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## Staged History in Local Settings: The Popular Norwegian *Spel* Tradition

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### **Abstract**

*During the last few decades there has been an enormous increase in locally based historical plays in Norway. These are mainly staged by amateurs, although professionals may hold important positions both on and behind the stage. The dramas have their origin in actual or invented historical events located in the area, and the scenery is carefully selected to lend an aura of authenticity to the performance: the plays are mostly staged outdoors, and the audience frequently has to make an effort to travel to the site of the performance. As the plays are normally staged annually or biennially, they constitute a regular ritual performance in the community. At the same time, minor changes are made from year to year and may be widely discussed and appraised by the audience, the media, and even people who have never seen the play! Although these dramas claim to represent historical events and period pictures, their underlying message is of current interest. They are mediums whereby the past is seen through the ideological and moral lenses of the present, creating memories for the future. As such, they should also be considered in the context of the wider social dramas surrounding the actual plays.*

A common way of speaking about memory and remembrances of the past is to use a comparison with a jigsaw puzzle. According to this metaphor, the past is a fixed entity which can be retrieved bit by bit, either from personal memories within us or collectively from a variety of sources. The goal is to make a picture that is as complete as possible. New pieces added to the puzzle will normally be helpful in finding the missing ones.

It will be argued in this article that the process of memory is far more complicated than this, and that memory is not necessarily something which is constantly accumulated as the past is unwrapped and put together. Instead, memories may be retrieved, revised (as also mentioned by Lowenthal, 1988, pp. 206 ff), and even fabricated in continuous feedback

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processes. The importance of the past for shaping the present is sometimes emphasized (see for instance Connerton, 1998, pp. 2 ff). The main emphasis here, however, will be on how cognitive and behavioral aspects of the present may shape the perception and experience of the past. The focus will be on mnemonic practices surrounding a certain type of dramatic art where local history is of central importance<sup>1</sup>. As part of this reenactment, both imagination and forgetting are brought into play.

## Locally based historical dramas

During the last 50 years there has been an enormous increase in the staging of a special type of plays in Norway<sup>2</sup>. These dramas, commonly known as *spel*<sup>3</sup>, are characterized by the following three aspects:

Their contents are *historical*. They are based on actual or invented events from a certain historical era connected to a certain locality. The authors may grab hold of a story about something that happened there, or was supposed to have happened there according to local folklore, and elaborate on this narrative. They may also create a completely new story, but in a setting of a specific historical time. In the process of creating these stories, historical sources are used, written and oral, but there is also a fair degree of creative fantasy involved in order to make the drama interesting for the audience. As a result, there are many possible combinations of the dimensions of historical documentation and artistic freedom.

The dramas are connected to a certain locality, and another of their characteristics is that they are actually staged at or close to this *site*, and almost always outdoors. The stage can be in the proximity of old houses, for instance at an outdoor museum, it can be inside or on top of the ruins of an old building such as a fortress, or it can be on the fields of a former battleground which is in some way or other connected to the play. As the drama is played outdoors and often surrounded by a natural environment, the staging can make use of dramatic effects: actors can climb on hills, dive into a river, disappear into the forest on a horse or arrive on boats by way of sea or the river. The outdoor staging is also vulnerable to the weather, which in Norway is far from predictable. Accordingly, certain measures must be taken in order to prepare for various weather conditions. Actors tell many stories about how they have had to put on heavy woollen clothes under their

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on data gathered from attending the performances of nine different historical plays in Norway. Apart from viewing the performances themselves, informal talks were held with actors and the audience, and formal interviews were conducted with writers, producers and others involved in the staging of some of the plays. The ballad opera “Litj-Johan på Nerøra” (Orkdal) should receive a special mention, as I was kindly invited by the choir Orklang to observe the preparations and staging of their play as well as its subsequent evaluation for a period of more than two months in 2007. The seasonal media coverage of the plays and not least the debates and controversies surrounding them have also delivered data for my analysis.

<sup>2</sup> According to the homepage of *Norsk spelkalender* (2009), 68 different historical plays were to be mounted in 2009.

<sup>3</sup> *Spel* literally means ‘play’, and it is significant that it is spelled and pronounced according to *nynorsk*, the official Norwegian language most associated with rural speech and dialect. The term *spel* is preferred in speech and writing even when the more “urban” version of Norwegian, *bokmål*, is being used. This denotes its association mainly with rural areas, history, and the use of dialects in the dialogues of the plays.

costumes in order to spend time waiting inside old and cold buildings, or the audience may sit outside with raincoats and umbrellas while they view the show. In any case, these changes in weather and other natural conditions seem to create much of the atmosphere of the drama and heighten the experience for both actors and audience. Certain improvisations may have to be made, which cause humorous situations and fond memories for those participating. For example, an outdoor play<sup>4</sup> was staged outside an old villa where seagulls nested on the roof. During the performance, one of the disturbed gulls kept diving down on the stage, mixing its loudly voiced displeasure with the singing of the choir.



*View from the audience during a rainy performance of the play Spillet om innvandrerne, Svullrya, Grue, 2007 (photo by the author).*

As these localities are most often far away from central urban areas, the audience may also have to make a special *travel* effort in order to arrive at the performances. To mention some examples: one play about the reformation is staged near a medieval

church on a small uninhabited island off the coast, and the journey involves both a boat-trip and a walk on the island to arrive at the site<sup>5</sup>. Another play based on a historical battle is performed on the former battleground situated on a remote mountain plateau close to the Swedish border<sup>6</sup>. This play is shown in January after nightfall, which gives a further picture of the harsh conditions the soldiers experienced. Other sites include mountainous areas close to waterfalls, or in bogs and forests with performances during the light summer nights. The movement to and from the site functions as a *liminal* stage (Turner, 1967, pp. 93-111), preparing for the drama to come through a gradual immersion into the context of the play, and also giving time to digest the impressions afterwards through a gradual removal from the play. If the performance is viewed as something liminal in itself, the journey to and from can be seen as rituals of separation and inclusion. In any case, the journey constitutes part of the total experience, as a gradual approach to and removal from the drama in time and space.

A third characteristic is the *communal* touch to the phenomenon. The plays largely depend on local amateurs, although some of the more important jobs are held by professionals, such as the playwright, the members of the orchestra or band, the instructor and the leading roles of the actors. The event also activates a series of communal institutions, such as the local choir, the local riding-club, the local handicraft association that sews the costumes, or the local historical society that consults on clothes, tools, and former lifestyles during the historical period. The plays also involve many of the local children,

<sup>4</sup> "Litj-Johan på Nerøra," staged at Strandheim, Orkanger, Orkdal in 2005.

<sup>5</sup> "Kinnaspelet: Songen ved det store djup," performed on the island of Kinn, Flora.

<sup>6</sup> "Karolinerspelet i Tydal," performed annually at the outdoor folk museum at Brekka, Tydal.

and there is a saying that there is no real *spel* without children and horses. In the process of creating and staging the plays, certain local talents may be incorporated into the narrative. For example, a role might be created to showcase the talents of a fiddler from the village<sup>7</sup>. Their participation in the production helps local people to identify with the story, although this may not be a conscious process. Together with the fact that the staging actually takes place in its original environment, this increases the play's appearance of authenticity. Sometimes descendants of historical figures act in the play and may be allotted the roles of their ancestors, further enforcing the story's authentic flavor.

History, locality and communality are the hallmarks of these plays. The *spel* may frequently be criticized for their lack of artistic qualities, and there is a lively debate among the producers of these plays as to whether they should have a professional base or focus on grassroots amateurs<sup>8</sup>. However, this has hardly diminished the plays' popularity. There are popular jokes about villages that don't have any particular historical event or site they can turn into a play, but that nevertheless grasp hold of any minor happening connected to their community which can be used as a point of departure for a narrative. A usual explanation for the continued interest in these plays is that modern man, in times of rapid changes, increased globalization and homogenization, has responded with an enhanced need to search for particular identities such as the local (see for instance Friedman, 1994, p. 19). I agree that the search for identity is an important impetus, but I want to emphasize here that moral identity is strongly intertwined with local identity. This search for identity can largely explain the narrative or *contents* of these plays, in which selected memories are brought forth in order to convey a message. But to explain the *form* or structure of the staging as such, another aspect of memory appears. The whole process of creating, presenting, and viewing these dramas and the involvement by the community in their various facets becomes a forceful catalyst for memory in a series of feedback loops—in this process, these memories are not fixed, but constantly reworked and revised. The play becomes a medium through which identity is effectively internalized.

Through the different steps of the staging process, different types of memories are retrieved as well as created. Both communal memories and private memories come to the fore. Contents and embodiment go hand in hand and reinforce one another. To understand their interdependence, in the next sections each of them will be examined in turn.

## The contents of the plays

The main feature of the plays is their historical content. This may be grouped into certain themes, some of which are more recurrent than others. Viking battles are fairly popular in geographical areas mentioned in the Sagas, and the tension between the old and the new religion is a major focus in them. Another theme is the establishment of an important local industry in a village, with the resulting social problems and stress in the community. A third theme is the persecution of “witches” or other outsiders followed by their executions,

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<sup>7</sup> In this text, the term ‘village’ simply refers to a local community in a largely rural setting.

<sup>8</sup> This was, for instance, evident in the heated discussions between producers, instructors, researchers, politicians and others participating in a seminar on historical plays in Florø, Flora, 15th-16<sup>th</sup> June 2007.

although these are presented in such a way that the sympathies of the audience land on the side of the accused. The leading figures in these plays, as well as in many of the other historical dramas, are often strong female characters.

Although the content is historically based, the plays address a present-day audience with a contemporary message. A strong (but often suffering) woman as a main character is an expression of this, as it addresses current feminist ideologies and struggles. The topicality of the play is sometimes also acknowledged by those producing the play, and may be explicitly stated in an accompanying folder or epilogue. One play, for example, is based on the true story of a woman who was executed after fellow villagers accused her of poisoning her husband<sup>9</sup>. In the brochure advertising the play, it is stated that the message of the play is of high current interest, even containing a timeless message, and that people should beware of gossip and slander. In a play about the Forest Finn ethnic minority<sup>10</sup>, in which their history is depicted as 400 years of oppression and exploitation by the ethnic Norwegian majority, the author herself in the part of a clergyman gives a concluding speech in which she calls for tolerance and mutual understanding in an age of increased global migration<sup>11</sup>.

The plays are normally performed annually or biennially, and their repetitiveness invests them with a ritualistic quality (this is also mentioned by Nygaard, 2008). People from a village may talk about *their* play, and if they are presently living some other place they may choose to visit their native district at the time of the performance in order to see it. Some of the actors have participated in the play since childhood, gradually taking on adult roles. The preparations and rehearsals throughout spring or summer, ending in the climax of the performance, regulate part of their annual cycle.

Minor changes may also be made to a play from one year to the other, both in the manuscript and in the visual staging itself. Such changes cause excitement and sometimes heated debates<sup>12</sup> among participants and viewers alike. Certain comments from the audience may also be perceived by the writer and instructor and become incorporated into the next version. In one play about life in a small town where economy and employment opportunities were heavily dependent on a single industry, some of the audience did not find the founder-cum-director of the factory in the play as villainous as what they had been told about him. This was altered in the next version of the play, where he was depicted as harsher and less favorable (although the author commented that she could not find evidence for such accusations in the written sources). These amendments do not change the ritualistic qualities of the play, but make them more dynamic. One is tempted to make a comparison with Clifford Geertz's Javanese funeral, where changes in the ritual are debated and adapted as it is carried out (Geertz, 1973, pp. 142-169). The ritual itself

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<sup>9</sup> "Maren, dømt til døden," performed in Dolm kirke, Hitra, in 2007.

<sup>10</sup> Rendered in M. Wiger, 'Spillet om innvandrerne' (1998, p. 100).

<sup>11</sup> "Spillet om innvandrerne," performed at Finnetunet, Grue, in 2007.

<sup>12</sup> This is especially true for "Spelet om Heilag Olav," performed annually in Stiklestad, Verdal. This *spel* holds a certain status as a national play, or The Mother of All Plays, in Norway. Changes made to this "national treasure" have caused fierce debates in the newspapers during the last few years about whether they are timely and reflect the artistic freedom of the stage directors or if they contribute to the destruction of a dear tradition and distort the intentions of the original play.

can both be seen as an expression of changes in culture and society, but also as a medium for negotiating these changes.

The number of plays has increased so rapidly that sometimes several plays are staged within one municipality. Although they may actually compete with each other for manpower, financial support, and audience members, these plays are often presented as being complementary to one another. In one municipality, the two plays are perceived as demonstrating the diversity of the area, with one “urban” and one “rural” play<sup>13</sup>. Another municipality has three plays in different locations. Although they are from quite different eras, they all have in common a main character who is murdered without the culprit being put to trial<sup>14</sup>.

The timing of the plays is often coordinated with an annual village festival with a cultural and social program, as well as stalls selling various items. Guided tours are conducted in the area that explain the local history of various special sites, and there may be processions celebrating local traditions. These “village days,” as they are commonly called, normally last for two or three days and draw lots of visitors, both locals and others with a connection to the place. Local identity is much in focus, as are other “traditional,” nostalgic values. These are expressed through the display and sale of products which can be characterized as small-scale, “natural” or unprocessed, traditional, and locally produced. In many ways, these village festivals mirror values which are related to those expressed in the plays.

## Memory through enactment

As stated, it is a complex task to understand why these plays are so popular. One may argue that it is a late modern phenomenon, attempting to pull together or rescue identities that are falling apart (see Sevaldson, 2007, pp. 83 ff). It might even be a post-modern phenomenon, in which people readily switch between identities including those offered by the dramas. The writing, staging, viewing and discussion of the plays can partly be seen as a search for identity<sup>15</sup>. In the process of this search, locality may be more a means of achieving and consolidating identity than a container of the important identity itself. This identity coincides with the message of the play, which encourages sympathy for the oppressed or the just. Empathy may be felt with villagers who had been subject to less than fair treatment. The play also arrives at practical solutions for the conflicts that have been presented, and a happy ending is worked out by the ancestral villagers. Through a moral identification with the heroes in the play, people’s connection to the place is enhanced and local belonging enforced. Vice versa, by celebrating the village, important moral identities are also implanted or aroused in those participating in the process of the drama. This brings us to another aspect of the play, the enactment process.

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<sup>13</sup> This interpretation of Orkdal’s plays is based on an interview with a local.

<sup>14</sup> From a brochure advertising one of the new plays in Skaun municipality (2007).

<sup>15</sup> One playwright told me that she wrote her story as a response to the comparative lack of engaging publications on local history from the area. Many of the families in this industrial community were immigrants, and their children had therefore not been able to learn about its past through, for instance, a grandparent’s narrations. Her story could therefore contribute to the creation of a local identity.

The performance itself involves a number of local people who interact together. In addition they perform in front of an audience that mostly consists of people connected to the place in one way or the other. Audience members may have lived in the same village (or town) all of their lives and can trace back generations of their ancestors in the community; they can be people who have moved to the place, settled down and (wish to) become integrated in the village; they can be people who come from the municipality and return to visit family and view the play; or they can be people from neighboring areas who know the village and its people, and who go on a day-trip in order to see the play. In any case, many people know and know of the people acting in the play. As an observer of both rehearsals and actual performances of some of these plays, I would argue that a great deal of humor is played out between the actors which is highly appreciated by people in the audience. Comic parts like the irresponsible, frivolous drunkard or an overdone portrayal of a character are very popular among the onlookers. This allows for much improvisation and clowning on and offstage.



*Staging of a Viking play at Giske in 2007 (photo by the author).*

In one Viking play, one of the reverends in the area played a sort of trickster in the play. His playful and cunning appearance made the audience roar with laughter. Another play set in the early 20th century featured two teachers working among industrial laborers. Their status was underlined by their attire, which included bowler hats. In some parts of the play they would simultaneously take off their hats in order to greet the audience. During some of the rehearsals the two teachers would spend time in the wings while waiting for the scene in which they were supposed to appear. The two men walked around together, time and again solemnly greeting each other as well as others they encountered with their bowler hats. In this way, they made joking statements about themselves and their roles as teachers.

Altogether, a certain embracement of roles could be detected<sup>16</sup>. In one play, a woman in the part of a laborer's wife carried around a life-size doll that represented her baby. From the day of the rehearsal when this doll was introduced as a prop, the actress held on to it tightly throughout the preparations. If she had to assist in carrying something around on the stage, she would do it with her free arm, without putting the baby-doll down. Of course, one should not assume that she became the role of the caring mother, but *something* nevertheless seemed to trickle down from the act. It has also been noted that there is a tendency towards people "playing themselves" in these dramas (see for instance Nygaard, 2008; Ohrem, 2005, p. 18). People with special backgrounds or skills may be chosen to perform exactly what they are good in. Equestrians may have walk-on parts as horsemen, or an elderly farmer might pitch hay on a field as part of a rural scene. As

<sup>16</sup> See for instance Erving Goffman's notion of role embracement (Goffman, 1972, p. 94).

mentioned, actors sometimes play their ancestors or other relatives (see for instance Sevaldson, 2007, p. 49). The borders between fiction and reality are thus somewhat blurred, and the feeling of authenticity increased. During one dress rehearsal I sat next to a mother of one of the performing children. She pointed out two of the amateur actors who entered walking hand in hand during the closing scene, a wedding celebration. She commented that she found this very cute, as they were also a couple in real life.

I have also mentioned the migrant casual worker who reappears in many of the plays about industrialization or mining. From my position as an onlooker, it seemed as if these versions of the trickster were something people enjoyed playing, and they soon “found” or came into their role. Playing drunk, womanizing, i.e. all the moral inversions of normal life, are perhaps qualities that in some way resonates with *some* aspects of the actors. They tend to overplay these roles, and to a certain degree carry them offstage. Simply wearing the vagabond hat in itself seems to allow for types of behavior that deviate from the norm. This can also be observed at many of the village festivals where the male participants tend to wear such traditional hats which seem to spur playful behaviour in itself. The itinerant sellers who attend the various stalls are a case in point, but in principle the hat can also be used by others in this setting.

## Historical plays and memory

The whole process of writing, staging and attending a play involves many steps and positions which touch memory in one way or the other. True, almost all plays have stories based in historical eras so far back that none of the participants could have first hand experience of them. However, some stories are based on written and oral sources from the local community. These can be stories and facts narrated by parents and grandparents who either experienced the era and witnessed the events themselves, or heard of them from still others<sup>17</sup>. Private diaries and letters from previous generations can also be valuable. Local lore may also be of interest, even if their fictional essence is acknowledged. A locally based legend or myth gives the play a certain artistic touch or color.

The point to be noted here is that even in the very first stage of creating a play, local people are exposed to their history. If the process of creation does not elicit personal memories from an era, it sets in motion memories of the stories at least some of the local people have been exposed to. Discussions with the playwright as well as among themselves both reveal and create memories in an ongoing process. Narratives in old schoolbooks and accounts from former teachers often come to mind. If special events and modes of living pertaining to the history of their own village are not found, at least a vague recollection of the era of the nation as a whole (e.g. the Viking age, the reformation and the early stage of industrialization), is triggered. Thus villagers experience a shift from latent memories (proto-memories) to meta-memory, where a certain conscious or subconscious contemplation of the memories takes place.

The next stage is the whole process of preparing for the performance, which starts months in advance. The script is more or less ready, although it may continue to be altered at the

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<sup>17</sup> The play “Maren, dømt til døden” is for instance much based on a version narrated by a local woman whose great-grandmother had known the main character (source: hand-out folder accompanying the staging in 2007)



request of the participants to reflect their interpretations of the historical facts. These changes may be related to information about particular events or on how certain practices were carried out during those days.

The most important part at this stage is the great mobilization of various groups and individuals in the community. Many agents take part in the process. The producer(s) is (are) of course present at an early stage, planning the coordination of economical, administrative, and technical matters. Quite soon the actors also start rehearsing. They may be drawn from the village drama group and local choirs, from school classes or other volunteers. If the play is staged for the first time, potential premises must be sought or at least inspected. This involves excursions to various sites, both cultural and natural. Careful planning as well as imagination and creativity is needed in order to use the built-up environment or dramatic natural scenery. The time of the day and year, the light, changing weather conditions and even the tides must be taken into account and unforeseen matters anticipated. The group of people involved at this stage will therefore inspect one or more local sites. Local history – far beyond the story of the play – is recapitulated and contemplated. The physical movement and the sensations of the site, such as the smell of old buildings, the views of the landscape or the sounds of the sea, start the process of embodying the marriage of history and locality.

Other groups in the community are also involved. Often the local handicraft association is active in collecting or making costumes, or at least acts as a consultant for those responsible for the costumes (whether these are recycled or newly made). Representatives from the local history association may also be brought into the process, as they have photographs and other information on the attires, tools, and events typical of the time. Again there is a pattern of moving around, retrieving, discussing and *processing* memory. Equestrian clubs are also involved. Some plays featuring the Vikings and Viking battles on land are, of course, particularly suitable for the use of horses. But horses are also generally popular in historical plays. They create lively entrances and exits to and from the stage. The very use of live animals also creates closeness to the story and enhances the feeling of authenticity.

At this preparatory stage of the play, then, memories are activated and elaborated upon. The whole process of learning to utilize local resources and talents is important for the consolidation of locally situated history. This explorative process is taken further as the rehearsals progress, and the actors may be asked to elaborate on their own parts. Although this involves much waiting, it also calls for much fun in the shaping of the roles and through the occurrence of spontaneous initiatives and unplanned events. Gradually the actors come to internalize aspects of their figures. Reading my fieldnotes from the staging process of the ballad opera “Litj-Johan på Nerøra” reveals an interesting development. A local choir was heavily involved in the production of this play:

*For weeks I had been sitting in a local gymnasium listening to them practicing the songs, the main actors rehearsing their lines and gradually practicing certain movements. Small modifications were now and then made to the manuscript and new roles were delegated or made more specific. The members of the choir sometimes actively participated in this process through their comments and suggestions, and the atmosphere was light and humorous. The singers were eventually divided into ‘factory workers,’ ‘casual laborers,’ ‘wedding guests,’ etc. At one point during these rehearsals, the singers-cum-actors were invited to bring with them various garments intended for costumes. Somebody knowledgeable on historical attires from*

*the area then gave her approval or not, and made further suggestions. This was partly done on the basis of old photos, as I understood. At this stage the instructor also asked the actors to further develop the character(s) they had been assigned.*

*Then the day came when the rehearsals were moved from the gymnasium to the actual premises of the performance, the courtyard of the residence that once belonged to the industrialist in the play. I was not able to participate in this first outdoor rehearsal, but was told later that “everything had been chaotic.” The opening was only two weeks away! A couple of days later I was present in the courtyard, and everything still seemed somewhat disorderly with the presentation continually being interrupted and discussed. The actors were now in their costumes and also had other accessories. They looked different from before, and seemed somewhat uncertain – almost shy – among themselves. During the next sessions, however, something happened. In the courtyard, wearing their costumes and performing their acts, people quickly found their own characters. The members of the choir were suddenly unrecognizable to me. One woman walked around with her baby-doll prop all the time. The two school teachers moved in step in a dignified manner both on and offstage. And the casual laborers, who really seemed to enjoy their characters as vociferous drunkards and somewhat pushy towards the girls, occasionally acted like rascals during breaks as well. The members of the choir had to a certain degree embraced their roles<sup>18</sup>.*



*The choir rehearsing for an early 20th century play about industrialization in Orkanger, Orkdal, 2007 (photo by the author).*

When the main performance is presented, the audience emerges as another party in the process of digesting memory. The audience is of course partly made up of people who have been following the play all along, such as parents. But the

onlookers also constitute a much wider circle of people who have their *own* personal memories affected, and who can moreover have an impact on the collective process in different ways. In any case, those who attend the plays may have critical comments as to their truthfulness in rendering the past. Although not disapproving of the drama as such, some voices have for instance commented that the historical play about the Forest Finns gives much emphasis to oppression, “forgetting” the peaceful cohabitation and cooperation that also existed between the Norwegians and the Finns.

History is thus retrieved and worked on in a continuous process. This happens cognitively in preparations such as instructions, discussions, and various practical considerations. However, sensual and bodily dimensions are also provided through physical movements in the environment, enactments and/or the mere presence at the site, thus creating empathy for the drama by all those who experience it from their various positions. Memories are retrieved and created, elaborated upon and recreated. The plays become important mediums for the processing of the past and for installing attitudes and sentiments for the

<sup>18</sup> This narrative was constructed from my notes.

future. As such, it has been suggested that locally based historical plays may be a psychodrama for certain historical heritages of the village, where a painful collective past is lived through and given a status or delegated to a place where it can be handled.

There may be *some* truth in this. The ancestral villagers who had a woman from their midst sentenced as a sorceress may induce a potential collective guilt from present-day villagers. But by clearly sympathizing with the hapless woman, she – and not her fellow villagers – becomes the pride participants in the play identify with. They may also identify with the progress of modern times against the background of the abuses done to people during previous centuries<sup>19</sup>. The story portraying the injustice done to the ethnic Forest Finn minority may be a good ally for the present-day inhabitants of the Finn Forest area who – descendants from the Finns or not – nevertheless experience a geographical and economical situation of marginality with a high degree of migration from the region. Through the play and other cultural revivals of the past, those associating with the Finns experience a certain social and cultural rehabilitation and pride in their heritage. In another which deals with early 20th century industrialization of a village<sup>20</sup>, a series of social problems of the day are presented: tuberculosis, unacceptable love between a man and a woman belonging to different classes, antagonism between local and itinerant workers, and wage conflicts. The play ends with a happy solution to all problems – for time being. The villagers can suffer with their predecessors, but also participate in a gratifying solution.

## Memory and identity

So far it has been ascertained that the locally based historical plays are forceful mediums for both handling the past and for the creation – or confirmation – of identity. Although many of the dramatists emphasize that there is a lot of historical research prior to their writing and that their aim is to create a play as close as possible to the main historical facts, the writing process nevertheless involves a lot of – exactly – *creation*. Certain themes have to be selected to the detriment of others. This involves if not forgetting, at least the temporary displacement or under-communication of certain available facts, if only to make a holistic and integrated narrative. As social processes, remembrance and obliteration seem to go hand in hand (see Herzfeld, 2001, p. 78), and perhaps presuppose each other. Moreover, it is necessary to spice up the story with colorful people and events that can make history come alive<sup>21</sup>. This, of course, demands a certain amount of imagination from the author. I have heard time and again from those involved in setting up the plays as well as from members of the audience that these historical dramas are mediums whereby people can learn about the past, or, more specifically, about *their* past. But the knowledge disseminated and perceived is always colored and transformed by the present.

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<sup>19</sup> A further discussion of this issue can be found in Larsen (2007).

<sup>20</sup> "Litj-Johan på Nerøra," Orkanger, Orkdalen.

<sup>21</sup> The structure of the *spel* has been analyzed and compared to fairy tales with their heroes, assistants, adversaries, and happy endings (see Danielsen, 1997).

Indeed, the relationship between the past, the present, and the future are manifold, as noted by Kontopodis and Matera in the introduction of this volume. The popularity of the plays is partly to be attributed to the narrative itself, which tackles moral issues and values people of today can identify or sympathize with. These are represented through rather stereotypical characters (for a further discussion on stereotypes and imagination, see Rautenberg in this volume). The pursued, the oppressed and the sufferer as well as the just hero are figures some people would like to identify with, and this is strengthened by the following logic: The hero is local, I am local, and as such we come to share identities. When we partake in the narrative, we also partake in the moral or emotional issues in the story. This does not mean, however, that a prior belonging to the place is a necessary prerequisite for establishing an identity with the characters in the play. Being associated with the play behind, on or in front of the stage, and moreover experiencing it on (the historical) site, creates a certain bond and sympathy to place and story. It encourages a feeling of goodwill towards both, and perhaps a longing to be part of it all. Attending the play repeatedly strongly enhances such emotions of attachment.

As mentioned at the outset of this article, there has been a great escalation in the number of local historical plays staged annually during the last five decades. As I was trying to understand the reasons for their popularity, I came to notice that other phenomena had sprung up like mushrooms during the last decades that have certain similarities to the plays. I have already mentioned the village festivals, or “village days.” Family reunions are another type of event that seems to be on the rise. The immediate explanation for this has to do with a need for identity through historic anchorage, as particular trajectories in history may be what make the village or the kin group unique and seemingly fixed in relation to others.

Other important aspects of these institutions have more to do with their form than their contents. This is all about movement and enactment. The present-day village festivals often include processions, excursions, and cultural trails. For example, a wedding might be staged as a procession which moves from a festive sermon in the local church to a location where a cultural program will take place. The cultural trails can be walks in or outside the central area of the village, with or without a guide, and which take people to historical sites of interest. During family gatherings, family members may also move around to visit places of interest. This may include a visit to the grave of their common ancestor(s), to sites that have been significant for their ancestors or certain prominent members of the family, or to other sites of interest in the area where they have chosen to meet.

What we witness here are bodily acts of participation or even pilgrimage by those moving around. The focus is on visual displays and sensual experiences in general. In this way, memories are again not only retrieved, but created. Visiting important sites brings up memories and associations, but not everybody participating necessarily has memories directly or indirectly connected to these particular places. However, with these visits something from the vast arsenal of memories from their past is activated, about other places and persons they have known or have heard about. This merges with the more “fact-like” information they are presented with. The hardship endured by some of their ancestors, or feats performed or achievements accomplished by others of them, are woven into the tapestry of their memories. As with the historical plays, the participants want to

own or become part of this tapestry, and this is made possible as situated enactments of the past are embodied. Although these are (mostly) secular phenomena, they seem to express a ritualistic longing quite distinct from modernist ideals of disembodied construction and which differ from their grandparent's ways of dealing with the past<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> The Danish theologian Jan Lindhardt (1993) has pointed to some aspects of present day culture which seem to change people and make them more similar to medieval people than their parents and grandparents were. He attributes these changes to the impact of television and other electronic media.

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