

Theatre and Social Responsibility

An Introduction

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The idea for the current issue came out of musing on linguistics. The noun “responsibility” can be (mis)spelled “responsability” - an ability to respond - which to our ear sounded truly inspiring. In late 2021, after the gruesome pandemic years, theatre as an ability to react, to create, and to initiate a better adaptation for the changing world, looked like a theme for a new call for papers that might resonate well. The body of scholarship on the subject pointed out to the virtually unlimited conceptions of how theatre can be responsible towards the world, society, audience, and itself. It is interesting to observe how, in the course of the last hundred years, cutting-edge theatre feels first responsible for its own aesthetic value and accessibility focusing on artistic achievement over financial success and decentralisation. The U. S. and France could be a case in point.¹ Then comes the age of politically transgressive content as manifested in engaged theatre theories and practices of the second half of the twentieth century. It is especially evident in the development of Scandinavian independent performance, which as volume no. 11 of this very journal, co-edited by Knut Ove Arntzen and Anna Blekastad Watson, points out, was focused not only on formal experimentation but also on an anthropological turn and fusion of the popular and political theatre, thus creating a distinctive and region specific aesthetics.² In the case of the Baltics, societal responsibility is deeply embedded in local theatre tradition, which developed in the framework of the national emancipation movement of the late nineteenth century.

Currently, the responsibility of theatre can address the promotion of values in audiences ranging from risk-taking, individual freedoms, personal responsibility (“the entrepreneurial participation” in Adam Alston’s wording³) to strengthening the social fabric in dislocated communities⁴. In all the cases however, it is safe to conclude that the social responsibility of theatre dwells on the belief that (to paraphrase David Elliott *et al.*⁵) theatre is made by the people for the people.

1 Nelson 1983; Dixon 1980.

2 Arntzen & Watson 2021.

3 Alston 2013.

4 Woodson 2004.

5 Elliott *et al.* 2016.

The collection of articles in this issue is organized along three main thematic subsections. The first section deals with issues and representations of migration on stage. People move around the world more than ever, some of their own volition, others out of necessity. Immigration has changed societies, but has it changed the artworld accordingly or are there some deeply entrenched structural inequalities that persist within the cultural institutions of performing arts? Ingri Fiksdal examines the situation in the Nordics and draws attention to the fact that, currently, the dance field does not represent regional demographics. Fiksdal focuses especially on the possibilities that education offers for changing the current situation and suggests ways to increase diversity in the professional field.

Opera has a long history as a highly internationalized art form. However, this is not always noticeable in the attitudes of people working in the opera institutions or of the operagoers. In his article, John R Severn argues that there is room for improvement and a need to encourage people involved with opera to reflect on their own responsibilities and ethical standpoints. One issue that Severn highlights is that despite the themes of immigration, it remains relatively easy for a binary division of society into migrants and non-migrants. Severn introduces some ways to avoid this, including “the familiarization techniques” that obstruct the binary division and create a sense of a continuum of migrant identities instead. After exploring the operatic repertoire from the point of view of immigration, Severn analyses his case study, *Den Rejsende* [The Traveller], which is a chamber opera by Danish composer and librettist Eva Noer Kondrup from 2018. *Den Rejsende* tells of a Syrian refugee and her daughter as they make their way to seek asylum in Denmark.

Severn’s article tackles a highly topical issue since millions of refugees and asylum seekers have arrived in Europe lately. In 2015, 1.3 million people came to Europe to request asylum, and at the moment, millions of Ukrainians search for a place to live. Currently, the Nordic and Baltic countries take in refugees but there have also been historical periods during which wars and persecution by the Soviet Union forced Nordic and Baltic people to flee their countries. Martin Nõmm examines the Baltic narrative of exile as a cultural trauma by analyzing three plays by the first-generation Baltic exile playwrights Ilmar Külvet, Alfreds Straumanis, and Algirdas Landsbergis. Nõmm explores the ways the cultural discourse has changed during the centuries and highlights the possibilities the playwrights suggest for transforming from the trauma to the more positive, creative potentials of exile.

The second subtheme deals with the material conditions of independent theatres. Liliana Farcas and Helena Holgersson start the series of articles discussing the material conditions of artistic work, precarization, working conditions, and funding of the independent theatres. Farcas and Holgersson draw from Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu as well as from Angela McRobbie and Isabell Lorey while discussing the relation between freedom and resistance, passionate work, self-exploitation, and precarization in the cultural sector. They analyze the current situation in Gothenburg but also examine the historical background since the 1970s using archive materials and ethnographic interviews and fieldnotes.

Theatre NO99, which worked in Estonia 2005-2018, offers an intriguing, radical example of inconsistent funding and cultural policies and its impact on independent theatres. Hedi-Liis Toome runs through the rise and fall of Theatre NO99 and analyses the reasons behind the twists and turns as well as the effect on the theatre field in Estonia. Like Farcas and Holgersson, Toome discusses the strained relations between freedom, avantgarde, and government funding.

Ieva Rodina continues the discussion about working conditions in theatre groups by highlighting the changes in the roles of actors. According to Rodina, actors – or performers – work increasingly as freelance artists who also participate in administrative tasks and in creating the performance. Her concept actors as co-creators refers to the administrative process but also to devising and other working methods which allow actors to be an active part of the creative process. Rodina describes the aesthetic, institutional and social change through the works of Alvis Hermanis, Valters Silis, and the independent theatre troupe KVADRIFRONS.

The final subsection of this issue discusses social responsibility in relation to sustainable development. The environmental impact of theatre is harmful and requires theatre practitioners to update their practices. Whitney Byrn introduces the Danish association Bæredygtig Scenekunst NU [Sustainable Performing Arts NOW] and their idea of creating the first CO2 neutral production in Denmark. Byrn follows the production process of her case study, *Frontløberne* (2020), in

detail, and elaborates the successes and failures as well as the actual ecological footprint of the process. In similar manner, Kitija Balcare investigates the latest sustainability practices in the theatre scene in Latvia with special emphasis on the development of ecoscenography, meaning new production forms and new scenographic solutions oriented towards sustainability and new material thinking. Both Byrn and Balcare emphasize the importance of the transition from producing to reducing, reusing, recycling, and, as Balcare puts it, even refusing.

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