

CORE OF NORDIC APPLIED THEATRE

Challenges in a subarctic area

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Nordic applied theatre takes place outside the traditional theatre institutions and focuses on social, political or educational aspects where the aesthetic form, thematic content and the locally situated context of the theatre medium are the central focal points. The issues faced by Nordic countries are thus reflected in such theatre practices. This may include the much-talked-about age wave and challenges with dementia, theatre projects related to the refugee crisis, Sami affiliation and identity in the subarctic regions, or normality and social exclusion in disability theatre.¹ The organizing and financing of applied theatre varies between the Nordic countries due to different national, cultural and social policy guidelines and different educational opportunities (Gjørnum, Ineland & Sauer, 2010). The Drama Boreale organization, however, ensures knowledge transfer across the Nordic countries by organizing seminars and conferences.²

As an umbrella term, applied theatre does not primarily represent “performance art” as an art innovation, but bridges the gap between locally-situated aesthetic practices, the social and epistemological significance that such practices are able to achieve (Gjørnum & Rasmussen, 2012). Applied theatre often involves people from marginal positions (from a given location within a cultural framework) as co-researchers in the aesthetic creation process. One may understand Nordic applied theatre in the light of the inclusive arts because democracy and equality have a strong position in Nordic countries.

This chapter describes and analyzes Nordic applied theatre as an art of didactically, socially and ethically involved theatre. A selection of field examples where the vulnerability is staged will be analyzed in a place-philosophical perspective where we enter four different rooms: The activity room, the objectively-given room, the sensed room and spatiality. All rooms are set in the framework of the Nordic welfare model.

What is the Nordic context?

The Nordic region is a historical-geographical common denominator comprising Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, Greenland and Åland. These countries have common linguistic, cultural and historical features. The Nordic countries have, over the years, developed a collaborative platform to solve complex challenges in society.³ Collaboration is linked by the Nordic Council of Ministers through ten thematic initiatives: Language comprehension,⁴ democratic competence,⁵ research,⁶ early and inclusive efforts in education systems⁷ (Hadnagy, 2016), lifelong learning,⁸ entrepreneurship and innovation,⁹ digital competence¹⁰ (Bocconi, Chiocciariello & Earp, 2018), sustainable development,¹¹ mobility¹² and recognition of qualifications.¹³ These ten initiatives all relate to what the Nordic countries refer to as the social democratic “welfare state”. That is, a state that guarantees all citizens of the community the right to free education and assistance should they experience health problems, social distress or loss of income. This way of organizing a society also has consequences for applied theatre (Heggstad, Rasmussen & Gjørnum, 2017; Gjørnum, Ineland & Sauer, 2010), for the so-called “Nordic welfare model” refers to more than the welfare state. “The

model is about a distinctive interaction between public policy, the market, family and organizational life ... [thus] a social affiliation and cohesion system, a political system and a cultural system” (Hvinden, 2009: 2).

Marginality

Nordic applied theatre is concerned with destigmatizing the marginal by breaking down the boundary between majority society and marginal groups. The Nordic field is concerned with normalizing the general human experience of “feeling socially excluded” and counteracting status differences (Torrissen et al., 2017; Aurne, 2017; Lilletvedt & Myklebust, 2017; Heggstad & Heggstad, 2017; Ineland, 2007; Sauer, 2004). A marginal voice is a voice we can all have. It is a contextual voice that may feel strong yet is hardly heard in public. The involuntary social exclusion can be recognizable in any human life. Per Fugelli, Professor of Social Medicine, claims that man is an innate malconstruction (Fugelli, 2015). He considers all people, on a profound level, as equals, regardless of diagnosis, health and function, and he reminded us that we all have a predisposition, a defect, a rust spot on the soul or a scratch in the paint. Today's Western society is characterized by an ever-increasing focus on appearance, success and streamlining. We also see an increase in the Nordic population in terms of lifestyle diseases, anxiety and depression (Sund, Rangul & Krogstad, 2019), as well as greater income disparities and the development of relative poverty (Omholdt, 2016). In this context, applied theatre is emerging as a potent arena for inclusion and interaction (Storsve, Rasmussen & Gjørnum, 2019).

We can all be the one who does not fit in, the one who appears abnormal in the gaze of the community (Aurne & Gjørnum, 2015). Different contextual sentences will thus produce a myriad of marginal voices, of marginality and marginal groupings of different kinds. Counteracting marginalization is a pervasive theme in Nordic applied theatre practices, because marginalization involves an undesirable situation in a social democratic welfare state, i.e. a degradation of you as a human being or exclusion from a social context: “He is regarded as an *outsider*” (Becker, 1963: 1).

Conceptual clarification in a Nordic context

In the Nordic languages, the term *drama* applies in relation to fiction, role and fable, and is used both about drama-pedagogical procedural work and about the manuscript itself for a theatrical performance.¹⁴ The term *theatre*, on the other hand, can mean two things in the Nordic languages. Either the institution itself that presents performances/events or:

a live performance or event that takes place in real time and in the same room as living people involved both on the side of actor and the spectator. The audience plays a more or less interactive role in the performance and in the stage energy, something which implies a response loop from the audience to the stage and back.

(Gran & Gjørnum, 2019: 12)

The art of making things possible is called *facilitation*. The term comes from the Latin “*facilis*” that means “to ease”. A facilitator thus makes it possible for team members to exchange ideas and find solutions, thus achieving something they would not have accomplished equally well on their own (Solem & Hermundsgård, 2015). According to John Heron, facilitation can be divided into six dimensions: Planning, meaning, confronting, feeling, structuring and valuing (Heron, 1999). The facilitation of applied theatre is about creating and maintaining a safe space for equal dialogue between the actors, promoting creativity and ownership towards common goals, and also to facilitate productive and impartial meetings (Ellinggard, 2015).

The term “applied theatre” in the Nordic countries is used for projects in which one plays for, about and/or with actors who reside outside the mainstream art institutions, such as nursing homes, schools, disability care, psychiatric care, prisons, kindergartens, refugee centres, libraries, local cultural centres or in inclusive art practices. Here, the importance of facilitator competence, target group analysis and ethical considerations is strongly emphasized (Enoksen, 2017). Applied theatre as a concept did not gain a foothold in the Nordic countries until Helen Nicholson’s (2005), Phillip Taylor’s (2003) and James Thomson’s (2003) textbooks appeared on the curriculum in drama/theatre studies.

In 2019, we saw a theatre landscape in great change in the Nordic region, a process which will have consequences for applied theatre practices in the future. We are in the midst of a technological revolution, and cultural area by cultural area is subject to the conditions of digitalization (Gran & Gjørnum, 2019). The Nordic theatre field has consisted of three rather different sub-fields: institutional theatres, private theatres and free groups. Today, however, we see ever closer interaction, exchange and overlapping networks between the fields, although they are financed differently and are based on different historical traditions, organisational structure and organisational culture. Among other things, we see a tendency for well-functioning close teams of artists to enter the institutions with new methodology during project periods. The fields no longer have waterproof bulkheads. In our time, cross-aesthetic forms, alternative playing styles and a greater degree of audience involvement are developed (Berg, 2018). We also see how documentary theatre (Aurne, 2017), reminiscence theatre and citizen theatre are becoming more common. The working methodology we recognize from traditional applied theatre practice is further institutionalized and aestheticized (Gran & Gjørnum 2019). An increasing number of productions at both the major institutional theatres and in the free groups stage performances with “ordinary people” on stage. A good example is the Danish theatre company Fix&Foxy’s productions such as *Pretty Woman* and *A Doll’s House in Ordinary Homes*.¹⁵ We also increasingly see representatives from so-called “marginalized groups” performing together with professional actors in productions, such as those by Martens & Goksøyr, Kjersti Horn or at Reykjavik Þjóðleikhúsið. The audience is facilitated in our time to a greater degree of participation. Children and young people are invited into productions, and “backstage stage” discussions, reflection groups or café dialogues are organized to bring fiction and reality together.¹⁶

In light of art didactics

Applied theatre as an art of didactic practice deals with, or involves, marginality in various forms. Nordic applied theatre may be viewed in light of the concept of relational and “performative art didactics”: “The contemporary ambiguous, multi-faceted, relational, performative and context-oriented art didacticism that paves the way to a dynamic and situated topos for dissemination” (Aurne et al., 2013: 14). This didactic approach is characteristic of applied theatre projects and is used in facilitating a mediation situation understood as a didactic meeting between three instances: performance/ presentation/event; the observer as co-creative actor; and facilitator/educator/artist (Aurne, 2013).

In the communication situation, the applied theatre facilitator enters what one may choose to call *the activity room* (Pahuus, 2015). This space underlines the fact that everyone involved in the art didactic context is always an actor; active co-creators of the events that occur in the meeting between them – events that may be experienced as aesthetic experiences (Dewey, 1934). In this sense, we understand the art didactics of applied theatre as a form of relational aesthetics (Bourriaud, 2007). The activity space is closely linked to life itself: “The most basic form of the activity

room is the room of the living – a space that can assume the different forms ... determined by the human body and by human needs” (Pahuus, 2015: 123).

As an applied theatre facilitator, one exercises professional judgement in art didactic assessments in the face of people with different life experiences. Discretion is contextually contingent and linked to human intuitive sensation, cultural norms, values and silent knowledge. Art didactic processes in applied theatre may be perceived in light of Aristotle’s (2013) concept of phronesis.¹⁷ Then the processes can be understood as sensory, relational and intuitive. They are thus culturally and contextually conditioned. In a Nordic theatre context, we can see that the Nordic welfare model plays a role, though in different ways. We find dividing lines between the Nordic countries. Therefore, let us dive into a comparative study of Norwegian and Swedish Disability Theatre to illustrate the contextual differences.

Applied theatre and disability

In Norway, the national cultural policy governs applied theatre for people with disabilities,¹⁸ while in Sweden it is the health and social policy. The consequence thereof is that in Sweden, funding is earmarked for this purpose, giving day care centres, etc. the task of initiating such projects as part of the comprehensive care that the welfare state offers (Gjærum, Inland & Sauer, 2010). An example is the Ållateatern theatre (for people with intellectual disabilities) in Sundsvall, which for years has staged classics such as *Romeo and Juliet* and *Carmen*.¹⁹ This group is respected in Sweden and has gradually gained national and international attention (Sauer, 2004). The Disability Theatre hires professional theatre instructors and is considered by the public as both art and therapy (Inland, 2007; Solvang, 2010). Cultural logic values the actors’ otherness from a purely artistic point of view, while therapeutic logic categorizes actors primarily as clients in the welfare state. This Swedish applied theatre project is funded by the welfare state of Sweden because it contributes to education, mastery, identity development and affiliation (Inland, 2007; Sauer, 2004).

In Norway, however, such funds are not earmarked for Disability Theatre and it is therefore up to voluntary enthusiasts or theatre institutions to fund and organize such projects (Gürgens, 2004; Gjærum et al., 2010). Nevertheless, so-called cultural democracy (Gjærum, 2017) is the goal of Norwegian cultural policy today and has been since 1973. With the new parliamentary White Papers in 1973–1974, we got a cultural concept that embraces both art, leisure, sports and outdoor activities. The view of art that underlies the idea of cultural democracy and the expanded concept of culture is open and wide. But no matter the parliamentary White Paper buzz words such as diversity, inclusion, cultural democracy and freedom of speech, the reality of Norwegian cultural life today is characterized by stronger elitism and categorization (Gjærum, 2008). The latest parliamentary Cultural White Paper, Meld. St. 8 (2018–2019) *The Power of Culture: Cultural policy for the future*, says nothing about specific investments in art for and with people with disabilities. However, the Cultural White Paper states that “the Ministry of Culture assumes a broad understanding of the diversity concept that comprises several dimensions”, but the way the concept of diversity is operationalized in the Cultural White Paper still does not appear to include people with disabilities (Meld. St. 8 (2018–2019)). In the White Paper, diversity and multiculturalism are only associated with immigrants, indigenous peoples and so-called “national minorities: ... Jews, Kvens/Norwegian Finns, Roma (Gypsies), Romani people/Norwegian and Swedish Travellers and Forest Finns are accepted as national minorities in Norway” (p. 76). The priorities in the Norwegian Cultural White Paper do not include people with disabilities in general or with intellectual disabilities in particular,²⁰ despite the fact that these citizens are and always have been part of the natural diversity in Norway (Gjærum et al., 2019; Gürgens, 2004; Gjærum 2008). We see that in a Norwegian context, national and ethnic

minorities are given cultural and economic priority, which will have consequences for applied theatre projects such as Dissimilis²¹ (Henningsen, Berkaak & Skålnes, 2010; Gjørnum, 2008). The Nordic welfare model thus has two completely different effects in Sweden and in Norway in terms of organizing and financing different forms of applied theatre.

Location-specific rooms

The art didactics of applied theatre practice enable several forms of objectively-given spaces where projects can be carried out. Let us consider two examples, one from a hospital and one from a prison. We can think of applied theatre brought into the hospital as an objectively-given space – that is, into the hospital-clown’s sensational-empathetic universe.²² In this setting, the art didactics create meetings between people in the body of the hospital, understood as the hospital’s architectural building mass, but also the patient’s body, a body that holds a marginal voice that is under medical treatment. Art didactics thus become – through the hospital clowns – the meeting point between the sick and the healthy in man: “Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick” (Sontag, 1991: 3). All people can get sick. However, it is important to point out that the sick person also has a healthy half that needs nourishment and comfort in order to give strength to heal the sick side (Gjørnum & Kinn, 2016). The hospital – the “sick-house” (in Norwegian) as an objectively-given space – has inherent drama in the site-specific dramaturgy and scenography (Brodzinski, 2010). Thus, the health institution is not “the empty space” (Brook, 1995: 11). It is a landscape filled with social meaning; with fear, power, expectation and hope (Foucault, 1972: 166). Human warmth, sensation and dialogue extend the scenic framework for the objectively-given space when the hospital clown shows us what applied theatre can be in a hospital.

We also find applied theatre projects in Nordic prisons.²³ Today, several different free groups operate by playing for or with the prisoners, such as the Vardeteateret in Norway. In Nordic countries, the use of theatre in prisons increased with the help of, among others, the Swedish pioneer Jan Jönson. He staged *Waiting for Godot*, first at the Kumlaanstalten in Sweden and later in the USA. Through Beckett’s drama he explored, together with inmates as actors, the waiting situation and existence as a lifetime prisoner, in the early 1990s.

Other applied theatre projects bring the stories of prisons into the community outside the prison walls. An example is the project ‘The Quadruple Room’, created by Karoline Enoksen (2017), which toured secondary schools under the auspices of “The Cultural Schoolbag” (*Den Kulturelle Skolesekken*).²⁴ The theatre performance is based on interviews from Norwegian women’s prisons.²⁵ Four young actors communicate the women’s stories and stage in a documentary manner difficult life choices, coping with everyday life and a situation beyond their own control. The students who experience the performance are reminded of the challenges of making choices that prove to be fateful, they get a sense of what it means to be in marginalization processes, and are reminded of the systemic differences between female and male inmates in Norway.

Spatiality

To sense means to perceive, feel, observe and experience. Sensation is about sensory recognition (Gadamer, 2012). However, the term “to sense” is often used when referring to experiences we cannot quite put into words or point to as clear, distinct signs. We sense when we feel that something is happening, as if the body internalizes the world and lets the sensation mature until we have analyzed the experience, placed it and become able to put it into words.

The activity room is the place where one as an active being participates in interaction with others in joint exploration, often with a desire to move on in a purposeful action that provides recognition or mastery. Then the needs of the body and the possibilities of man are the only limitation in the space of living where we are going, directed towards something (Pahuus, 2015). *The sensed room*, on the other hand, is the place where one can tacitly be inside oneself and where the experience is subjective, bodily and emotional. One does not depend on others in the processing of the experience in one's interior. According to Pahuus (2015), the sensed room is closely related to "dance" or "hike" in the outdoors. Here, the distance is not the goal itself; one can move crosswise, one can dance backwards and in circles, the essence becomes "dimensions such as width and depth – and a shift between the open versus the closed" (Pahuus, 2015: 127).

The last room we can reach through applied theatre projects as observed from a place-philosophical perspective is *spatiality*. Spacious means far-reaching, solid, rugged, powerful, bulky and comprehensive. The concept thus exceeds the boundaries of a *closed room*. Thus, spatiality is opening, welcoming and transboundary. When people reach spatiality, it provides tranquillity. For spatiality, claims Pahuus (2015: 133), is about returning home. Man always longs for "home", for belonging and thus for human existence in the place (Norberg-Schulz, 1978). The home represents the safe roots we require to be able to face challenges with confidence in our own lives. Only when we can give room to others, create dialogue rooms between the known and the unknown, will we as human beings reach the *spatiality* of life. What, then, does "spatiality" entail for applied theatre projects, for the facilitator, the artist and the audience? Let us consider the example "Blodklubb", which can be understood as both performance art and an applied theatre project, in the meeting between culture and genetics. The title of the project comes from the dish *Gumbá* (a kind of blood sausage), which is the feast food often served on the Sámi National Day.²⁶ The quartet behind the project has Sámi/Finnish/Norwegian backgrounds and they problematize on stage how we romanticize family background, tradition and culture in Nordic countries, while genetics as an explanatory model is very problematic in a political and social context. They draw the audience into polls and practical exercises, analyze real genetic tests, and the artists claim to conduct what they call "charlatanism". Together, they explore how it: "feels paradoxical to be Sámi, having to relate to an identity and a mindset of belonging that is ultimately a genetically conditioned collective".²⁷ This concept of regular club meetings puts spatiality to the test when people, as a non-Sámi northern Norwegian audience, are challenged on whether blood is thicker than water, and some types of blood are better suited than others to own ancestral songs and the narrative of living in the circumpolar north.

Challenges ahead

Nordic applied theatre is characterized by the art fields merging, the theatre industries working in more and more interdisciplinary ways and that theatre – as an epistemological forge – is coming more into focus in society. This is due to the need for new reflection rooms in the face of a more complex society with increased social and ecological challenges. An example of a field in expansion is the nursing home sector due to an increasingly older population, growth in the dementia diagnosis spectrum and a demographic shift in society. Thus, in the Nordic countries (like in many other places in the world),²⁸ there is a growing need to find alternative aesthetic community work for citizens with dementia. We see the emergence of three different forms of applied art projects for this target group. The first are the *therapeutic* projects in which art is used as a form of activation with clear instrumental medical or social goals such as reducing drug use against anxiety in dementia (Mysja, 2005). The second form is *entertainment value*²⁹ projects that hire professional musicians and actors, or possibly other older amateur artists, to contribute to meaningful and life quality-enhancing

moments for patients with dementia (Heggstad et al., 2018; Rønning, 2017). The third and final form of applied projects in nursing homes is related to *procedural "co-creativity"* work which aims for evenly balanced dramaturgy, actors as equal partners and relational cross-aesthetical art meetings between patients, relatives and improvisational artists in music, visual arts and theatre (Zeilig, West & van der Byl, 2018; Ursin & Lotherington, 2018).

Nordic applied theatre has clear similarities to applied theatre in other parts of the world (Prendergast & Saxton, 2016). Some features of the Nordic countries, though, can be viewed in light of national, regional and local power structures and location-specific challenges. The basic motives in applied theatre are the same in the Nordic countries: degrees of *participation* by the artist, the facilitator, the actor and the audience; different *aesthetic* genres, styles, methodologies. There are a wealth of *ethical* dilemmas with regard to thematic issues that may be processed by the participating actors and a need for *evaluation*, feedback, impact measurement or post-reflection on complex projects with often delicate topics.

Notes

1. Arnesen & Gjørum, 2017; Heggstad, Rasmussen & Gjørum, 2017; Rasmussen & Gjørum, 2010; Gjørum, 2013a, 2013b, 2015, , 2017.
2. <http://www.openensemble.se/?p=1230>
3. <https://www.w.nor.den.org/no/info/rmaton/10-inns-atsom-rader>
4. <http://www.sprogpiloter.org/>
5. <https://nordicsafecities.org/>
6. <https://www.nordforsk.org/no/programmer-og-prosjekter/programmer/education-for-tomorrow-1/education-for-tomorrow>
7. <https://www.norden.org/no/node/7630>
8. <https://www.nordpluonline.org/>
9. <https://www.nordicinnovation.org/>
10. <https://www.itd.cnr.it/doc/CompuThinkNordic.pdf>
11. <https://www.norden.org/no/node/7767>
12. <https://www.nordpluonline.org/>
13. <https://norric.org/>
14. The way a drama is realized on stage through the ages is explored in theatre studies. Literary researchers focus on the dramatic text that is the point of departure for the performance (<https://snl.no/drama>).
15. <https://fixfoxy.com/en/>
16. Examples include the Goksøyr and Marten productions at the Norwegian Theatre (<https://www.detnorsketeatret.no/framsyningar/dottera/>) or Rommen Scene in the Gjøruddalen suburbs (<https://www.rommenscene.no/>).
17. Aristotle writes in Nicomachean Ethics about phronesis as the ability to act in a wise way, to imagine differently, to see what makes sense to know, to make the right decisions in specific contexts, to justify choices which presume moral virtue.
18. After 1991, with the dismantling of the major central institutions, people with intellectual disabilities should move to their home municipalities, in line with the normalization ideology. From now on they will be treated as ordinary citizens.
19. <https://www.svt.se/nyheter/lokalt/vasternorrland/mittnyttjournalister-bakom-alla-dokumentar>

20. <https://www.dagsavisen.no/debatt/kulturmeldingen-er-ikke-relevant-og-representativ-for-alle-1.1491977?fbclid=IwAR0vwX-rZzqULI2k7JDsq1iL6SCLjuczdl87JtxSkbl8zdXZhOigCxDWN5w>
21. The Dissimilis National Competence Centre is experiencing financial cuts from the Norwegian state despite the fact that the private foundation offers arts and culture experiences and high-quality customized education. Measures that the state is obliged to offer to its citizens, which is enshrined in both the Norwegian Culture Act (2007) and in human rights.
22. In Norway there are 16 hospitals employing hospital clowns (<https://www.sykehusklovnene.no/her-er-vi/>)
23. <https://underskog.no/sted/6351vardeteateret> and <https://www.dagbladet.no/kultur/kreativ-kriminalomsorg/60169661>
24. <https://www.denkulturelleskolesekken.no/english-information/>
25. <https://dks.osloskolen.no/firemannsrommet/>
26. <https://www.ferskescener.no/forestilling/blodklubben/>
27. <https://www.ferskescener.no/forestilling/blodklubben/>
28. <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2018/08/16/why-universities-for-the-elderly-are-booming-in-china>
29. <https://www.nrk.no/vestfold/xl/det-er-aldri-for-seint-a-debutere-1.13337170>

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