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# *Silence and Affect in the Swedish Performing Arts After #MeToo*

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## ***Abstract***

What could create more displeasure in the performing arts than silence about power, sexual harassment, bullying, and discrimination? Swedish performing arts has been described as a place where a code of silence rules, a code that has been challenged after the Swedish #MeToo movement of 2017 in film and performing arts. In this article, we aim to theoretically and empirically examine what silence around sexual harassment in the performing arts is, using feminist theory.<sup>1</sup> And further, we discuss how it creates negative affect<sup>2</sup> in the performing arts work environment. Silence or “theatre without action” as described by Rancière,<sup>3</sup> has traditionally been regarded as a valuable creative tool in rehearsal work. However, the #MeToo movements have shone a light on how silence contributes to the prevalence of sexual harassment, bullying, and discrimination in film and the performing arts. Building on discourse analysis of qualitative individual interviews and recordings of rehearsals with employees of four performing arts institutions in Sweden, we examine the discursive and affective shape of silence in the performing arts today. Challenging the idea that great art comes out of suffering, we discuss how silence in the performing arts has consequences that risk being harmful, not only for the employees, but for art itself, as well as the audiences experiencing it.

## ***Keywords***

culture of silence, performing arts, #MeToo, feminist theory, affect, sexual harassment

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<sup>1</sup> Butler 1997a, Malhotra & Carrillo Rowe 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Ahmed 2004, Berlant 2008.

<sup>3</sup> Rancière 2013.

### *Setting the Scene*

What could create more displeasure in the performing arts than silence about power, sexual harassment, bullying and discrimination? Performing arts institutions have, in Sweden and elsewhere, been described as places where a code of silence rules, a code that has been challenged by the #MeToo movement. In 2017, Swedish performing arts, mainly theatre and film, but not excluding other performing arts institutions, faced scandals surrounding sexual harassment, violence, and rape, where the silent acceptance by institutions was critiqued. In the petition #tystnadtagning (Silence, action) actors (mostly women) shared narratives of their experiences of sexual harassment and sexual violence in the workplace. In the years that followed, research<sup>4</sup>, as well as policy changes in the sector, were initiated and implemented by the profession's organization (Svensk scenkonst) and the union (Film och scen). They actively pursued a better work environment by breaking the silence about sexual harassment and sexual violence in the performing arts. The silence surrounding sexual harassment and sexual violence in a Swedish context has been understood as having covered up negative affects and displeasure, and the public display of negative feelings in #MeToo was met as a positive (even liberating) speech *about* displeasure. Thus, the relationship between sexual harassment and violence, silence and displeasure are multiple in the case of silence in the performing arts.

In this article, we aim to theoretically and empirically examine what silence in the performing arts is using feminist theory.<sup>5</sup> And further, discuss how it creates displeasure, and other affects<sup>6</sup> in the performing arts work environment. We build our analysis of silence and displeasure in the Swedish performing arts based on interview material and video recordings of rehearsal sessions collected as part of an ongoing research project called *Culture of Silence*.<sup>7</sup> The video recordings of rehearsal sessions and interviews drawn upon in this article were conducted and filmed in 2022 and 2023 with persons working on-stage and off-stage at four

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<sup>4</sup> Wahl 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Butler 1997a; Malhotra & Carrillo Rowe 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Ahmed 2004; Berlant 2008.

<sup>7</sup> *Culture of Silence* (full title in Swedish: Tystnadskulturens logik. Grupprocesser, konstnärlig frihet och lärande i scenkonstbranschens förebyggande arbete efter #tystnadtagning) is a three-year research project funded by AFA Insurance 2022-2025 (Dnr 200282). It draws on policy analysis, interviews and rehearsals. In this article only part of the material, interviews and observations about silence and affect, is discussed.

publicly-funded performing arts institutions in Sweden. Their cooperation, as institutions and individuals, was crucial for the project. For ethical reasons the institutions, productions, and persons are de-identified. The chosen institutions were of different sizes, located in different Swedish cities, and were rehearsing different types of productions. This article focuses on the present experiences and practices of the people working in the performing arts: their ideas about silence and displeasure and the interactions between them in rehearsal sessions. This article is based on the position that ideas and affects about sexual harassment in the work environments of the performing art professions deserve more attention, especially after #MeToo. The article first reviews relevant research contexts and theories, then we describe and discuss our methods and material. After that, the analysis is structured in three parts based on different silences brought up by our participants. Finally, we conclude by discussing how silence around sexual harassment and discrimination becomes affective in the performing arts today.

### *Displeasure and #MeToo: Challenging Performing Arts Traditions*

The enduring aspiration within the performing arts to aesthetically dismantle the barriers between life and art represents, we argue, one facet of how displeasure comes to matter in the art institutions. The performing arts aesthetically employs elements of violence and ecstasy/sex, which are, in turn, hallmarks of the modernist avant-garde movement, succinctly articulated by Antonin Artaud as the “Theatre of Cruelty”.<sup>8</sup> Theatre, thus, as a source of displeasure, maintains a connection with destruction and violence, drawing on historical understandings of the art form where the intention has been to approach reality more closely, or invoke real experiences in the audience. This aesthetic legacy is further elucidated by Peter Handke when he asserts that theatre cannot function as an institution that upholds morality<sup>9</sup>. Handke<sup>10</sup> dwells on the idea that art, as a pure form of representation, can obscure or distort an otherwise coherent transcendental reality. Artaud’s and Handke’s approaches have shaped the manner in which theatre has treated

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<sup>8</sup> Nelson 2011, 15.

<sup>9</sup> Handke in Joseph 1970, 58.

<sup>10</sup> Handke in Joseph 1970, 59.

sex and violence on stage, affecting ideas about what level of sex/violence an actor should be able to handle as part of their work.

A significant part of achieving displeasure in theatre along these lines revolves around breaking down language and other pronounced, visible representations to tap into real life.<sup>11</sup> According to Artaud, a theatre with minimal emphasis on spoken language was a strategy to achieve the real.<sup>12</sup> In another vein, silence or “theatre without action”, as described by Jacques Rancière,<sup>13</sup> has been regarded as a valuable creative tool in rehearsal work. Directors have employed silence, not giving direction, to empower actors’ artistic freedom or to build suspense and uncertainty, not only among actors/characters but also between the audience and the stage, as well as between characters and the aesthetic staging. These takes on performing arts, and the concept of artistic freedom, have been scrutinized for privileging the masculine and furthering the (symbolic and real) violence of masculinity.<sup>14</sup> Arguing that theatre should employ displeasure, silence, or cruelty, we argue, glosses over gendered and other power imbalances.

In the context of #MeToo, silence and displeasure took on new significance. #MeToo foregrounded the fact that working conditions in the industry were problematic in that they turned a blind eye to sexism, sexual harassment, and sexual violence, and that the avant-garde aesthetics that incorporated such silence had long been impervious to critique within the performing arts.<sup>15</sup> Even though one could argue that the avant-garde is no longer as relevant and that radical ideas from the modern era have been abandoned, the habits of thought, hierarchical structures, the notion of the genius artist, and even the contemporary performing arts institutions’ methods of organizing rehearsals and repertoires remain largely intact. Despite widespread disapproval of its aesthetic ideal, the tradition of the modernist avant-gardist way of working in theatre continues to be used.<sup>16</sup>

The #MeToo movement and its impact has been studied intensely for the past few years. In

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<sup>11</sup> Schroeder 2001; Nelson 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Nelson 2011, 28.

<sup>13</sup> Rancière 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Nelson 2011; Lund 2019; Johansson & Lindström Sol 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Lund 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Nelson 2011; Wahl 2018; Lund 2019; Johansson & Lindström Sol 2021.

a Swedish context, researchers have argued that #MeToo cut across sectors of the labour market, built on previous feminist infrastructures, and contained differences in strategies, impact, and difficulties between, for example, the forest sector and highbrow artists.<sup>17</sup> It has also been concluded that #MeToo and its ramifications have also been built on social media affordances and contemporary “affective counter-publics”.<sup>18</sup> Further, #MeToo activism, being a networked feminist activism, has been found to hold certain risks and strategies employed online.<sup>19</sup> While initially there was a strong focus on white Western celebrities in #MeToo as well as in #MeToo research, scholars are today accounting for experiences from many different #MeToo movements across the globe and acknowledging diverse origins and aims.<sup>20</sup> #MeToo activism also revitalized research on sexual harassment. In a Nordic context, there was no research field devoted to sexual harassment, it was seen as an anomaly in the Nordic exceptionalism narrative in which the Nordic region is imagined as “good” at gender equality.<sup>21</sup> After #MeToo, several studies and reports were launched<sup>22</sup> showing that sexual harassment still persisted in workplaces.

### *Silence, Speech and Affect in Feminist Theory*

In feminist activism, the idea of a need to “break the silence” has recurred throughout the twentieth century. From the suffragette movement’s work to achieve the vote, being able to speak about and influence politics, to the hashtag “say her name” created by, among others, Black feminist theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw<sup>23</sup> in 2015 to bring public attention to the murder and violence directed at Black women in the US, speaking has in feminism been seen as positive, silence as negative. “I will overcome the tradition of silence”<sup>24</sup> writes Gloria Anzaldua in 1987. *Your silence will not protect you*<sup>25</sup> is the title of the collected writings of Audre Lorde published

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<sup>17</sup> Ganetz, Hansson & Sveningsson 2022.

<sup>18</sup> Mendes, Ringrose & Keller 2019, 100.

<sup>19</sup> Clark-Parsons 2021.

<sup>20</sup> Pain 2021; Yin & Sun 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Lundqvist, Simonsson & Widegren 2023.

<sup>22</sup> For example, Wahl 2018 on the performing arts.

<sup>23</sup> Crenshaw 2015.

<sup>24</sup> Anzaldua 1987, 81.

<sup>25</sup> Lorde 2017.

in 2017. The feminist discourse on silence versus speech connects speaking up to challenging persisting violence and gender-based oppression, including racist, homophobic, and transphobic oppression. But how is silence understood? And how does silence work affectively on the feeling bodies in a culture? Sheena Malhotra and Aimee Carrillo Rowe,<sup>26</sup> discussing women of colour in the US, argue that in feminist theory, the understandings of silence have been ambiguous; silence can be an expression of powerlessness, but can also be used as a mode of resistance. There are different types of silence, they argue, and it is not always apparent which type we are dealing with. This conceptualization of silence can be compared to how Michel Foucault describes three types of silence;<sup>27</sup> that which cannot be said or the forbidden word, what must not be said, in the interest of separating madness from sanity in speech, and what we do not need to say because it is obvious and incorporated in the will to truth. All three silences are exclusions of speech that construct discourse – that is: a way to speak about a topic at a particular time and place.<sup>28</sup> Judith Butler discusses speech acts in several works and presents feminist conceptualizations of silence and discourse. According to Butler,<sup>29</sup> because they are performative, speech acts construct the world, and meaning. Speech acts are given political significance, for example, by being forbidden. Butler<sup>30</sup> discusses the “don’t ask don’t tell” policy on homosexuality in the US military and compares it to attempts to legislate against hate speech. While sexist and racist speech is constituted by repetition<sup>31</sup>, she argues that the very repetition holds the potential for satire and multiple meanings. For Butler, legislative attempts to prohibit sexist and racist speech cannot distinguish between speech acts with different meaning and effects, prohibiting pornography results in punishing queer activist artists, prohibiting racism results in punishing Black rappers. For Butler, state interventions of censoring speech are therefore a double-edged sword. Butler<sup>32</sup> also describes censorship as a discursive mechanism. Rather than a simple prohibition from the state, Butler argues that

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<sup>26</sup> Malhotra & Carrillo Rowe 2013, 13.

<sup>27</sup> Foucault 1993.

<sup>28</sup> Foucault 1993.

<sup>29</sup> Butler 1997a.

<sup>30</sup> Butler 1997a, 124.

<sup>31</sup> Butler 1997b.

<sup>32</sup> Butler 1997a, 128.

censorship is always in practice, by silencing what cannot be said, without explicit state prohibition, but speech also has the potential to transcend censorship and change the conversation. Understanding speech and silence with Butler and Foucault, thus, supports Malhotra and Carrillo Rowe's<sup>33</sup> conclusion that silence is ambivalent, it can be the result of censorship or resistance, and suppress both sexist and feminist speech.

Malhotra and Carrillo Rowe challenge feminist activist normative understanding of silence as bad and having a voice as good. They do so from a position of Black feminist theory and postcolonial feminist theory, arguing that in silence, power may also be subverted.<sup>34</sup> One example they draw on is Gayatri Spivak and her analysis of the (female) subaltern's speech of resistance, performed without saying a word. In a Swedish context, Maria Carbin<sup>35</sup> has argued that the policy requirement to speak, in her case about honour-killings directed at racialized women, produces silences. For Carbin<sup>36</sup> the stories of oppression told by girls helped silence the foundation of institutional racism within Swedish policy through the focus on sexism. Thus, the binary relation between silence and voice around issues of oppression is an illusion, the two co-exist.

In a different theoretical vein, Sara Ahmed<sup>37</sup> has argued that emotions and bodily affects are closely connected to discourse on what/who belongs. In her work on emotions, she argues that the feeling of fear is invoked in relation to particular bodies, those of racialized (Black) strangers.<sup>38</sup> The way emotions of fear, a negative feeling, latch on to ideas about racialized others as a threat, Ahmed argues, proves that emotions are doing something actively in our culture and that something asserts power over racialized others. Emotions are not reactions to the world, but rather shape the world in terms of "us" and "them" by how we feel. In her work on happiness and the feminist killjoy, Ahmed<sup>39</sup> further argues that opposing sexism and racism involved feeling unhappy and killing others' happiness. Using her approach to emotion, we

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<sup>33</sup> Malhotra & Carrillo Rowe 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Malhotra & Carrillo Rowe 2013, 2.

<sup>35</sup> Carbin 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Carbin 2014, 112.

<sup>37</sup> Ahmed 2004.

<sup>38</sup> Ahmed 2004, 63.

<sup>39</sup> Ahmed 2010.

argue that emotions surrounding current silences in the performing arts are uncomfortable. Lauren Berlant<sup>40</sup> defines affect as the active presence of the body in connection to the intensities of the present: affects (such as her example of sentimentality) entrench subjects and their feeling bodies within historical fields. Thus, the historical structures of affects can be sensed in the present. When displeasure and disgust shaped the reception of #MeToo narratives in 2017, the affective response was therefore constructing others, the perpetrators and the institutions that did wrong were shaped by the disgust the public felt for them. Silence around sexual harassment and sexual violence and discrimination in work culture was by association “bad”, something to be dealt with. In the following years, the Swedish performing arts employed different measures, for example research/mapping, education, and updating written policies to reform institutions and stop perpetrators. These ambitions in Swedish performing arts illustrate a discursive change where negative affect was the fuel to create a new imperative to speak. This article investigates present speech about silences in Swedish performing arts institutions and their entanglement with (negative) affect.

### *Methods and Material*

The material studied was collected using two methods: interviews and video recordings of rehearsals. The interviews analysed here were semi-structured individual interviews<sup>41</sup> performed by one of the authors (Werner) using a thematic question guide. The video recordings analysed were filmed and transcribed by the other author (Benyamine), enabling us to study actors’ interactions in rehearsal sessions.<sup>42</sup> In the analysis, we focus our attention on the meaning of silence in what the participants say (interviews) and what they do (rehearsals). We pay attention to silence, speech, and, actions regarding intimacy, sexual harassment, and other discrimination. The participants gave verbal and written consent to participate in the research project, using forms approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.<sup>43</sup> The

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<sup>40</sup> Berlant 2008, 1-2.

<sup>41</sup> Brinkmann & Kvale 2015.

<sup>42</sup> Norris 2020.

<sup>43</sup> The project applied for ethical approval with the Swedish Ethical Review Authority, an application granted with Dnr 2022-00124-01. The collection, storing, and analysis of the material followed ethical guidelines outlined in the application.



selection of productions that were video recorded, and from which the interviewed actors were selected, was made in dialogue with the four institutions. The analysis that follows uses a discourse analytical approach influenced by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe's<sup>44</sup> methodological tools of nodal points. A nodal point is a contested sign around which meaning is organized in discourse. Silence around intimacy, sexual harassment, and other discrimination are nodal points where different ideas and negotiations are active in the interviews and rehearsals. Through speech and actions — both meaning making processes in discursive regimes according to Laclau and Mouffe<sup>45</sup> — the participants negotiated what could be said and done, and what could not. Concretely, sections of the interviews where participants talk about intimacy, sexual harassment, and other discrimination in terms of silences in their work environments have been analysed by looking at how, when, and where they state that such silences occur, what the silence is concerned with, and how they feel about them. In the filmed rehearsals, we analysed the speech and actions of the participants that establish or challenge silence around intimate bodily interactions in rehearsal situations, such as kissing, touching, and fighting. In the analysis below we use transcriptions from the video recordings and quotes from the transcribed interviews to exemplify the participants' ways of speaking about silences around intimacy, sexual harassment, and other discrimination. We also refer to participants' talk without using quotes, sometimes to secure their de-identification, but also in order to give the reader a sense of the material within the short format of an article. First, the analysis explores and tracks the positive changes expressed by our participants where silences within the performing arts were seen as having been replaced by speech about sexual harassment. Also, sexist talk had silenced in the performing arts. Next, we address how rehearsal work still shows traces of what the participants call "old" silences, and finally we address how a minority of the participants speak about other silences surrounding racism and genders outside the cis gender binary. In the conclusion, we discuss the displeasure and the affective dimensions of silences in our study, and what these affects mean for working in the performing arts.

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<sup>44</sup> Laclau & Mouffe 1985.

<sup>45</sup> Laclau & Mouffe 1985.

*“One Can Notice a Difference, People Are More Careful With What They Say”*

In the interviews, many participants argued that now (as opposed to before) there is an ongoing discussion about power, sexual harassment, discrimination, and work environment issues within the Swedish performing arts. The current conversation contrasts with what they described as “past silences”, characterising silence as “bad” and a sign of censorship.<sup>46</sup> At the same time, they described that there were some things that could no longer be said – they argued that the language used in the profession had changed. Here we must remember that this is how they understand the past in the present, and it is not a definite account of the past. Examples mentioned of what was talked about after #MeToo, but not before, included how to negotiate the performance of intimate stage scenes, or any stage scene that requires actors to touch each others’ bodies, to avoid sexual harassment and violence, but also how to talk to each other and treat each other in the workplace. For example, recognizing and saying hello to everyone, not commenting on each other’s looks and bodies.

Another area mentioned as developing by most participants in the interviews was the institution’s policies and preventive efforts after #MeToo. These had become more visible, more spoken about, and had generally improved, according to many. Also, the participants were mostly in agreement when they said that the way personnel in Swedish performing arts interact at work had improved, and that bullying had decreased due to a consciousness of sexism and sexual harassment. In Butler’s terms<sup>47</sup>, the speech had changed, transcending implicit censorship and changing the conversation. A key discovery regarding silences was that the participants experienced an ongoing conversation about sexual harassment in the performing arts. This change of repetition and speech also involved examples of things that could no longer be said due to new self-regulated censorship,<sup>48</sup> when, for example, utterances about actors’ bodies, especially female actors’ bodies, or spontaneous touching were no longer accepted. One female actor said, “one can notice a difference, people are more careful in what they say [about

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<sup>46</sup> Butler 1997a, 128-9.

<sup>47</sup> Butler 1997b.

<sup>48</sup> cf. Butler 1997a.

bodies and sex - A.W. & I.B.]”. This new practice of speech about women and sexual harassment was perceived as a change for the good by most, while the sexist discourse that, according to participants, had been abandoned was perceived as “bad” by most.

One participant, a male actor, reflected on how things used to be in an example of how the silence around sexual harassment had severe consequences for actors’ working lives. When talking about an institution where he used to work, he said that “they [women - A.W. & I.B.] could not ride the same elevator as x”. Another actor spoke of a colleague who needed bodyguards to protect her from a perpetrator working at the same performing arts institution. In the interview, the male actor made it clear that it was (now) very strange to him that women had avoided taking the elevator with the perpetrator called x, but that x’s actions of sexual harassment and violence were not dealt with or addressed at the time. He argued that this practice had previously been normalized, nobody talked about it. That would not happen now, he said. He further argued that “people did report it [sexual harassment - A.W. & I.B.] sometimes, somewhere, I do not remember”, but nothing much happened when you reported it before #MeToo. For him, this silence surrounding sexual harassment at large has been placed in the past and this discursive strategy constructs it as being “done”, that sexual harassment has already (now) been handled. This way of speaking about the here and now as “good” by invoking a “bad” past resurfaced in many interviews. A female actor remembered that during her first theatre job, when she turned to older colleagues for help in her professional development, only the male actors wanted to help her, but “they did not really want to help me [pause] they wanted me to inspire them by letting them feel me up”. Further, she stated that from her education “we were almost taught that you were supposed to take it [sexual harassment - A.W. & I.B.]. You should not be ashamed of your body”. In her narrative, protesting against being felt up was previously considered a sign that a female actor was ashamed of her body, and since you did not want to be a prude, nobody spoke up. In her narrative, the “now” was a time when this was not the case anymore, and at her institution they spoke about how they worked with their bodies (and not).

Many participants argued, like in the examples above, that it had become, not only possible,

but even desirable to *talk* about sexual harassment in performing arts workplaces in a way that renounced it, and that this openness was seen as evidence that sexual harassment was being dealt with. An ongoing conversation about sexual harassment and gendered violence can certainly be understood as an improvement of the working conditions for people in the Swedish performing arts, if compared to the workplace situations described in #tystnadtagning. In line with Butler, it can also be seen as a shifting discursive regime, with new silences. In the rehearsal work, where there is a scene portraying a physical confrontation between two male characters, the two actors were working together on how to portray a fight on stage under the guidance of a stunt coordinator. The coordinator was meticulous in providing instructions and consistently underscored the importance of post-rehearsal and post-performance debriefing discussions about how the actors felt, checking every time if either of them had been hurt (mentally or physically). The stunt coordinator was, in line with the new discourse where talking about bodily interactions was premiered in the performing arts workplace, emphasising the necessity for the actors to maintain continuous communication about their wellbeing with regard to how movements, punches, and falls were executed. The coordinator asserted that if they did not engage in these conversations, the scene could unintentionally evolve and depict something contrary to the director's intentions, or that they could get hurt. Both actors concurred on the importance of conversing with each other to ensure the accurate portrayal of the scene. This interaction can be compared to how another male actor at a different institution spoke about the new methods that had been implemented in rehearsal work to prevent sexual harassment: "[it can be - A.W. & I.B.] careful in a bad way. We are becoming too nervous, (...) is it violence every time I do it [touching your arm - A.W. & I.B.]. There is now a carefulness that does not benefit our work." The participant was discussing touching other actors during his work in rehearsals and performances. He mentioned scenes with sexual violence and how those should be dealt with. Distinguishing between rape and touching an arm, he argued that the performing arts had become too careful. This quote illuminates that not all participants viewed

the changes in the performing arts positively. As Butler<sup>49</sup> argues, speech is both censored and exceeds its censorship at the same time, thus in this case, through the participants' understanding of a change in practice and what he said, he displayed a new norm. Drawing on Carbin,<sup>50</sup> we must ask what old and new silences are produced when violence and sexual harassment is described as having been dealt with in the performing arts. If talking about sexual harassment and sexual violence is performative, if these new ways of talking disturbs the normalization of sexual harassment and sexual violence in line with a changing discourse,<sup>51</sup> is the changing discourse a solution to sexual harassment and discrimination? We will focus on contradictions in speech and silences in the next two sections of our analysis.

*“Did You See That I Grabbed Your Ass?”*

The new discourse and practices recounted above were, however, contradicted in other rehearsals, where touching and intimate scenes were not always talked about or problematized. Some of the recorded rehearsals contained palpable silences surrounding intimate scenes, scenes involving physical touch, and scenes depicting sexual relations. Whether this happened in the filmed material when two actors got into bed together (dressed and not touching) or when an actor was bullied verbally within a scene, the possible physical and mental harm caused by portraying violence and sexuality was often not raised. According to Berlant,<sup>52</sup> enduring silences (from the past) can be understood as an aesthetic structure of affective expectation. The rehearsal is an institution that absorbs contingencies and allows for modifications, all while promising participants the pleasure that they anticipate through historical affective structures around gender and sexuality<sup>53</sup>. When silence around sex and violence in the rehearsal process endures, it provides a recognized and well-established experience of social belonging within the performing arts community, serving as a site of affective investment and emotional identification.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Butler 1997a.

<sup>50</sup> Carbin 2014.

<sup>51</sup> Foucault 1993; Butler 1997a.

<sup>52</sup> Berlant 2008, 4.

<sup>53</sup> Berlant 2008.

<sup>54</sup> Berlant 2008, 4.

However, the interaction material also demonstrates that joking, irony, and fun were employed when actors were faced with situations that could potentially be interpreted as sexual advances or perceived as sexual harassment. During one rehearsal on stage with scenography, which occurred just two weeks before the premiere, two actors (one male and one female) performed a scene where they were positioned between a sliding door. There was limited space to move for the female actor, who needed to close the door after being given a kiss goodnight by the male actor. Following the rehearsal of the scene, the director and the rest of the crew left to work on a different scene on another part of the stage. The two actors remained in the same location and engaged in a conversation. Positioned across from each other, the female actor alerted her colleague to what had just occurred.

Female actor (Fa): In the scene, did you see (...) that I grabbed your ass?

Male actor (Ma): No, are you kidding me?

Fa: Yes (chokes with laughter while supporting herself with hands on her knees)

Ma: Um, a life crisis.

Fa: Yes... I know (straightens up and takes a step towards her colleague) Because, it was somewhere here, now I'm not going to do it. But it was like I kind of ended up here. (She raises her hands and looks at her male colleague's hip, then she lowers her hands towards his ass. The male actor takes hold of her hand and places it firmly on his ass. The female actor laughs.)

In this exchange, the intimate touch is negotiated, but in such a manner of irony and joke that the negotiation does not align with the idea that touching someone's ass is a serious matter of possible sexual harassment. While the actors were speaking about the incident, humour was

used to deflate historical affective structures around gender and heterosexuality.<sup>55</sup> Their speaking about the touching therefore failed to critically articulate sexuality and touch as a serious matter in rehearsal work. Rather it confirmed, in Berlant's<sup>56</sup> terms, the inscription of historical structures of affect in contemporary heterosexual narratives. The idea that the male actor could be touched in an inappropriate way, and hurt by it, was constructed as hilarious by their affective response of humour. Especially his ironic statement that this was a life crisis for him, while he at first did not seem to have noticed her touching him at all. The joking use of jargon around issues of sex was not understood as a problem by these participants. But there were others who were not as convinced by speech acts that joked about sexual harassment and discrimination.

*“The Person Who Challenges the Tone”*

When female actor commented on the jokey discussion of topics such as sexual harassment and discrimination, that she had identified in her ensemble of actors, she said that there were several men that took up a lot of space and set the tone at her performing arts institution. She described it in the following way: “(...) there are some people that talk, they speak up, they point that out and they joke and set the tone. And the tone they use, there is something about how it can be difficult to challenge. When you try to challenge it, you are against the grain, the group, the person that challenges the tone becomes the person at fault.” In vague ways, this participant described how there was, at the time of the study, a sense of group consensus at her institution. Her fellow actors were joking and having fun, they were happy, and sometimes this camaraderie excluded others, those not in the group. While the group was not all male, it was dominated by men. The tone was hard to challenge, she either fell silent or participated, she said, in order not to destroy the vibe of the group. But she was not comfortable with the jokes and the informal work environment within the group. Later in the interview she contrasted the jokes about sex and the new discourse on sexual harassment with how race and racism was not

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<sup>55</sup> Berlant 2008, 4-5.

<sup>56</sup> Berlant 2008, 4-5.

spoken about at all. It was not part of the new normal to discuss racism, she argued. Rather the opposite, make-up, hair, wardrobe, and lighting practices were brought up by several Black participating actors as examples of everyday racism. For example, stockings for Black legs and hair products for Black hair were not supplied by the theatres and, despite the problem of naturalising whiteness having been brought to the leadership, this had not changed. In three of the four institutions there were participants eager to have conversations about race and diversity, but they faced (they said) silent resistance, leaders who said yes, but did little. The critique of a lingering silence around racism in Swedish performing arts was only brought up by a handful participants (Black and white) when interviewed about sexual harassment and discrimination. The heightened awareness of sexual harassment and discrimination discussed in the first analytical section did not extend to race, class, cis gender norms or sexuality, they said. Most of the participants did not link sexual harassment to other forms of discrimination at all. In her research, Carbin<sup>57</sup> concluded that the discourse created in policy that aims to prevent honour violence covered up structural racism by speech of individual sexist oppression. In her work, the gender equality efforts were hiding racism. Could the new discourse where speaking about sexual harassment is encouraged in the performing arts, and sexism is disavowed be hiding other forms of discrimination, like racism? The power relating to hierarchical ideas about the different professions employed at the institutions was also expressed as something everybody knew about, but did not talk about. Workers in make-up, hair, fitting and dressing were gendered feminine and designated a low professional value, they said, that they were possibly less worthy of protection than the female performer. Participants from technical professions such as light, sound, and stage discussed the masculinization of their professions and the impact that has on what could be said, and what could not be said, about being a gay male technician, for example. One sound technician described the profession as still persistently sexist, but less so in the performing arts institution where he worked. Another participant, identifying outside of the gender binary, talked about their experience being mis-

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<sup>57</sup> Carbin 2014.



gendered throughout their experience of working at the performing arts institution. They reported that there was a non-discussion about discrimination of other genders (not cis male and female), this made them feel uncomfortable, that it was not a crisis for them, but rather a silence they let happen and felt bad about. Speaking up would have caused discomfort for many, they said, and so they let the issue slide. The negative affect and types of displeasures caused by everyday racism and cis gender norms were felt by a few. Most participants in the interviews did not mention them and indicated that they enjoyed their work environment. According to Ahmed,<sup>58</sup> in her conceptualization of the feminist killjoy, the person pointing out a problem that ends up killing other people's happiness is perceived as being the problem themselves. Experiences of racism and cis gender norms thus illustrate that the new discourse around sexual harassment and discrimination, experienced as a big improvement by most, also had blind spots. Participants who were conscious of the silences around racism, sexuality, and cis gender norms were left feeling bad, but either their complaints led nowhere, or they chose to stay quiet.

### *Affective Speech and Silences After #MeToo*

Challenging the idea that great art comes from displeasure, or that performing arts institutions have no moral responsibility, we have argued that silences in the performing arts risk covering up inequality and negative affect among the persons working within them. Some of our participants felt bad, others had been feeling bad before because of what could and could not be said about sexual harassment, discrimination, homophobia, transphobia, and racism in their workplaces. The interviews and rehearsals in our material displayed several types of silences. These were expressed differently depending on the gendered and racialized position of the participant. We argue that there was a new discourse on sexual harassment, intimacy, and sexuality in the performing arts institutions. Speaking about the matter was rewarded and seen as good, and sexist talk was not accepted and had gone quiet. This new discourse was understood as emancipatory by many but had also created discomfort for a few men that felt that they were under suspicion and were now afraid to speak. Also, participants experiencing

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<sup>58</sup> Ahmed 2010, 582.

racism and persons who identify outside of the gender binary spoke with displeasure of the remaining silences surrounding white and cis gender norms in the workplace. Still, with a Butlerian<sup>59</sup> theoretical framework it can be argued that the discourse on sexual harassment and discrimination has changed in Swedish performing arts. But this conclusion is complicated by the analysis of the rehearsals where the historical silences of the past reappear as affective structures of heterosexual negotiations.<sup>60</sup>

Returning to the ideas about theatre and displeasure discussed at the beginning of this article: for Handke, displeasure seemed to constitute an eagerness to collapse the distance between the audience and the stage, ultimately enveloping the spectator, possessing them, and causing subversive dissolution<sup>61</sup>. While silence does not always intend to represent reality, it seems to have the potential to generate, not dissolution, but multiple perspectives on various themes and questions presented on the stage,<sup>62</sup> and communicating these perspectives to the performing arts audience. From this perspective, our examination of the current multiple silences in Swedish performing arts bring attention to the performing arts as a platform where affective silences are unequally perceived and felt. These inequalities ultimately have effects on performances and audiences too. Performing arts institutions must not stand still in terms of the new discourse on sexual harassment and discrimination, neither a modernist avant-garde or a #MeToo feminist interpretation of silence covers all the unequal practices in performing arts workplaces. Therefore, silence and its effects should continue to be critically explored.

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<sup>59</sup> Butler 1997a.

<sup>60</sup> Berlant 2008, 1-5.

<sup>61</sup> Joseph 1970, 58.

<sup>62</sup> Rancière 2009 in Nelson 2011, 28.

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