



Ingrid Redbark Wallander

“Folkhemmet” and dance

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Emerging structures for dance in Sweden, 1930-1960

By Ingrid Redbark Wallander

This article is based on my PhD-dissertation (2023), which addresses how theatrical dance in Sweden, with a focus on Stockholm, became modern between 1930 and 1960, from a historiographical point of view. In the thesis, the concept of ‘modern’ is central as well as the socio-cultural, political, and aesthetic ways, in which the modernisation processes unfolded.

The research presents an alternative to how “the modern” in Swedish dance historiography primarily has come to be associated with a specific genre, aesthetic renewal and a break with previous traditions; a narrative dance researcher Lena Hammergren (2009) has problematised. This kind of historiography was consolidated during the 1940s and 1950s and continued during the 1970s (Idestam-Almquist 1951; Rootzén 1945, Skeaping and Ståhle 1979). A narrative has thus been created that highlights the individual, usually choreographers, and the aesthetics of the choreography.

For this article, I have chosen to focus on a limited part of my PhD-research; the modernisation processes concerning the emergence of societal structures for theatrical dance. This includes new forms of social organisation such as trade unions and interest associations, as well as reorganisations of established institutions and the creation of networks. Together they formed an infrastructure; an important part of the professionalisation of the dance field. The concept of infrastructure began to be used in Sweden at the end of the 1950’s¹. To systematically develop structures for different forms of production in the dance area was one of the distinguishing features of modernity and not a specific Swedish phenomenon (Franko 2002; Laakkonen 2003; 2009; Vedel 2008).

1) Infrastructure is defined as “systems of facilities and their operation, which form the basis for supply and the prerequisite for production to function”. *Nationalencyklopedin*, online at <https://www.ne.se/>. Sources not previously translated into English are translated by the author.

Billede (tv.): Scenografiske skitser af Dicki Lakha. Værk: Solastalgia (2021).
Idé, instruktion: Madeleine Kate McGowan. Produceret af Sort/Hvid.

Based on institutional theory, I understand the emergence of an infrastructure as an organisational field. According to institutional theorists Paul DiMaggio and Walter W. Powell it is defined as: “those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognised area of institutional life” (1991: 64). Modified to the conditions of the emerging dance area, their concept of “regulatory agencies” corresponds to the emerging national cultural policy which I argue functions on both a regulatory and a discursive level. While what they describe as “key suppliers resource and product consumers” instead consist of the agents who produce, distribute and promote both dance and dance knowledge. They argue that a field passes through different phases before it becomes institutionalised. The first is characterised by “[a]n increase in the amount of interaction among organizations within a field” (1991: 65). This is what I refer to as the establishing phase of the dance field.

Cultural theorist Sven Nilsson (2003) has taken an interest in how the cultural sector develops in Sweden. He denotes the period I highlight as “the first nation-state phase of modernity” (Nilsson 2003: 14). He regards the development in Sweden as emblematic of the period and believes that it can be summed up in the Social Democrats’ political concept of *folkhemmet*². In this specific context where state and society were interweaved, dance was growing as a professional field.

Methodologically, the article is based on traditional archival work and institutional theory. Sources such as Swedish Government Official Reports, protocols, scrapbooks, posters, programme sheets and articles are used. My main research question is how an emerging infrastructure and a professionalisation of the dance area are formed in the sociocultural context of the *folkhemmet*’s ideology. I argue for the significance of the implementation of the new cultural policy, and thus it is important to investigate the discourses forming normative ideas in the policy document, as well as which agents were involved with producing, distributing and promoting dance and dance knowledge.

2) *Folkhemmet* is a metaphor, literally translated as people’s home, and synonymous with the Swedish welfare system.

Folkhemmet's cultural policy: citizens' taste needs to be refined

The Social Democrats came to power in 1932 with a strong vision of changing society. As one of the first political parties, they considered national cultural policy as an important part of the process of change and appointed an inquiry into the theatre situation in 1933 (which implicated dance). The directives stated that “theatre [is] an important part of public education”³ and that a public theatre should be created to reach the majority of citizens in Sweden (SOU 1934:3: 7). When Sweden had become a modern welfare state, democracy, art and education would be intertwined to strengthen the citizens' participation. A year later, the results were presented in two reports (SOU 1934:3, SOU 1934:21).

Cultural policy works on two levels here. At the regulatory level is the proposition of forming a people's theatre; the democratic organisation Riksteatern (The Swedish National Touring Theatre) with a touring business. A number of local theatre associations around Sweden would themselves, in a democratic spirit, choose performances for their particular location. The structures of the Riksteatern were created through collaboration between existing public meeting places such as Folkets hus och park (The people's house and park, a part of the Labour movement) and the performing arts that were to be distributed.

Nilsson (2003: 15) argues that the organisation of the nation-state and the building of structures were distinguished by the period's emphasis on hierarchy and ranking; which can be noticed at the discursive level in both reports. The kind of theatre intended was drama and music theatre, of which drama was considered the most important. Dance was only mentioned in a few sentences during the approximately 300 pages. The art form did not have an autonomous status but was considered part of musical theatre. When high quality was emphasised, it was linked to a normative discourse. The citizens should be able to distinguish between good and bad quality in art. The historian of ideas Per Sundgren argues that the cultural policy's idea of “refining both

3) ‘Public education’ is my translation of the Swedish concept ‘folkbildning’ of which there is no established English translation. Folkbildning is an umbrella term for a variety of educational formats including “non-formal learning” and “informal learning”. It was an important part of the Labour movements idea to change the circumstances of the workers since the beginning of the 20th century. <https://folkbildningsradet.se/om-folkbildningsradet/translations/english/what-is-folkbildning/>.

taste and personality” included a hierarchy where the established culture was regarded as character-building in contrast to popular culture (2007: 25).

At the same time as the ideological discourses were formulated in reports, they materialised in practice. The fact that the national cultural policy considered the performing arts to be of such a great importance contributed to the emergence of the field. But when ideas of the “best” art were practised, the folkhemmet’s cultural policy shaped the conditions for the performing arts.

Agents in the emerging structure

The Riksteatern, became one of several agents in the emerging dance field. According to Nilsson a distinctive feature of the Swedish cultural life during the period covered was that it developed “in an interaction between the state, the market and civil society” (Nilsson 2003: 231). Using his three-part model, I argue that interaction between agents, representing different parts of the dance area, is the basis of the emerging infrastructure. The interaction can also be linked to DiMaggio and Powells idea of “connectedness” as an important part of the emerging structure of a field (1991: 65).

The Royal Theatre and the Opera Ballet – Part of Sweden’s democratisation project

One of the central agents in the national culture policy was the Royal Theatre. Since it was established by King Gustaf III in the 18th century, it has undergone a number of changes. Over 250 years, the theatre has changed premises, regulations, organisational form, activities, name and operational goals on several occasions. During the social transformation of the 19th century, this meant that the parliament took over the financial responsibility for the theatre, which would serve the public instead of the monarch. Business economist Jeanette Wetterström writes that the theatre’s purpose then also changed and came to be regarded as a form of educational activity that could contribute to equalising previous differences in social status (2001: 209-210). Thus, the transformation into the entire nation’s theatre could take place. The idea that the Royal Theatre constituted an important part of the public education

and the project of democratisation that was necessary in order for Sweden to become modern, permeates the directives of the *Teaterutredningen 1933* (the theatre report 1933).

Despite the fact that dance has been performed at the Royal Theatre since the 18th century, it was not considered an autonomous art form during the 1930s, neither at the theatre nor in national cultural policy. The ballet ensemble mostly performed dance in opera performances and a type of mixed performances. However, a modernisation process began in the mid-1930s. A new performance convention – Dance evenings – was implemented and during the 1940s a fixed repertoire was developed. These were changes that contributed to the opera ballet's general recognition during the 1950s. As a result, the importance of the ballet company as an agent within the infrastructure also increased.

Konsertbolaget – An agency for dance

According to Nilsson, the market was one aspect of the cultural field. In the emerging infrastructure for dance, the Konsertbolaget (Scandinavian Artists Management), which started an agency for artists in 1917, here represent the market. From the 1920s to the 1940s, the company was responsible for most of the international guest performances visiting Stockholm, while at the same time supporting Swedish dance artists. Professionally conducting impresario activities was a new phenomenon in Sweden and was noticed in newspapers during the 1920s. Of the few agencies active in Stockholm, the Konsertbolaget was the most prominent. At the same time the company was not limited to Sweden. In newspaper articles from the mid-1930s, it was described how the business extended to all of Scandinavia, and through cooperation with international agencies also to include Europe and even reach the United States (*Nya Dagligt Allehanda* 3 September 1935). Systematically developing tours contributed both to international influences reaching Sweden and to possibilities for Swedish dance performers to tour abroad.

Formally, the Konsertbolaget was a private employment agency. How the employment agency should be managed was a recurring debate issue. Folkhemmet's new ideals meant that the public sphere would take responsibility

for the mediation of all unemployed, regardless of profession, which would be impartial and free. When a new law was instituted in 1936, new establishment of companies and specifically those with a profit motive was prohibited (Lindström et al. 2006: 17). However, exceptions were made for “musicians and stage artists” and specifically exchange visits to and from abroad (SOU 1992:116: 28). The government regulation required that the Konsertbolaget annually applied for and received an extension of the dispensation. The application procedure likely contributed to limiting the number of impresarios and thus strengthening the company’s importance.

Although the number of dance evenings arranged by the Konsertbolaget was relatively small during the 1930s, it exceeded the ones given at the Royal Theatre in number. The company was largely the only one, besides the Royal Theatre, to arrange professional dance performances during the 1930s and 1940s. In terms of repertoire policy, it also differed by having a greater breadth of genres compared to what the opera ballet developed. Mainly, the Konsertbolaget focused on three genres: ballet, ethnographic dance⁴ and *fri dans*⁵ (free dance). The international guest performances attracted great attention in the press and made it possible to experience widely different dance performances. It allegedly contributed to increasing public interest in the art of dance.

Organisations for dance practitioners – Different views on professionalisation

The third factor that Nilsson mentions as contributing to the emerging cultural life is civil society. As for dance, no less than three associations started during the 1930s which, in different ways, aimed to strengthen the professional field. The formation of the associations originated from a need to establish cooperation around certain common issues, as the practitioners began to become sufficiently numerous. It can be linked to DiMaggio and Powell’s view of the development of an organisational field that also includes professionalisation.

4) Ethnographic dance was mostly dance from other cultures, but could also include Swedish folkdance.

5) In Sweden *fri dans* was the most common genre concept, since modern dance often denoted social dance.

It is defined as the collective struggle of the participants to articulate the terms of their profession, as well as to establish a cognitive base and legitimation of the autonomy of their professional field (1991: 70).

*Dansstudion*⁶ (1930), the first of the three associations, brought together the majority of practitioners of dance outside the Royal Theatre, both professionals and students, as well as those generally interested in dance such as critics. There are traces of the association's activities in various types of sources such as reviews, articles and written librettos. Based on these, it appears that it arranged joint performances for both adults and children, formed a children's theatre group and participated in the public debate.

I consider Dansstudion's participation in the public debate as an example of the association's wish to contribute to an educational base. In 1933, the *Konsertbolaget* arranged an international guest performance with a German couple – Ruth Sorel and George Groke – within the genre *fri dans*. They had each won the award for best dancer in a competition for solo dancers in Warsaw, just a couple of months earlier. The visit meant that, for one of the first times, dramatic dance was performed in Stockholm. In several ways the guest performance excelled. It triggered an intense discussion in the critic's corps. Different opinions were hotly debated, and the debate was also unusually long-lived. What was unique to this discussion was that the association was involved. Their debate entry came in the form of an advertisement where they addressed the two guests directly with a defence of their new aesthetic⁷. The post is one of several where the dance practitioners wanted to raise the level of knowledge in different ways in order to strengthen the area's autonomy. The association's contribution to the debate was based on a highly developed specialist competence, while the members' mixture of amateurs and professionals was typical of the time. It is unclear when the Dansstudion ceased to exist, but it seems to be at the end of the 1930s when several of the famous members founded two new associations.

6) The formal name appears to have been Stockholms Dansstudio, but I employ the more commonly used Dansstudion.

7) My translation: "In this way, we would like to convey to You our gratitude and admiration for the unforgettable experience You prepared for us at Your first performance here in Stockholm. Your artistic maturity, creative imagination and solid mastery of technique inspired and excited both us and the plenary audience."



Advertisement in
Stockholms Tidningen 4th Dec. 1933.
 Konsertbolagets klippbok 16.

The two new associations were established within six months, *Dansfrämjandet* (dance promulgation) (1938) and *Danspedagogförbundet*⁸ (dance pedagogue association) (1939). While the former had a broad perspective on how and what type of dance should be promoted, the teachers' association delimited its view to how the field of education should be professionalised. The start of both were intertwined with the socio-political situation and became somewhat conflicted. According to institution theorists a struggle for political power and institutional legitimacy arises during the establishment phase of a field (DiMaggio and Powell 1991, p. 66). In the field of dance, the struggle concerned how professional development should take place. Which association would gain legitimacy to develop the professionalisation? Should amateurs and professionals be part of the same association? Should the organisation be a union or vocationally focused?

8) Formally Svenska Danspedagogförbundet, but Danspedagogförbundet was the name commonly used.

The two associations were initiated just before the outbreak of the World War II. The background was that a group of dancers felt a threat to their means of livelihood from foreign dancers. No less than 32 people signed a letter which was submitted to the relevant authority. In it, the “increasing foreign imports” were described, and the senders called for “protection of our labour market” (Styrelseberättelser 1938-1978, B1:1, Danspedagogförbundet, TAM). They were advised to create an association, join the trade union the Teaterförbundet and thereby become a formal ‘referral body’. In other words, to create an organisation with institutional legitimacy. However, the formation of the association took time. In the meantime, the action was noticed by a grouping with opposing political positions. They reacted immediately and formed the Dansfrämjandet. The purpose was to protect all dance practitioners working in Sweden. It was a clear positioning against the opposite group. Once the Danspedagogförbundet was formed, the protectionist stance was written into membership. It was “an association between Swedish pedagogues in artistic dance within Sweden”. The two associations ended up on different sides. All dance practitioners in Sweden disregarding their ethnicity, versus *Swedish* pedagogues. It was also about the view of dance: all types of dances versus the genres *fri dans* and ballet. The start of the associations indicates a drawing of boundaries in the field of dance, where different political positions were intertwined.

Protocols have been preserved from both organisations and a comparative reading shows that the conflictual relationship between them was significant for the further development. Likely, a contributing factor was that several of them were members of both associations. The struggle for legitimacy can be followed over a period of 20 years. What was the result? The dance community could not agree. The Danspedagogförbundet gained legitimacy in matters regarding education and contributed to the state-supported teacher training starting in the early 1960s (Styrke 2010). The Dansfrämjandet continued to promote dance performances. However, their persistent attempts to unite the practitioners in a common trade union did not succeed. The question was difficult and also became long-winded. A trade union restricted to dance artists employed by the institutions was established during the 1940s. When dance artists outside of institutions became affiliated in the late 1960s,

all dance artists were finally brought together within the same union – the Teaterförbundet. What happened to the dance pedagogues? They became unionised a few years later in the Musikerförbundet (musicians’ union). During the establishment phase, the different approaches to how professionalisation should take place thus contributed to a struggle for power and institutional legitimacy that divided the area into fragments.

Interaction in the infrastructure

DiMaggio and Powell describe how the growth of an organisational field takes place through different phases where the first is characterised by: “[a]n increase in the amount of interaction among organisations within a field” (1991: 65). When the Riksteatern was created through cooperation between already existing agents, an ideological national cultural policy discourse was formed. The ideas were also materialised outside the state’s framework. But without government support collaborations were instead built on personal initiative and individual contacts. The structure thus also became more vulnerable.

When the Konsertbolaget started arranging dance performances, it depended on partners to gain access to a stage. The choice depended on a number of factors. The main one was what venues were available. A guest performance usually meant one or two scheduled performances, but in the case of a success it was extended and a vacant stage had to be found at short notice. This meant that visiting dancers could dance on several different stages during the same guest performance in Stockholm. During the 1930s, when the Royal Theatre initiated their official touring activities, an opportunity to use the stage for a longer and cohesive period was created. However, there is conflicting information as to how often the Konsertbolaget used the stage. According to the theatre’s management reports, the agency rented the theatre only on a few occasions. In the Royal Theatre’s archives, however, there are several programme sheets where the Konsertbolaget’s name is printed on the front, which shows that it was their event. It is therefore not possible to ascertain whether the agency officially rented the theatre, or whether it was some other type of cooperation. Significant for the period was that this form of collaboration was informal rather than formal.

As already mentioned, the non-profit organisation Dansfrämjandet was another significant agent in the infrastructure. This form of association was typical of the time and is counted as part of the Swedish folkrörelse (popular movement). It was and still is fairly unregulated; without commercial activities it is not subject for accounting and auditing. The openness of the organisation model came to fit well with the Dansfrämjandet's development in various ways. Right from the beginning, the purpose seems to have been to bring together practitioners within the Royal Theatre and the *fri dans*-area so that the various stakeholders would cooperate and utilise common resources. The Konsertbolaget's economist was a board member during the first years together with dancers from the opera ballet and the *fri dans*-area (Styrelseberättelse 39-41, Dansfrämjandet's protokollspärm, CAB).

At the end of World War II, the organisation changed its direction. The activities became increasingly outward-looking with performances, guest performances and public education-activities. The Dansfrämjandet had to collaborate with other agents as the organisational form was impossible to combine with impresario activities. Programme sheets show that performances were often arranged in cooperation with the Konsertbolaget, which handled the formal side of the event, the one that had to be reported to the authorities. Similar to the Konsertbolaget's procedures, different venues were used. However, a change occurred during the 1950s when the Dansfrämjandet's performances were given at the Royal Theatre. The formal conditions of this collaboration have not been ascertained, as no contracts have been preserved. However, the time coincides with when the Royal Theatre's chief financial officer became a board member of the association (*Svenska Dagbladet* 3 November 1951). At the Royal Theatre he was the one who both proposed and approved dance guest performances, and an exchange of services arose (Interview with Häger 1997). The chairman assisted with tips on suitable ballet directors, choreographers and guest dancers, while the financial manager allowed him access to the Royal Theatre's stage. The interaction between the Dansfrämjandet and the Royal Theatre basically ended at the same time as a new ballet director was employed, who took command of both the ballet ensemble and the type of dance that would be shown on the national stage.

In the establishment phase of dance, the personal network was usually the prerequisite for the infrastructure.

According to organisational theorists, there must be several actors who contribute similar services for an organisational field to emerge (Powell and Colyvas 2008: 2). In this case, Konsertbolaget (representing the market) collaborated with Dansfrämjandet (the civil society) and Kungliga Teatern (the state) in different constellations to arrange dance performances. The network came to function as an infrastructure that made it possible to distribute dance performances more systematically. At the same time, it contributed to the modernisation process of the opera ballet. When it became possible to attend dance performances of various kinds at the Royal Theatre, the interest in dance likely increased as well as the debate about why the ballet company did not have its own full-length dance performances.

Performances on tour – Normative discourses

In the cultural policy, the importance of the high quality of the performances going on tour was emphasised. The Riksteatern's local associations decided which performances would come to their geographical location. But what did the dance selection look like? There was a continuous but not so rich range of dance programme. During the 1930s there was usually only one dance programme per season and that was by the opera ballet. Every season they gave a few performances (Ullberg 1991: 307). Not until after the World War II did a change occur. The opera ballet was no longer the dominant actor, but some new dance groups – the Algo ballet, the Cullberg ballet and the Swedish Dance theatre – were incorporated into the repertoire. They also usually gave significantly more performances per season. The fact is that, despite the emergence of new groups, it was nevertheless the opera ballet that provided continuity over a 20-year period. In other words, it became the type of dance that the audience had access to, regardless of where they lived.

Programme sheet, from the tour of 1945 with principal danseur Otto Thoresen as the tour leader. Illustrator and photographer unknown. Arbetsrörelsens arkiv och bibliotek, FPC Ö9, "Övriga handlingar".



Otto Thoresen



Programme sheet, from the tour in 1945 with principal danseur Otto Thoresen as the tour leader. Illustrator and photographer unknown. Arbetarrörelsens arkiv och bibliotek, FPC Ö9, "Övriga handlingar".

The opera ballet's importance was also strengthened through summer tours in the Folkets park. The tours began in 1945 and continued for 20 years with around 30 performances per summer (Engel 1982: 71-83).

The tours seem to have been initiated by the dancers themselves and later transitioned to formally being under the auspices of the Royal Theatre. A comparison with the opera ballet's number of performances on the home stage shows that in most seasons the ensemble presented more performances on their summer tours than they did at the Royal Theatre. Thus, the tours were important from the dancers' perspective as they developed their dancing experience. The large number of performances in the Folkets park also contributed to the effective distribution of the aesthetics of the opera ballet in Sweden.

In this way, the tours supplemented the tours arranged by Riksteatern and contributed to ballet as a genre gaining a hegemonic position, in comparison with other dance genres.

At the same time a development was also taking place outside the Royal Theatre, in the *fri dans*-area. The changes that occurred inside and outside the framework of the institution cannot fully be separated, and I therefore regard them as interwoven. During the 1930s, the Konsertbolaget was basically the only company that organised dance performances within the genre *fri dans*. Although there were performances of ballet and ethnographic dance, a dance evening in the 1930s above all came to be associated with the genre *fri dans*. During the 1950s and the Cold War, the European map had been redrawn, as had the dance field. The Konsertbolaget then also radically changed the focus of its performances. By and large, performances by practitioners of the *fri dans* ceased. Instead, “foreign”, preferably “exotic” groups and national folk-dance ensembles were presented, all of which could be included in ethnographic dances in a broad sense. Curiosity was high and the events attracted a considerable audience, which was a prerequisite for the agency’s financial survival.

The Konsertbolaget’s change of repertoire (not supporting *fri dans* anymore) appeared at the same time as the opera ballet strengthened its position in the theatre. The number of dance performances increased during the 1950s, and the ballet ensemble also developed a repertoire of both classical and modern choreographies. In the historiography of the 1970s, the 1950s has been referred to as the “renaissance of ballet” in parallel with the fact that “modern movement art” was given a space at the Royal Theatre (Skeaping and Ståhle 1979). Modern and classical choreography contributed to Sweden having a national ballet of rank. To link back to Powell and DiMaggio, the ballet ensemble had gained institutional legitimacy at this time. The choreographers, who were allowed to stage their choreographies at the Royal Theatre, contributed to the development of the ballet company, while the dance artists in the *fri dans*-area continued to struggle for legitimacy. The national cultural policy’s requirement to spread the art of dance also left the practitioners of the *fri dans* outside the institution without corresponding support.

Conclusion

The importance of public education permeated the cultural policy of the 1930s. It was also one of the ideas that the agents in the emerging dance field related to. In practice, this meant spreading dance and dance knowledge through touring performances, lecture series (in connection with or independent of performances), trade journals, and trade books – i.e., anything aiming to understand, explain, and discuss the art of dance.

The Social Democrats' national cultural policy together with modernity's emphasis on efficiency contributed to the development of systematic structures for the performing arts. As the supporting structures were formed, they were permeated by invisible power structures. In practice, the national cultural policy's idea of supporting the "best" quality of dance performances became equivalent to the aesthetics of the opera ballet. The Konsertbolaget contributed significantly, like Dansfrämjandet, albeit to a lesser extent, to a structure where a variety of different types of dances were performed. However, it was a fact that the opera ballet had the most channels for reaching out with its performances. During the establishment phase of dance, the aesthetics of ballet thus acquired a hierarchical position and became a significant expression of the modern.

Also significant was the number of initiatives taken to change the situation for practitioners of the art of dance. Changing both one's living conditions and one's professional field was an expression of the modern world's view of the individual. The newly started associations actively contributed to the professionalisation of the dance area, which led to state-supported educations for the different professions, choreographers, pedagogues and dancers being established in the late 1950s and early 1960s. However, the establishing of a structure for the performance business continued to depend on the network of individuals in strategic positions. The stable and unstable elements created a vulnerability; a distinct characteristic of the emerging infrastructure for the art of dance.

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