

## REVIEW

Karin Helander

### En teater för alla sinnen: 30 år med Orienteatern

STOCKHOLM: STOCKHOLM STAD, 2015, 176 PAGES

Karin Helander's *En teater för alla sinnen: 30 år med Orienteatern* (*A Theatre for all Senses: 30 Years with the Orion Theatre*) is, in many ways, precisely what it purports to be: a book that celebrates one of the most prominent independent theatre groups in Sweden. The book tells us about successes and setbacks from the early 1980s until today and it tries to define the distinctive features of this highly idiosyncratic and unpredictable theatre.

Orienteatern would probably have been better known in Sweden and abroad had it been a touring company, but all of its productions are intimately linked to a former manufacturing factory, which was transformed into a theatre space in 1983. Throughout her book, Helander tries to describe what it is that sets Orienteatern apart from other theatres, but the defining moment was no doubt the decision to move from Eskilstuna, some 90 kilometres from Stockholm, to the unconventional theatre building at Katarina Bangata 77 in the popular Södermalm district in the Swedish capital.

This *found space* is the subject of one of the chapters of the book – “The Site” (*Lokalen*, pp. 56-69) – and, as lighting designer Anders Rosenquist points out, this space always plays along and has a value of its own. The old, austere building encourages the creative and technical staff to constantly think anew when it comes to actor-audience relationships and design. It has turned out to be a highly flexible – and durable – space. It has, for example, been flooded at times and trampled by the massive cows, which grace the front cover of the book.

This unconventional space might, in fact, explain why Orienteatern, in comparison with other

contemporary Swedish theatres, seems braver and bolder, neither content with the classics, nor afraid to put them on in new fashions, equally keen to produce new plays, to mix traditional theatre with music, dance and circus, and to challenge its ensemble with new (and old) acting techniques and improvisations. This *ludic space* has also attracted spectators who, over the years, have come to expect the unexpected.

The frame is important, but Helander is of course primarily concerned with content, with the productions that have invigorated the old building and filled it with life and energy. She describes most of the major productions in passing and some in detail. Her attitude is clearly sympathetic. She must have seen most of the productions herself – as a critic, teacher, researcher and, more recently, as a participant observer – but she does not rely solely on her own impressions. She frequently quotes other critics and listens to those involved in the creative process on and off stage.

In the first chapter – “Premiere” (*Premiär*, pp. 19-34) – she plunges right into a late production, *Help Wanted* (*Hjälp sökes*, 2013). In the following chapters, she turns to different aspects of the theatre's complex apparatus under headings such as “Process”, “Costume”, “The text” and “The actors”. In the last chapter – “Orion and the Outside World” (*Orion och omvärlden*, pp. 128-58) – she describes the different phases in the development of Orienteatern.

A more obvious way to structure this text would have been to start with the last chapter, which is a good introduction to Orienteatern, and then describe the house and the stage that has be-

come the hallmark of the theatre. Then, after that, look at the different aspects of the apparatus and end with a detailed analysis of *Help Wanted*, which involved poet Kristina Lugn and ABBA-Björn and Benny.

It seems to me that Helander has composed the text on the spur of the moment. Perhaps she is somehow imitating the creative processes that she manages to uncover in the first chapter, which is the most engaging and exciting chapter of the book. The first half of the book has a pleasant improvised character, but the overall impression is that everything, dutifully, has to be included.

Helander's text and Martin Skoog's pictures do give us a notion of the scope and range of this theatre. Orienteatern's inconsistency and Helander's changes of perspective guarantees that there is a forward and onward movement in the book. Some readers will no doubt be able to fill in the inevitable blanks with their own experiences. Lars Rudolfsson, the first and present head of Orienteatern, comes across as a humble, all but authoritarian artistic leader who has turned Orienteatern into a safe haven for curious and committed even activist, theatre artists. When Peter Oskarson assumed leadership in 1993 Orienteatern became much more oriented towards cross-cultural theatre traditions; choreographer Lena Josefsson's involvement in 2002 probably added to the physical expressiveness of the company, and when Stina Oscarsson replaced Josefsson the theatre became more involved with political matters.

I like the book for different reasons. For example, it does touch upon the methodological difficulties associated with theatre historiography and performance analysis. The genre itself is, however, problematic. A tribute is always a tribute, it is not an occasion to problematize and draw bold conclusions. It seems to me that Helander is trying to focus on the collective process of the theatre in order to make the book more useful to students. Helander also takes the opportunity to call for transparency in cultural policy, long-term thinking, and reliable support, and she seems to criticize

a Swedish cultural policy, which does not allow a successful independent theatre to become so successful that it competes with the major state-funded theatre institutions.

More than anything, however, this book is really the equivalent of an artist's retrospective exhibition; that is to say, a recognition of the status of this theatre. Is it an important book? Well, I suspect that it will appeal primarily to those involved in producing the shows and those that have supported the enterprise financially.

In a roundabout way, the book in itself tells us that the climate has changed during these three decades. Not too long ago it would probably have been impossible for a critic to express such unrestrained admiration for a theatre. Two years ago, Helander – together with theatre critic Leif Zern – wrote a related book about Stockholm City Theatre's 50 years of existence. In a way these books are a symptom of crisis – nowadays, everyone in the field of theatre is involved in keeping it all going – but something good might come from this symbiosis and one thing is, of course, this book.

*A Theatre for all Senses* is a book that Orienteater can be proud of. It ought to convince the sponsors that public funds have been well invested. It ought to remind the audience that time has been well spent. It does, however, not overcome the limitations of the genre.

*Rikard Loman, Lund University*

