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COMMUNITY THEATRE IN A SOUTH SAMIC COMMUNITY: THE CHALLENGES OF WORKING WITH THEATRE IN SMALL COMMUNITIES

by Tordis Landvik (Norway)

Abstract

This article focuses on how cultural identity in small communities is under pressure from the influence and power of the large community. I describe the story behind a South Samic production I worked on during 2003/04 in a small community close to the Arctic Circle in Sweden. The production had been delayed three times during that year for reasons which will be explained later. My focus is on a performance named *Vattufall/Waterfall*. Some important questions arise: What makes this kind of theatre different from other kinds of theatre in small communities? What kind of consciousness emerges during the theatre processes when local people work with local controversial issues? What kinds of theatre expression are chosen and why? How do the performers and the audience respond in 'community theatre'?

Extrait

Cet article est centré sur la façon dont l'identité culturelle dans de petites communautés est sous la pression de l'influence et du pouvoir de la communauté principale. Je décris l'histoire d'une production par des Sami du sud, sur laquelle j'avais travaillé en 2003/04 dans une petite communauté proche du cercle arctique en Suède. La production avait été retardée trois fois cette année pour des raisons qui seront expliquées plus tard. Mon objectif se porte sur une performance intitulée *Vattufall/Waterfall*. Des questions importantes émergent : En quoi ce type de théâtre est-il différent d'autres types de théâtre dans de petites communautés ? Quel type de conscience émerge lors des procédés théâtraux quand des membres d'une communauté travaillent sur des issues locales controversées ? Quels types d'expression théâtrale sont choisis et pourquoi ? Comment est-ce que les acteurs et l'audience répondent-ils au 'théâtre communautaire' ?

Resumen

Este documento se centra en cómo la identidad cultural en las comunidades pequeñas está bajo la presión de la influencia y el poder de la comunidad más grande. Describo la historia sobre la base de una obra del Samic Meridional en la cual yo trabajé durante los años 2003/2004 en una comunidad pequeña cerca del Círculo Ártico en Suecia. La obra se había retrasado tres veces durante ese año por las razones que se explicarán posteriormente. Mi enfoque es sobre una obra llamada *Vatufall/Cataratas*. Algunas preguntas importantes surgen: ¿Por qué esta clase de teatro es diferente de otras clases de teatro en las comunidades pequeñas? ¿Qué clase de concientización surge durante los procesos del teatro cuando las personas locales trabajan con temas polémicos locales? ¿Qué clases de expresión teatral se eligen y por qué? ¿Cómo reaccionan los artistas y la audiencia al 'teatro de la comunidad'?

Author's biography

Tordis Landvik is Assistant Professor, Nesna University College, Norway. Her MA (1998) was titled *Theatre and Identity — Three Performances Based on Local History and their Role in Identity Formation*. Before joining the academic staff, Tordis directed and taught in northern Norway (1978–97), first at Nordland Teater and afterwards at Vefsn folkehøgskole. Her special interests are youth theatre, locally created small community theatre and the impact of these forms on their audience. She is currently researching community theatre and drama as a method in teaching mathematics.

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[EDITOR: The tables in this article are incorrectly formatted, owing to platform transcription issues. We apologise for this.]

Introduction

The term, though not the practice, of 'community theatre' or 'community-based theatre' is quite new to Norway. Three years ago, one of my colleagues, Associate Professor Tor-Helge Allern, picked up on the concept in the book *Community Theatre, Global Perspectives* (2001) by Eugene van Erven. Van Erven traces the etymological roots of the term 'community theatre' back to 1920, when Cornell University Professor Alexander Drummond used it in upstate New York to refer to his stimulation program for or 'grassroots theatre' (Van Erven 2001: 1). In this book, van Erven discusses examples from six parts of the world, showing how the label 'community theatre' means something quite different in North America than it does in Europe, Africa and Asia. In North America, the term 'community theatre' means the same thing as 'amateur theatre' in Europe. Throughout most of Europe, amateur theatre is a middle-class theatre activity, while community theatre mostly belongs to the working class.

Different community (based) theatre projects have their own distinct, individual stories, but they also have qualities in common:

- The emphasis is on local and/or personal stories rather than pre-written scripts. These local/personal stories are processed through improvisation and then collectively shaped into theatre under the guidance of either outside professional theatre people or local amateur artists residing among groups of people who, for lack of a better term, could perhaps best be called
- 'peripheral' (van Erven 2001: 2).
- Community theatre also expresses the privileges of any artistic pleasure and socio-cultural empowerment of its community participants. Its material and aesthetic forms always emerge directly from the community whose interests it tries to express (van Erven 2001: 3).
- Every community theatre production is unique, told in its owners' words and expressions, and with its own atmosphere.

Community-based theatre has a long tradition in Scandinavia, dating back to the late 1960s. One of the first performances took place in Tärpes in Finland, under the guidance of director Ralf Långbacka. In Scandinavia, it has been labelled 'local theatre performances'/Lokalspill/grassroot theatre or 'dig where you are'. These performances have often been based on local history and issues, with varying content and focus. They have been created by both idealistic theatre groups and by better organised, commercial theatre enterprises using a mix of professional and non-professional actors and crew. These Nordic community performances often involve people from a wide range of professions, educational backgrounds and avenues of employment. It is common to have participants from all age categories. It is never a question of which social/economic class the participants belong to; the only criterion is an interest in creating something meaningful together with others.

Theatre tradition

In Norway and Sweden, the theatre structure is divided into professional and amateur theatre. In amateur theatre, none of the crew is paid, except the director and conductor in some productions. Musicians are occasionally hired and paid. Many types of theatre created by amateurs have been referred to as amateur theatre. In my experience over the past 25 years, I've discovered that there's little or no difference between those who do amateur theatre and those who do community-based theatre in Scandinavia.

Professional theatre is owned by the state, the county and local authorities. The boards of the professional theatres have representatives from the owners, but these representatives do not have influence on the repertoire or artistic issues. Some independent professional groups may get financial support from the state for some projects.

We can therefore state that community-based theatre has existed in the Nordic countries since the 1970s, without being referred to using that particular term. In many places, people simply have created new performances about local issues, as in the *Vattufall* project discussed below.

Dearnan Sitje

The Sami people live in Norway, Sweden, Finland and Russia. In general, all people in the north have a traditional habit of moving between these countries — in particular Lapps, who work with reindeer. The move has not been from north to south, the way the borders run. One result of this is that we have, for

instance, three dissimilar Samic languages, and the people are divided into the Northern Samic, the Lule Samic and the South Samic, which means that they cannot communicate with each other as Norwegians and Swedes can do. Of the three Samic groups, it is the southern group which has been most strongly oppressed, both by the larger Samic groups and interests and by the Norwegian or Swedish local and central authorities. In Sweden, the South Samic language has been under immense pressure for decades; as a result, it can now be regarded as a dying language and culture.

This South Samic group, Dearnan Siŋje, is based in Björkevatn, in Tärna in Sweden, and is a part of the Sámi Teáhter/Samic Theatre in Kiruna. The group is also a partner of Åarjelhsaemien Teatere/South Samic Theatre in Sweden and Norway. Åarjelhsaemien is collaboration between Norway and Sweden, working primarily with theatre for children and young people, and offering courses and workshops for the education of leaders and others. Through this, they are hoping to recruit and train new theatre workers in all aspects of the theatre. The Samic Theatre in Kiruna administrates all collaborative efforts and directs the Samic professional theatre productions in Sweden. The Samic Theatre in Kiruna has also partially collaborated on productions such as *Vattufall*.

The manager and director of the *Vattufall* project, Eva Helleberg, is employed by the Samic Theatre in Kiruna, which in turn is managed by Lillemor Mauritzdotter Nylén.

The main theatre tradition among the Lapps in the northern part of Norway and Sweden is storytelling and their *joik* music. As Ola Graff explains: 'Joik expresses a fundamental referred relation and a referring object'/'Joik uttrykker en grunnleggende henvisningsrelasjon og et referanseobjekt' (Graff 2001: 42). It is a kind of vocal expression — for instance, you may *joik* a person, a feeling or an action.

I will now make a brief excursion into a theoretical framework derived from Habermas's work, because I find it useful for understanding community-based theatre in an indigenous context. Habermas has developed a model of 'the world of life' and 'the world of systems' (Madsen 1997: 80) (see Table 1).

Table 1: Habermas's view of society

World of life

Values Norms/rules Standards

World of systems

In this world, values and norms influence peoples' actions toward and interactions with each other in social communities. We are all unconscious about our own relations to these norms and values – they are not questioned.

Relations between people are based on mutual understanding.

An action of communication is a coordinated action between people where individuals are in agreement with each other's purposes.

These actions of communication create human resources which are basic and deeply ingrained in this 'world of life'.

Action of communication is necessary as a part of social life and behaviour.

The resources are:

- *Identity* : a resource which helps an individual define her/himself in contrast to the rest of the world.
- *Solidarity*: describes actions and interactions which are a person's practice of life. Through actions based on common norms, the person achieves connection with the community and the person is creating the resource of Solidarity.
- *Meaning*: made up of the cultural values and frames of understanding which motivate a person to act in the social world. These values are created by the social interaction between people. The knowledge of culture enables people to develop meaning as resource.

(Madsen 1997: 179)

Habermas sees these two versions of the world as two different aspects of social relations between people. He looks at history as an expression of changes in these two worlds. In a primitive and simple community, these two worlds go hand in hand as a varied unity.

The processes and development of modern society have separated the world of life and the system. This separation has created some profound differences: the system tends to penetrate the world of life and pressures it so that the ordinary sense of communication and the community of communication are threatened. When the system dominates the world of life in this way, it leads to a breakdown of what is real and what is not real, of what is true and not true, and threatens the continuation of the world of life.

A short description of the community of Björkevatn

Björkevatn is in a rural area. Back in 1951, it was composed of a cluster of 12 villages with a total of 174 people, which was eventually reduced to 10 villages with 39 people by 1991. Today the population of Björkevatn area is about 50 people. After the Second World War, there was a strong urbanisation in Sweden. At the same time, a powerful and effective oppression of the language and culture of the Samic people occurred. Today, South Samic people don't even have a Swedish/South Samic dictionary anymore, so they have to resort to a Norwegian dictionary.

This project was born four years ago. Two women, Lena Östergren and Eva Helleberg, started the project in Björkevatnet. Lena wrote the play and was one of the actors. Eva directed, produced and performed in the show.

None of the actors in *Vattufall* spoke in South Samic; they all spoke Swedish. Many locals want to learn their old language. As a result, from 2005 all Samic theatre productions will be in South Samic. Everyone now has to begin to learn the local language if they want to perform in theatre productions organised by the Samic Theatre in Kiruna. This is a challenging goal.

The story of *Vattufall/Waterfall* and Björkevatn

The story of this performance is about how the world of systems penetrated the world of life during the 1950s and 1960s in Björkevatnet. Locals made their living by farming, hunting and fishing. Their rights as Laps had been strengthened over generations. In this period, the Swedish government decided to develop this indigenous area for hydro-electric power production. They first sent anthropologists to document the local ways of life.

After the anthropologists had completed their research, engineers and workers were assigned to measure engineering requirements for the waterline (which is 13 metres higher than the tallest chimney). Then representatives were sent to convince the local population of the many financial benefits and improvements to their lives that they would experience from this hydro-electric project. The government's representatives visited every house, and counted every spoon, fork and knife, and every piece of furniture. Very carefully, all information was gathered and recorded.

The government invited the inhabitants to information meetings where the locals were promised a fantastic future filled with work and money, and the newest modern appliances. Then the face-to-face negotiations began. The government's representatives employed money as power; for many of the inhabitants, the change from barter economy to money economy was substantial so they were only too easily persuaded. The locals used their pay-off money to buy the latest products available in both Sweden and Norway in the 1960s, including cars, typewriters and televisions — even though they had no idea of how to use many of these items. They bought television without realising that there was no local electricity yet. The locals were promised free electricity for the rest of their lives — which they do now have. Unfortunately, however, the quantity of electricity they receive free is only enough to light a single lamp! Some people built new houses as close as they could to the lake, many people moved to the south of Sweden to work in factories. Others moved to the eastern coast. From the outside, it looked as if everyone was satisfied by this quick progress.

One of the consequences was fog. Another was that the local authorities appropriated the local hunting and fishing rights from the South Samic people. Some even lost their status as Samic people because they farmed rather than worked with reindeer. The authorities claimed they needed to give these rights to some North Samic people who had to move their reindeer herds to the south. A barrier was placed to close the old road; it was locked and impossible to pass. At the information meetings, everyone had been promised a key to the gate, but that was only one among many promises that were broken. After about 30 years, the local people began to talk openly with each other about what they really felt about this 'progress' and the negative impact it had had on their lives — particularly now that many of them have returned to the area to retire.

From a great idea to a final performance

Vattufall is an attempt to tell their story, and all scenes of the script are based on the history I have just reconstructed. The playwright, Lena Östergren, conducted detailed research. She attempted to study the official anthropological reports, but they were nowhere to be found. She read old local papers, held interviews and spoke at length with the local people. She took part in an academic course and received both response and guidance from other playwrights. Then the scenes she wrote were workshopped, revised and developed in close collaboration with a local cast of 15 actors and musicians ranging in age from 12 to 72. Some of the adult and elderly participants remembered a lot of stories from the 1950s and 1960s.

The first performance was scheduled for July 2003, but during the spring one of the actors became ill and died. Two weeks after that, the playwright's father — an important contributor to the project — also died. Since this was such a small community, these events profoundly affected the group, so the production went into a temporary hiatus. It is difficult to replace personnel in a small local group like this. Eventually the grief passed, and replacements were found so that work on the production could resume.

The final script contains 11 scenes. It has a narrative dramaturgy which ends up in an absurd finale, where present time fuses with the past and the future. The performance has an authentic (realistic) design and is performed in a popular way.

Summary of the script

The story centres primarily on two families and their development during the change of basis of existence. One family is more focused on this than the other. The first scene introduces us to daily life in this family. The mother, Stina, works at the local telegraph station which is located in her kitchen, and her husband, Arvid, is responsible for the mail in the village. Their children are Karin, Kjell and Sofia. Greta, the children's grandmother and mother of Arvid, lives with the family. Greta helps Sofia to sew a doll, working with leather from reindeer. Karin and Kjell are playing cards at the kitchen table until the father comes and brings his outboard boat engine to the kitchen table for repairs.

Between the telegraph calls to the station, Stina discovers foreigners along the lake who are knocking down sticks, and she demands that Arvid go and tell them that it is their land. When he returns with the mailbag, Stina asks:

Let me know! What did they do?

Arvid replies:

They told me they created a shoreline ... and that they had authority to do the work they were doing. They told that there will come people from Vattufall ... to inform us later on.

Stina and Greta are confused and repeat the same questions while Arvid continues:

Yes, I did say this is our land. I told I have the law text at home ... and the law says trespassing is not permitted.

Stina is interrupted by several calls and listens to what people talk about. A car has arrived and immediately there is a knock on the door. It is Siklund, who will do all the face-to-face negotiations. This is his first visit where he makes notes of the valuables while he chats. Arvid asks him:

ARVID: *What is on your mind? Speak up Mister?*

SIKLUND: *Well, I look about for ... complete a task for ... well, how does Mr Nilsson imagine?*

ARVID: *Sorry ... about what?*

SIKLUND: *Entirely house and property? Yes, now when ... Vattufall comes?*

ARVID: *Well ... I do not ...*

They are interrupted by calls and by Ida, the single and independent woman in the village, who comes to pick up her mail. As Ida and Siklund shake hands, there begins an attraction, which he tries to use as best he can in the face-to-face negotiations with her later on. Ida is a smart woman who can handle both business and private affairs; Siklund will leave a party scene later on quite humiliated by her state of mind.

During two meetings, the local authorities and the leading management of Vattufall inform the inhabitants about the beneficial consequences of the hydro-electric project. All homes will get free electricity for the rest of their occupants' lifetimes; there will be lots of jobs; they will receive enough money to settle down in other places and purchase new and modern items.

The people argue loudly against the project and the chief engineer says:

Hmm ... well, well ... in my conclusion I will propose a few things ... The question if and how great the scope of the regulation should be ... will be made of a legal decision ... and with His Royal Highness himself ... Sweden needs electricity ... The trial will take some time ... but should be complete by the end of this year. We are hoping to be operational before ... 1960. Those of you with property in the lake have the right to get an ombudsperson payed by...

GRETA: *What ... but the King, will he pay attention to this ... ? The King is no electrician!!!*

People leave the meeting, loudly arguing among themselves about the information.

The following scenes bring us to the next stage of development. Karin gets a job as a counter in the forest; Nasaren, a travelling merchant, visits Stina and Arvid. He knows that it will be compensation money and offers them credit. This is a part of the play where the consumer society is satirised. Locals want to buy things they need, but end up with useless objects because, for example, of the lack of power converters for electrical equipment, or because they buy fashion items which don't fit. Nasaren tricks them and leaves as soon as possible.

A meeting in the front of the locked barrier infuriates the locals already upset by the broken promises about the traditional rights. Once more, Siklund has to leave the crowd.

The next and last parts merge into each other and end, as mentioned earlier with a blues, and then with a *joik*.

Britta (the mother in the second family) and her family are going to move from the village. She comes to say goodbye to Arvid and Stina on the beach. Arvid tries to be nice and says:

ARVID: *Well, my good neighbour, you are around. I have heard you will move to Strann. How exciting for you to leave the farm and Björknes and come to a new place!*

BRITTA: *No, honestly, it doesn't feel good ... It's difficult for me to leave the cattle. We had planned to take one cow with us, Svala.*

ARVID: *Take Svala with ...!? How ...?*

They talk about all the money they have and Britta says:

BRITTA: *Well ... money ... here we have had a long life without. The most important is to have food on the table.*

ARVID: *Yes, but there's no harm either. Recently Stina has been so strange.*

Stina comes and says:

STINA: *I do not understand ... to build a new house without a basement ... A house without a basement is as a house without a roof ...*

Arvid tries to help:

ARVID: *I think it will be pleasant to move into a new house, in the middle of the property.*

Time passes. The fog comes and Arvid ends with these words:

ARVID: *But why didn't I ... why did I not do as thought! If I had known this ... I regret indeed ... I should done as thought. I regret so much ... I endorsed that paper!*

Present time takes over with the return of Britta and her grandchildren. She reminisces about how things were before the hydro-electric project changed everything. Her grandchildren complain about the walk; they don't see what she is describing. They try to catch some fish, but there is nothing left in the lake. The blues begins.

My work as guidance director

I was asked to help in September 2003, right after the production had resumed. The first performance was scheduled for December. Problems with actors and the need to find replacements continued until another actor left a month before the opening. Things now looked very bleak indeed.

A party for all of the inhabitants in the larger community had been planned for weeks. Both Lena and Eva had looked forward to it, but now they lost the joy of going because everything looked hopeless. They then made up their minds to go to the party and not return until they had found a replacement. As if by magic, they ran into a local man who had just returned to the area after living for many years in Los Angeles, where he had worked as an extra in the movies. For me, it was fantastic to watch how quickly he began helping the others around him.

To get people involved in a project like this is easy, but to keep them involved is very challenging for a community theatre facilitator. As Eva said:

Every time we thought we had things under control, something happened. We were close to giving up, but the will and desire to tell this story were so strong, we simply couldn't. After each crisis always something positive took place — as if in the fairy- tale.

When I came into the production to work alongside Eva, my task was mostly to listen to the actors' storytelling and direct them into the script and scenes. There was a double purpose to this approach. The local actors contributed to the play with their own memories (what was said by whom) while the playwright, Lena, decided what of that material would be included in the script. There were more than

enough memories for several more scripts.

Storytelling was also a therapy of sorts for the local participants. Their fictionalised role in the play gave them enough protection to tell it in public. For example, 'the fog comes' scene opens with an old man, Arvid, sitting in his kitchen drinking his coffee looking out over the lake where the fog drifts in. He becomes frustrated as he has been many times before and calls the Vattufall/Electricity Board. But he hears only the mechanical voice of an operator offering him several choices and asking him to confirm his choice by pressing the 'star' button. He gets mad at the voice, but gets no replies. He hangs up and calls again. This time he tries to listen and eventually realises his old phone does not even have a star. He takes a cell phone from his pocket and tries one more time. Of course, it's the same telephone answering voice again, so this time he decides to write a letter. He goes to his typewriter and begins to spell out: 'Till Vattufall', but he types it wrong and in frustration pulls the paper out of the typewriter. This is repeated several times.

Then it happens — the actor forgets that he is an actor. After several attempts, he finally succeeds in typing the opening of his letter correctly. This confuses him, because he no longer expected this to happen. So he says: 'Yes, so what do I write further?' He reads the opening one more time: 'Till Vattufall ... What to write? How?' He looks to me for some help. I tell him he doesn't need to write the letter because the script tells him to do something else. But he wants to write the letter: he is really furious about the fog and now that he has finally typed the opening correctly, he wants to finish the letter. I help him to complete the letter. Once satisfied, he puts the letter in his pocket. Then we start the scene from the top again. He had told me many times about all the people who had bought such typewriters despite having no clue how to use them. So why had they bought them in the first place? By doing this he was perhaps close to either his own experience or an experience he had heard of. Some time later, this particular actor left the project for various reasons.

In this way, during many of the rehearsals, we went deeper and deeper into what this story was really about. In many ways, it had been a taboo to confess their sense of lost identity, to confess some of the core feelings they felt about the local tradition and culture. Working in this project, the local actors began discussing these issues openly. The discussions continued during breaks. One of the greatest challenges for me was to let the actors talk — my method was to let it happen in its own time. Then I would use what was obviously important, focus and direct or lead the actors into what we were doing, and try to incorporate their perspectives into their roles or the situations.

Another challenge was dealing with the diminishing memory capacity of the old actors. I had to build their self-confidence in the scenes. There are always challenges in theatre direction which are not necessarily connected to old age, but when the actors are in the early stages of senility, things can become very difficult indeed. The more truthful an actor can be to himself in a role, the better the result will be.

The first performance

Finally the first performance came, and all went extremely well. The room where the performance took place only had seats for 40 persons, but about 55 were there from the village. Some had to sit on the stage behind the actors. During the performance, people commented out loud: 'Yes, it was just like this.' And they laughed. But the final scene ended with a blues that almost imperceptibly transformed into a *joik*. It was very moving for everyone. Sitting there, my thoughts went to Augusto Boal and his experiences in the rural districts.

The audience was invited to join the cast and crew after the show, with food and drinks served. Someone from the audience thanked us because this performance had everything he could have hoped for: 'Fun, serious drama, irony and sarcasm, love and poetry, power and humility. It was about life - our life and history.' He was so grateful.

When all the important speeches were finished, it became dark. Believe it or not we'd had a power blackout! Candles were placed on the table and now the real storytelling could begin. As mentioned earlier, storytelling is the truest form of theatre, both among Nordic people in general and Sami people in particular.

As it was told, one of the characters had his outboard boat engine sitting on the kitchen table. A lot of our scenes took place around this kitchen table while the man tried to fix the motor. This activity became the inspiration for 40 minutes of spontaneous outboard engine stories told by people in our audience. They were told in such a hilarious way that people were howling with laughter. I could not comprehend all the references, but I understood enough to follow the gist. The energy was incredible.

The power in Bjørkevatn did not return until 11.25 a.m. the next day, which was a Saturday. It was the end of April. During the night, the ground had become white with 20–25 centimetres of snow, which was unusual this late in the year, even for this part of the world. There was still no power in Mårbacka at noon, and I asked Eva if they were going to cancel the next show that was planned for that evening. 'Nobody can stop us,' she answered. 'And least of all the Vattenfall [the Electric Power Company]! A lot of people are making coffee at home; someone else has arrived with a power generator so that we can use our theatre lights; a third person went home to get a large container holding 1000 litres of water so that we can have functioning toilets.'

'See? Everything's under our control,' said Eva. 'They can do whatever they like to us and we don't care.' They were an amazing group of people.

So this is community-based theatre the way we practise it up north, and it shows how, as Habermas described, the world of system penetrates the world of life.

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