

# CROSSING BORDERS

## INTRODUCTION

### MIKKO-OLAVI SEPPÄLÄ

#### CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

This is a special issue of *Nordic Theatre Studies* based on the papers and discussions at the conference "Crossing Borders: Theatre and Cultural Encounters", held at the university of Helsinki and Tvärminne research station on 5-8 May 2015. The conference was organized and supported by the Finnish Society of Theatre Research ([www.teats.fi](http://www.teats.fi)) together with the discipline of theatre research at the university of Helsinki and in collaboration with the Association of Nordic Theatre Scholars. The organizing committee was led by professors Mikko-Olavi Seppälä and Pirkko Koski from the university of Helsinki and professor Steve Wilmer from Trinity College, Dublin.

The 25 papers presented at the conference contributed to the topic of crossing borders in a variety of ways. The theme conjured up a number of images: centre and periphery; urban and rural; space and spatiality; transnational and international theatre phenomena. Some concentrated more on borders of concrete and symbolic nature whereas others presented different cases of cultural encounters. Topics of

individual papers included the transnational, transregional, transcultural, and translingual encounters of artists, practices, styles, performances, mentalities, and institutions. The presentations stressed the reciprocity and diversification of the encountering process and its aftermath.

This issue presents seven articles developed from the presentations. Moreover, the editorial board, consisting of guest-editor Mikko-Olavi Seppälä and the editors Laura Gröndahl and Anna Watson, decided to add an article by Anna Lundberg, whose topic was in line with the overall theme of this issue.

The first two articles of the compilation present cases of crossing border between different countries. In his article, "Cultural encounters in modern productions of Greek tragedy", professor Steve Wilmer reflects how theatre has reacted to the contemporary European immigration crisis. Wilmer points out that refugees in exile formed a common theme in ancient Greek drama. His case study concentrates on the production of Elfriede Jelinek's *Die Schutzbefohlenen*, a play related to Aeschylus' *The*

Suppliants, at the Thalia Theater in Hamburg in 2014. Asking, who is allowed to speak on behalf of the refugees, the performance used reflexive techniques, staging real refugees witnessing the drama performed by the actors.

In her article, “Geographies of theatre: the Finnish National Theatre in Stockholm in 1956”, professor Hanna Korsberg shows how delicate and politicized were the questions of cultural exchange and a country’s image during the Cold War period. Invited to give a guest performance in Sweden with a Chekhov play, the Finnish National Theatre wanted to showcase its ability to produce Western drama along with Russian drama.

The next two articles deal with activist interventions through theatre. In both cases political aims met with a new kind of aesthetics. In his article, “S. O. S. - a pacifist intervention in Helsinki 1929”, docent Mikko-Olavi Seppälä looks at the theatre scandal created by a performance of a modernist pacifist play at a workers’ theatre. Anticipating a leftist avantgarde theatre, the co-operation between a Swedish-speaking modernist writer Hagar Olsson and the Finnish-speaking semi-professional Koitto Stage was rejected by the bourgeois press and eventually crushed by the authorities.

In her article, “Norwegian political theatre in the 1970s: breaking away from the Ibsen tradition”, PhD fellow Anna Watson traces the revolutionary experimental practices of the Norwegian group-theatre movement. She states that the work of the leftist theatre groups constituted, in many ways, a break in Norwegian theatre traditions. Dismantling hierarchies and fusing popular theatre forms with subversive content, groups like Perleporten and Tramteatret revitalised Norwegian theatre despite the conservative and unsupportive cultural policies.

Many papers of the conference dealt with crossing aesthetic borders. In her article “Rural and urban encounters in Reijo Kela’s choreographies”, Dr Aino Kukkonen reflects how site-specific dance performances can intervene with the quotidian. Concentrating on Reijo Kela’s solo performances *Ilmari’s ploughed field* (1988) and

*Cityman* (1989), she shows how these ephemeral events managed to leave their trace and, in the case of the community-based *Ilmari’s Ploughed Field*, also managed to affect the community in a long-lasting way.

The blurring of genre borders comes up in Dr Mikael Strömberg’s article “Entertainment as a complex form of communication”. Pondering the question how entertainment communicates with the spectators, Strömberg analyses the humorous cultural encounter between the mainlanders and islanders in the iconic 1966 television adaptation of August Strindberg’s tragicomedy, *The people of Hemsö*. Then, moving to a contemporary, farcical version of the play, produced in the Vallarnas open-air theatre in Falkenberg (2007), Strömberg points out how playing with audience expectations and de-familiarization of a classic evokes laughter.

One of the main questions raised at the Crossing Borders conference was how aesthetic traditions and innovations are transmitted from generation to generation or from one country to another. In his article, “New Brechtian impulses in contemporary Finnish theatre”, Dr Niklas Füllner traces influences of German theatre traditions and contemporary directors, such as Frank Castorf, on the Finnish theatre. Drawing examples from the production of Juha Jokela’s *Performance Economy* at the Espoo city theatre (2010), Füllner shows similarities between Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre and Jokela’s dialectic technique.

Brechtian influences have also been important within the Nordic youth theatre tradition, as Dr Anna Lundberg remarks. Her article, “Beyond the gaze: Translations as a norm-critical praxis in theatre for children and youth”, deals with the Eastern Swedish theatre “ung scen/ öst”. Translation studies are, of course, at the heart of border-crossing and cultural encountering. Lundberg shows how the feminist techniques of de-naturalization were put into practice in the production of *The Magical Circle* (2012) and its scene “Love machine”, which explored human touch and desire. In the scene, the physical interaction between two actors was transformed

with the aid of technical equipment into sounds. Following the teenage audience's reactions and offering a close reading of the scene, Lundberg shows how the performance managed to challenge heteronormative discourse.

### CHANGING CURRICULUMS

The Helsinki conference also meant a get-together of Nordic and Baltic theatre scholars. In addition to the Annual Meeting of the Association Nordic Theatre Scholars (ANTS), a general panel was organised on the state of theatre and performance studies in Northern Europe. At this panel discussion, a need for sharing information and experiences between the Nordic and Baltic universities became evident. The transformation of Nordic Theatre Studies into an online open access publication can open up new possibilities of communication, in addition to the new ANTS website, which could function as a platform for introducing new ideas and encourage co-operation. Although there are a lot of researchers and a good potential for new research networks, and despite the steady demand for academics in the large, professional theatre field, it seems that the opportunities for studying theatre and performance research have diminished as several universities have reduced the amount of separate bachelor's and master's programmes. In some universities, different bachelor programmes have been fused together, whereas in others, the discipline has completely disappeared from the curriculum.

Within the Nordic and Baltic countries, theatre and performance studies still forms an independent discipline with separate study programmes at the universities of Copenhagen ([www.ku.dk](http://www.ku.dk)), Stockholm ([www.su.se](http://www.su.se)), Gothenburg ([www.gu.se](http://www.gu.se)) and Vytautas Marnus university in Kaunas (on MA-level).

The university of Umeå closed down its drama and theatre research programme due to economic circumstances in 2006. There are still hopes, however, to launch a new stage art programme in Umeå. The university of Oslo ([www.uio.no](http://www.uio.no)) ceased its student intake for theatre studies in 2012. Instead, Oslo now offers a 2-year master's

programme on Ibsen Studies in English. A similar development took place at the university of Tampere ([www.uta.fi](http://www.uta.fi)) where the discipline of theatre and drama research was abolished in 2015 when the new Cultural Studies master's programme was introduced. The 2-year programme is designed for international students and taught only in English. As the university of Helsinki ([www.helsinki.fi](http://www.helsinki.fi)) radically diminishes the amount of separate bachelor's and master's programmes, from 2017 on, theatre research will be studied and taught within the Art Studies programme along with aesthetics, literature, musicology, and film and television studies. In a way, this means a return to the situation of the 1980s where students of literature could specialise in theatre research. In several Nordic and Baltic universities, e.g. university of Iceland and university of Tartu, theatre studies are taught within literature programmes. At the Lithuanian academy of music and theatre in Vilnius, theatre and film studies form a joint programme on both BA- and MA-levels.

At the same time, barriers between scientific and artistic education seem to blur. For example, the Trondheim-based Norwegian university of science and technology ([www.ntnu.edu](http://www.ntnu.edu)) has a practical/theoretical bachelor's programme which combines drama pedagogy and theatre studies, and the university of Aarhus ([www.au.dk](http://www.au.dk)) offers a practical/theoretical programme in dramaturgy. In 2015, the university of Lund ([www.lu.se](http://www.lu.se)) together with Malmö theatre academy introduced special courses on the theory and practice of theatre.

In the opening essay of this volume, professor Meike Wagner reflects the recent development in theatre studies. Her essay "Expanding the canon, creating alternative knowledge, marketing the field?" is based on her keynote lecture at the Helsinki conference. Drawing examples from German universities, Wagner notes that the new orientation towards cultural and performance studies has been fruitful both for research and teaching. She shows in detail how theory and practice have been interwoven in teaching theatre at the German universities of Hildesheim, Giessen, and Bochum.