

## In Memoriam

# Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen 1971-2022

Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen, former president of the ANTS and former co-editor of *NTS*, has left us far too early at the age of fifty. He died on 6 January 2022 at his home in Stockholm after a prolonged illness. He will be much missed by colleagues across the Nordic region and beyond.

Kim began his academic career already as a student at the theatre department of the University of Copenhagen in the 1990s, laying down the tracks that he would continue to explore in his research: the performative, the spiritual, and the political. Both the range and the intensity of Kim's commitments were remarkable already then. He was engaged in public debates about the direction of contemporary theatre and performance. For example, he objected to the Bishop of Copenhagen's prohibition of the communion that took place as part of *jesus\_c\_odd\_size*, a performance installation by the renowned performance theatre group Hotel Pro Forma, and in a feature article, co-written with Lisbet Jørgensen, he pointed to possible ways of reinventing political theatre. Kim also co-edited three anthologies together with various faculty members from the department and co-organised seminars devoted to such topics as political theatre, theatre and religion, and the role of the audience in contemporary theatrical forms.

Concurrently with these academic activities, Kim worked as an intern with Hotel Pro Forma back in 1998. Between 1999 and 2001 he was a driving force behind "Drama in the Church": a series of experimental, theatricalised services at the progressive Avedøre Church on the outskirts of Copenhagen where he served as director, dramaturge, and even as a lay preacher. In fact, despite identifying as a spiritual person rather than a Christian, Kim had been a member of the Avedøre parish council from an early age, which was what originally inspired him to study theatre. During the early 2000s he also worked as a dramaturge for Copenhagen-based theatre artists such as Stuart Lynch,

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.v33i1.131988

Petra Berg Holbek and Sigrid Bennike, and he found an outlet for his acting talent in the performance group SIGNA's immersive theatre productions *Seven Tales of Misery* (2006) and *Night at the Hospital* (2007). During the last year of his life, he would return to performing in immersive theatre once more when he appeared as a member of a Swedish community council in *It Takes a Village* by the Stockholm-based performance group O.

Like his idol, David Bowie – who is said to have toured the US like a superstar before actually being one – Kim took matters into his own hands and began his international academic career around the time when he submitted his MA thesis. He taught a few semesters at the universities of Copenhagen and Roskilde – later, he would also teach at the universities of Lodz and Stockholm – and he became known as a generous and committed teacher abreast with the most recent theoretical developments and dramaturgical concepts. An active member of the ANTS since 2007, he was the co-editor of *Nordic Theatre Studies* from 2010 to 2013 before finally heading the association as president from 2012 to 2016. He also began attending the conferences of Performance Studies international (PSi) and the International Federation for Theatre Research (IFTR) well before beginning his doctoral studies. Indeed, IFTR became a home away from home where Kim's cosmopolitan personality would thrive. Together with Joshua Edelman and Farah Yeganeh, he founded the working group "Performance, Religion, and Spirituality" in 2010, which later led to his and Edelman's cofounding (together with Claire Maria Chambers and Edmund B. Lingan) of the journal with the same name. With his firm belief in international and interdisciplinary collaboration and exchange, it was only natural that Kim should be elected on to IFTR's Executive Committee when he stepped down as ANTS president. People who met him in meetings and conferences remember an exceptionally friendly and inclusive colleague who warmly welcomed new scholars and introduced them to his vast international network; and he was adamant that scholars from across the globe should be represented both in the working group and in the journal he had cofounded. Not surprisingly, it was at an IFTR conference that Kim met his future wife, Daria.

In 2011, Kim was admitted to the doctoral program of the theatre department of Stockholm University where he wrote his dissertation, *Over the Threshold, Into the World: Experiences of Transcendence in the Context of Staged Events*, under Willmar Sauter's supervision. The thesis, which he defended in 2018, brought together several of his research interests: installation art, performance art, liturgical drama, and global spiritual practices, and he spent several months conducting fieldwork in New Zealand, studying the pōwhiri ritual of the Māori people. It is worth quoting the beginning of Samuel T. Shanks' recent review of the dissertation in *Performance, Religion, and Spirituality*, which gives an impression of just how innovative Kim was as a researcher:

Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen's book [...] is an impressive theoretical and analytical exploration of transcendence: an experience so subjective and ineffable that one could be forgiven for doubting any scholar bold enough to tackle this [as] a target for performance analysis. Skjoldager-Nielsen ably demonstrates that not only is such a project possible, but also that, in engaging something as

personally subjective as the experience of transcendence, the radical subjectivity of all performance is similarly highlighted and made more accessible as a site of analysis. Skjoldager-Nielsen's contribution is the kind of piece that might raise skeptical eyebrows when you first encounter it, yet it feels almost essential in its importance by the end.

Although Kim did not get the chance to develop his thinking fully in the years after his PhD defence, his dissertation and research articles show how closely integrated his diverse interests were. In a way, all his writings can be said to deal with the eternal problem of the relationship between the classic transcendentals: the beautiful, the good, and the true. Kim's writings would explore the relations between the humanities and theology as well as the social and natural sciences. Questions that Kim pursued included: How can forms of immersive theatre contribute to the ethical growth of the participants? How can our interaction with a work of installation art generate a spiritual experience? How can performance art or sci-fi movies convey philosophical, or even scientific truth to the spectators? Always explorative in his mindset, Kim did not search for easy answers to these questions. Although deeply moral both as a private person and as a scholar, he was never moralistic, keenly aware of the pitfalls of so much political theatre that instrumentalises art to promote an agenda. "I believe that *we* – the artists, audiences, critics, scholars – have to discuss, continuously and critically, how the performing arts interfere with reality," he wrote in 2011, insisting that immersive theatre should not "reproduce the repression mechanisms and structures to which these arts are otherwise opposed."

Committed to the concept of art's autonomy and following the dictum of Danish theologian and philosopher Dorthe Jørgensen that "beauty is the experience of something having value in itself," Kim rather believed that the role of art and performance in human society is tied to our spiritual life. Especially during his last years, as he became an active supporter of the climate movement, he pondered what role the performing arts might play in this context. As a consequence, he kept searching for ways in which the arts might "facilitate audiences' embodied knowledge of the ecological issues," as he and Daria wrote in a 2020 article. In an article published less than a year before his death, "Embodied Ecumenical Eco-Spirituality: Revised Christian Attitudes Toward the Creation", he went searching for the ecological roots of Christian spirituality, bringing together such diverse figures as Hildegard von Bingen, Pope Francis, Swedish pastor and liturgical playwright Olov Hartman, and ecofeminist theologian Sallie McFague. Another response to the ecological challenge he identified in the new field of cosmo-aesthetics, which he was keen to introduce into theatre studies. Unfortunately, Kim did not live to receive funding for his planned postdoc project, "Space Art on Stage: The Cosmo-Aesthetic Challenge", which invites audiences to "perceive humankind critically in a cosmic perspective", so these ideas are left for others to explore.

Kim leaves behind his widow Daria, also a theatre scholar, and their son Edward.

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