, and the essential similarities were further stressed in a sauna scene where Kristian Holm Jensen's comical King Christian II, in the nude, got drunk with his equally undressed subjects. In the beginning, however, everyone shouted out their nationality and eventually, as the Swedes were slaughtered and soaked in blood, the Danes would wear colorful garments over their white costumes.

Two characters – "A Danish Machiavelli" and "Homuth, the German executioner" – stood out from the rest and wore black clothes. Kristian Holm Jensen's king was obviously unfit as a ruler – he was too kind and too keen to be liked – but Christine Albeck Børge's Danish counselor kept reading from Machiavelli's *Il Principe* (written in 1513 but not published until 1532) to try to convince him that ruling by fear is the best way to keep the crown.

There was a love story across nationalities that represented some kind of hope in a cold world, but eventually Johannes Wanselow's Homuth was called in to interrupt the protracted party. All the guests were hung over when he arrived with a baseball bat, and suddenly heaps of blood washed over the stage as the Swedish nobles were executed one by one, while Homuth spoke about all the battlefields he had visited throughout history. *Aftonbladet's* theatre critic Barbro Westling called him a melancholic hitman, a ghostly death machine in a suit who walks through the ages.

The play and the production framed a failed attempt to unite Danes and Swedes, a horribly wrecked party, really, where hidden conflicts were disclosed with liquor as a catalyst. The play moved from party to hangover to a cruel finale, where Jonas Munck Hansen's small, live orchestra – electric bass, keyboard, and cello – played a low-key rockier version of a well-known funeral hymn (B.S. Ingemann's "Dejlig er Jorden"/"Härlig är Jorden"), well known to Swedes and Danes alike.

The director stressed in the theatre programme that he wanted to touch upon serious subjects – Realpolitik, greed for power, betrayal – and most importantly the question if this could happen again in our peaceful corner of the world. The comical aspects were, however, more apparent. I described it myself in a review for *Dagens Nyheter* as a roguish production that exploits the power of comedy but only occasionally peeks at the cruel historical events. Theresa Benér described it, in *Svenska Dagbladet*, as a revue where history and contemporary debate are stirred together with national myths, self-images, and prejudices.

Quite a few critics wrote about the fact that the Danish actors in the cast did nothing to be more easily understood. Kalle Lind e.g. wrote a chronicle in *Sydsvenska Dagbladet* about the difficulties in understanding Danish. It was of course a conscious choice from Moqi Simon Trolin *not* to facilitate understanding in this respect. In fact, when the characters on stage could not understand each other, a Swede quickly suggested "is it okay if we take it in English?" and everyone was happy to communicate using a third language – our lingua franca

– that no one mastered completely. The audience was given the opportunity to download the theatre’s translation app.

Borders, strangers, foreigners

The historical events that this production revolved around were once exploited to divide Swedes and Danes. I have myself felt the result and persistence of this strange process and the friction between these two “imagined communities”. The Anglo-Irish historian Benedict Anderson (1991) used this concept to stress the significance of the invented and continuously reaffirmed, followships that draw strangers together in nations. The imagined community consists of a lot of people who will, in fact, never meet but who still form the backdrop to our existence within the limited territory we think of as our sovereign nation.

I grew up in Sweden, in Norrköping, but my Danish mother, who was a teacher, introduced me at an early age to Danish history and culture. My Swedish-Norwegian father was a shipbroker, and he spent his entire career negotiating between Nordic and German buyers and sellers of the natural resources that the Kalmar Union was once meant to protect. We moved, in my early teens, from Sweden to Denmark, where everything that was quaint and awkward about me became signs of my Swedishness – and that was not a good thing in the border town Elsinore where you would frequently hear: “Keep Denmark clean, follow a Swede to the ferry”.

As a young adult I moved back to Sweden, to the other side of the border, to Skåne, and I quickly noted that this was a different kind of Sweden. Not only did I find it more difficult to understand the different dialects spoken in this region – much more difficult than the Danish spoken by my teenage friends and the Danish spoken by my relatives in Fyn (Funen) – I also soon realized that this was an old border territory with a complicated relation to Sweden. Gustav Vasa was elected Sweden’s king in 1523, but Skåne would remain Danish until the peace treaty in Roskilde in 1658. Christian II, who would be known in Swedish history as a tyrant, was popular in Skåne and spent a lot of time in this region during the Kalmar Union years. Skåne still has its own regional flag, and it has historically been more closely connected to Copenhagen than to Stockholm because, as Øystein Rian (2005) has pointed out, for a long-time, water tied together whereas woods kept apart.

In a border region like Skåne nationalism is always undermined and questioned by border crossers, by competing historical narratives, by different notions of belonging, but also by the fact that Skåne has frequently been the victim of political decisions in faraway places. Skåne is the southernmost of the historical provinces of Sweden, but it is right in the middle of the Nordic heartland.

In border zones, the risk of conflict is always more imminent, but so is the experience of reconciliation. Border zones are therefore good soil for suspicion *and* curiosity, bigotry, *and* broad-mindedness. Borders are also interesting from a theatrical perspective because they are always performative, and borders make themselves known when they are challenged by border crossers.

When *Stockholms blodbad* premiered in Malmö in 2016 the differences

between Sweden and Denmark and the sense of Skåne being a border territory had been amplified by recent events and different policies regarding what is now known as “Flyktingkrisen” (The European refugee and migrant crisis) in the spring of 2015. Denmark reinforced a much more restrictive policy which, by many Swedes, was perceived as inhuman, whereas Sweden wanted to keep the borders open. This was regarded by many Danes as naive. It was really against this backdrop that *Stockholms blodbad* was played out.

In 2015, an unusually high number of people tried to get into the EU and seek asylum. There was a total of 1.3 million registered asylum applications to the EU that year: more than twice as many as the year before. Most refugees, more than 25%, came from Syria, some 14% came from Afghanistan, and about 9% from Iraq. All three countries had ongoing armed conflicts.⁴

Sweden was among the four countries in the EU – the others were Germany, Hungary, and Austria – that decided to keep the borders open, and two thirds of the new asylum seekers ended up in these countries. About 163.000 people applied for asylum in Sweden that year – almost twice as many as a previous peak in 1992 when people fled from the wars in the Balkans – and in November the Swedish government started to tighten the policies because the refugees and migrants were now considered a threat to essential social functions.

In an article in *The Guardian*, the British-Indian novelist and essayist Rana Dasgupta points out that more and more people are left without a home country and they are therefore “pitched into a particular kind of contemporary hell”, fleeing from nations that seem intact only on a map. Dasgupta emphasizes that since 1989, only 5% of the wars in the world have been *between* nations. Most wars have been the result of “national breakdown, not foreign invasion” and they have spread traumatized refugees all over the world and they put a lot of stress on other nations. “The unwillingness even to acknowledge this crisis,” writes Dasgupta, “is appropriately captured by the contempt for refugees that now drives so much of politics in the rich world.”

There is, of course, a huge difference between my experiences as a border crosser – voluntarily moving between sovereign and internationally acknowledged, Nordic nations – and the unwanted border crossers trying to get into a Nordic nation out of necessity, fear, and an urge to survive.

As the dramaturg and Berlin based curator Sandra Noeth (2017) has pointed out, the vision of the borderless society and the “economically fostered and internationally acclaimed rhetoric of ‘cultural exchange’” are in staggering contradiction with “[t]ightened visa procedures, changing legal frameworks for permits, and an observably rising number of travel bans, exclusions and deportations.”. (p. 118) Some are allowed to travel, others are not.

The Israeli historian Yuval Noah Harari has made a useful distinction between *strangers* and *foreigners* that might also be helpful in this context. A stranger, according to him, is simply someone who looks like me, speaks like

4 In 2015, the civil war in Syria was in its fifth year and during this particular year more than 250.000 people – a lot of them civilians – were killed. By the end of that year there were about 7 million refugees in Syria – that is more than the entire Danish population – and 4.6 million refugees from Syria were in neighbouring countries.

me, and shares my culture; i.e. a *(relatively) familiar other* who is – in most respects – *inside* society. I was in this sense a stranger when my family moved to Denmark. A foreigner, on the other hand, is someone who speaks a different language, who looks different, and who does not share my culture; i.e. a *distant other* who – in most respects – remains *outside* society or is considered an outsider because s/he is not quite or not at all regarded as part of it.

Nationalists tend to accept strangers and familiar others but try to keep the distant other at bay. Nationalism nowadays has quite a bad reputation in Sweden (and, to a lesser extent, in Denmark) and it has become associated with xenophobic political parties, but as Harari points out, historically, projects that require large scale co-operation would never have happened without the support of this idea. Nationalism, says Harari, was in fact a necessary thing to counteract nepotism and tribalism and to let national interests prevail over personal interests and the interests of the closest family. According to Harari, today's democracies also rely on nationalism and weakened national sentiments help explain the disintegration and civil wars in countries like Syria and Iraq, and the chaos in the US. However, nationalism also reinforced our ancient tendency to prefer people like us over foreigners and, as Harari points out, "Xenophobia is to a large extent, unfortunately in our DNA."

The imagined Nordic community

The emergence of today's European nations and the growing significance of nationalism has to do with the collapse of the German-Roman empire, with the Napoleonic Wars (1803-15), and the Congress of Vienna (1814-15) which redrew the borders of Europe and resized the main powers so that they would balance each other and secure peace. As S. E. Wilmer points out in his paper "Theatrical Nationalism and Subversive Affirmation" (2012) cultural nationalism flourished in the nineteenth century, following the French and American revolutions and nationalist movements developed in many parts of Europe, "claiming the distinctiveness of their nations and, in some cases, calling for independence from a foreign oppressor," and theatre was used "as a powerful means of formulating and solidifying notions of national identity." (p. 86) Benedict Anderson (1991) calls the strong sense of belonging to a unique nation "nation-ness" and, as the American theatrologist Marvin Carlson points out in his book *The Haunted Stage* (2001), the theatre was in almost every new nation "significantly involved" in recirculating legends and historical events which were continually exploited in the process of developing a new national consciousness.⁵

5 Bruce McConachie (2010) has, in this regard, compared nationalism with melodrama in that it separates the good – moral and benevolent – from the bad – unethical and dangerous – and claims that hell will break loose if the former does not prevail. Actors in all nations were also expected to perform national characters and types, heroes and antiheroes – the selfless subject or soldier, the headstrong and obstinate but loyal peasant – traitors and villains. The theatre helped these invented national traits seem natural and true. All this reminds us of the fundamentally theatrical character of nationalism. As the German literary scholar Manfred Pfister points out in his introduction to the anthology *Performing National Identity* (2008): "National identity is not some naturally given or metaphysically sanctioned racial or territorial essence that only needs to be

In his book *21 Lessons for the 21st Century* (2019), Yuval Noah Harari points out that “the nationalist deal” looked quite attractive until 1945 because the modern nation states were able to build massive systems of healthcare, education, and welfare. But things changed in 1945 with the invention of nuclear weapons. After Hiroshima, people no longer feared “mere war” between nations, they began fearing nuclear war and, as Harari points out, “Total annihilation has a way of sharpening people’s minds.” Out of a shared existential threat, “a global community gradually developed over and above the various nations, because only such a community could restrain the nuclear demon.” (p. 132)

During the Cold War, “nationalism took a back seat to a more global approach to international politics,” and when the Cold War ended, “globalisation seemed to be the irresistible wave of the future” while nationalistic politics seemed “as a relic of more primitive times that might appeal at most to the ill-informed inhabitants of a few underdeveloped countries.” (p. 135)

There has certainly been a backlash in recent years with growing nationalism all over the world. Why is this? We know that nationalism becomes downright dangerous if it turns into a political belief that some group of people, representing a “natural” community, is superior to others and denies others their right to independence, or when it is used by political leaders to control the citizens of nations and excuse crimes in the name of the nation.⁶ Still, as Harari points out, once again “people all over the world seek reassurance and meaning in the bosom of the nation.” (p. 135)

Quite a few would say that this backlash is a reaction to globalization. In an article in *The Guardian*, Rana Dasgupta calls the nation state’s inability to withstand countervailing 21st-century forces “[t]he most momentous development of our era.” National political authority is definitely in decline, says Dasgupta, but more importantly, “since we do not know any other sort, it feels like the end of the world.” This is paradoxically, according to Dasgupta, why “a strange brand of apocalyptic nationalism is so widely in vogue.”⁷ When it seems impossible to move forward, we turn to the familiar past, and politics as we know it has a tendency to always deal with the problems of the past and not the challenges of the future.

According to Dasgupta, there is still, in spite of the effects of globalization, a

conceptualised or spelt out in discursive texts; it emerges from, takes shape in, and is constantly defined and redefined in individual and collective performances.” (p. 9)

6 As Robertson (1985) points out: “Nationalism has always been useful to leaders because, by stressing national unity and harping on threats from those who are clearly ‘foreign’ or ‘different’, internal schisms can be papered over, or otherwise unpopular policies can be executed.” (p. 332) In short, political leaders are likely to exploit nationalism as long as it can be used as a dangerously effective political tool.

7 All nations are enclosed within the same global system and this is why the individual nation will eventually have to capitulate, for as Dasgupta points out, “20th-century political structures are drowning in a 21st-century ocean of deregulated finance, autonomous technology, religious militancy and great-power rivalry.” The world order that was established in the first half of the 20th-century will not be able to handle the new world order which Dasgupta calls a “nihilistic backlash”. A domestic politician who claims to have a significant influence on the future of the nation will soon lose credibility, because, after decades of globalization, economics and information have grown beyond the authority of national governments.

lingering and in fact antique “faith of borders”. Uffe Østergaard (2015), professor in European history at Copenhagen Business School, has similarly pointed out that globalization has had the paradoxical effect that populations tend to unite behind the nation and support national parties in their respective Parliaments.⁸ This tendency might, however, as Rana Dasgupta points out, be a symptom of an old world in its death throes.

The British political sociologist Chris Rumsford wrote extensively on the impact of globalization, and he concluded that a consequence of this compressed perception of the world is that a lot of people feel estranged. The world as a whole may seem more familiar to us, mainly because of the internet, but the enormity of the world is also brought into focus and therefore globalization makes the world increasingly strange and threatening, says Rumsford (2013). In our increasingly interconnected world, everything is within the grasp of every individual, but at the same time, “globalization constitutes a threat to the integrity of our familiar (nationally-constituted) communities, and is disruptive of our attempts to maintain those communities.” (p. xi)

Strangeness, according to Rumsford, is the result of people’s insecurity as to whether or not they belong to a “we” collective, and their uncertainty regarding other members of this “in group”. We can no longer rely on the old notions of community and belonging.

Did these observations have any bearing on *Stockholms blodbad*? Well, indirectly or inadvertently they did, because on stage the Swedes and Danes looked pretty much the same but felt very different and failed to understand each other. They looked nothing like the beige, brown, yellow Swedes living in a town like Malmö where some 344.000 (as of Dec. 31 2019) inhabitants come from 184 different countries and where “strangers” and “foreigners” have in many ways become a familiar part of everyday life.⁹

As we have seen, *Stockholms blodbad* allowed itself to be anachronistic in many ways, but it did not update the cast so that it corresponded to present day Swedes and Danes. In *Stockholms blodbad* the Swedes and Danes were in fact – with Johannes Wanselow’s Homuth as the only exception – quite similar to the homogenously white Northerners described by the Roman historian Tacitus in *Germania* around 98 AD; those who resemble none but themselves, who are “nowise mixed with different nations arriving amongst them”. This is of course nowhere near a true description of the inhabitants of today’s Nordic countries.

Even though *Stockholms blodbad* was primarily intended to make fun of national stereotypes and preconceived ideas, it did, in fact, dig quite deeply into the present culture. In recalling this particular historical event; in blurring the boundaries between present and past; in posing the very serious question if our peaceful corner of the world was somehow exempted from the violence

8 Religious belief has had an unexpected renaissance, but nationalism is still, argues Østergaard, the strongest identification factor globally.

9 One third were born abroad in countries like Syria (7.970), former Yugoslavia (7.564), Denmark (7.384), Poland (6.840), and Bosnien-Hercegovina (6.425). See e.g. <https://malmo.se/Fakta-och-statistik/Befolkning.html>

found everywhere else, it indicated that we are still in many ways prisoners of the past and of our inherited national identities and imagined communities.

A gory past and a messy present

A particular theatre production is first and foremost expressive and significant to the audience that actually attends it, in a particular theatre space, on a particular occasion. *Stockholms blodbad* acquired meaning in *space* because it communicated with things that co-existed when the play was staged in Skåne in the wake of the European refugee and migrant crisis in 2015. It would have been received in an entirely different way had it been staged in the Swedish capital – where the bloodbath actually took place, where people in general tend to feel “more Swedish”, and where these events still have a different kind of presence in people’s minds – and not in a border territory, historically on the fringes of the Swedish nation and close to Denmark, where it was much harder to demonize the Danes and much easier to approach these events in a joyful, relaxed spirit.

Stockholms blodbad also acquired meaning in *time* because it communicated with past events and events that were causally interconnected. To begin with, *Stockholms blodbad* said something about the significance of history, which is important for a number of reasons: because it is *our* history and because it affects our sense of belonging and our sense of purpose. History is a limited number of significant events that have been picked out and abstracted from the actual infinitude of events and experiences that is the actual history. It is also the real or invented pasts that frequently and consciously are recalled, staged, and dramatized to nourish ideas about what shaped and united us and how it sets us apart from others. This is important because the things we remember and the ways in which we re-enact our memories will affect how we perceive ourselves and what we do in the future and how we act in the present. This is why nationalists often exploit history to try to shape and re-shape our likes and dislikes.

As Rumsford (2013) points out, the invocation of a threatening ‘other’ can sustain social cohesion. For a long time, the Stockholm Bloodbath was exploited in this way: to unite the Swedes and make Swedes fear and despise the Danes. The staging reminded us that the threatening other used to be our closest neighbour, but it did not attempt to reinforce this notion. *Stockholms blodbad* did not portray heroic national characters from the past (Gustav Vasa was absent and Christian was ridiculous), the Danes were not really vilified as oppressors and the Swedes never seemed to fight a righteous battle against a foreign oppressor. In fact, the production made nationalism seem fundamentally absurd and laughable, and it possibly made an attempt at what S. E. Wilmer (2012) calls “subversion through over-identification with nationalism”, whereby nationalistic expressions are called into question by imitation and exaggeration. Irony was certainly used to ridicule nationalist expressions in Sweden and at one point one of the Swedes suddenly transformed into a well-known leader of a Swedish xenophobic party. However, *Stockholms blodbad* seemed to revive some of the ideas of a “pure” Nordic community beneath the final coat of national varnish where everybody speaks like me, behaves like me, shares my culture and history – and certainly looks like me.

The foreigner was absent in this re-enactment of Stockholm Bloodbath, but the impact of globalization – the traumatized refugees that spread all over the world because of wars and national breakdowns; the contempt for refugees that now drives so much of politics in the rich world; the effects of globalization which some experience like the end of the world – was really essential to understanding the politics of the performance and its choice of subject. It was not the blood that flooded the stage, or the brutality of the executioner Homuth, or the cruelty of Christian and the Danes that made the strongest impression. The real horror of the production was really that it confirmed that we tend to still live in the past, in the inherited perceptions of the world, when we cannot face the challenges of the present moment.

We still tend to view the world from within our imagined national communities and our Nordic community. Moqi Simon Trolin and Lucas Svensson certainly made fun of nationalist sentiments and tried to convince the audience that we had all luckily transitioned from a world of conflict, war and brutality to a (post)modern world of theatrical playfulness, but *Stockholms blodbad* also probed and contested the (utopian, wish-oriented) idea of a shared Nordic identity in the early 21st century. In that sense and as Georges Gurvitch once ascertained in “The Sociology of Theatre” (1955): “The theatre is a *sublimation* of certain social situations, whether it *idealizes* them, *parodies* them or *calls for them to be transcended*. The theatre is simultaneously a sort of escape-hatch from social conflicts and the embodiment of these conflicts. [...] The theatre is society or the group looking at itself in various mirrors, the images reflected therein making the people concerned, the spectators, weep, laugh or come to some decision with increased resolution.” (p. 76)

Of course, this production had a limited impact, and the intent was primarily to entertain the audience, but this playful and playfully gory representation of a well-known historical event said quite a lot about the present world where people are no longer sure who “we” are and who the “other” might be. One important implication of globalization is undeniably that “strangers” and “foreigners” now come from a greater range of places with a greater range of – ethnic, linguistic, cultural – differences which makes it increasingly difficult to differentiate “us” and “them” in the Nordic community. According to Chris Rumsford (2013), this results in a “condition of strangeness”, of disorientation, because in a globalized world the “previously reliable reference points have been eroded.” In this new world, we encounter strangers, says Rumsford, where previously we encountered neighbours.

As S.E. Wilmer (2012) concludes his paper: “Cultural nationalism is endemic throughout the world, and the theories of such eighteenth-century philosophers as Herder continue to dominate our way of thinking.” (p. 99) Paradoxically, our national differences seem to be affirmed every time the idea of a Nordic community is conjured up. The real problem of nationalism is that it prevents us from becoming a part of something larger than the nation, larger even than the Nordic community. This is a problem because, as Yuval Noah Harari (2019) has pointed out, we now face a number of serious threats to our common future that no nation on its own can come to terms with, e.g. climate change, technological

disruption, the coming economic shocks that the AI revolution will unleash, the still prevalent threat of a nuclear war – or, we might add, a global pandemic like Covid-19 or the fact that a growing number of people are left without a home country and are therefore “pitched into a particular kind of contemporary hell.” As Harari points out: “While nationalism has many good ideas about how to run a particular nation, unfortunately it has no viable plan for running the world as a whole.” (p. 134)

In order to survive, we have to start looking beyond the imagined national and Nordic communities that once made us care about the most immediate strangers, leave the past, forget the old battles, use the theatre to rehearse survival skills, and face the harsh, messy, difficult – and beautiful – present reality, which will require collaboration on an entirely different scale, and together envision a future that is habitable and hospitable to all humanity.

AUTHOR

Rikard Loman is an Associate Professor (lektor), with the University of Lund. His most recent books are *Drama- och föreställningsanalys* (Play- and performance analysis) (2016), *Historiska perspektiv på teater/Teaterperspektiv på historien* (Historical perspectives on theatre/Theatrical perspectives on history) (2019) and *Funkisregissören. Ingmar Bergman och Malmö Stadsteater 1952-58* (The Functionalist Director. Ingmar Bergman and Malmö City Theatre) (due Spring 2021).

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