

NEWS FROM SWEDISH THEATRE

focus: young audiences





Introduction

SWEDISH CHILDREN'S THEATRE has been recognized and appreciated across large portions of the globe ever since its artistic breakthrough in the 1970's. Starting from the basic idea that children should be taken seriously and treated with the same respect one would accord adults, the flowering of theatre for children and youth coincided with parallel developments in academia, politics and psychology.

Since its first steps towards becoming an integral part of the modern theatre, the path of Swedish children's theatre has followed the rapid growth of the independent group movement, the foundation of Sweden's regional theatre network and finally, the shift of artistic focus to the "children's theatre departments" formed under auspices of Sweden's foremost national and municipal theatre institutions.

Theatre for children and youth occupies a strong position in the Swedish theatrical landscape. During 2012, 876 professional theatre productions were mounted across the country. Of these, 212 productions or approximately 24 % targeted children and youth. Independent theatre companies spawned a majority of these productions. An increasing number of productions were aimed at audiences of all ages.

Developments on the artistic front have created space for collective and social issues to stand alongside the private and personal. New forms, often crossing the boundaries between genres, have augmented a repertoire composed of written plays and

adaptations of children's books. The dance scene has begun to turn its attention towards children and youth. The theatre and dance community in Sweden is targeting young audiences with creative, avant-garde productions and is establishing children's theatre as the main laboratory for exploring new means of expression.

Forward progress has been countered by setbacks, artistic as well as structural and financial. Sweden has weathered the global economic crisis better than many other nations in Europe and abroad – we have yet to see any huge budget cuts. On the other hand, new financial investment in culture has been meager during the past few years and the performing arts sector for children and youth is still the runt of the cultural litter – even here in Sweden.

In this issue of "News from Swedish Theatre" we spotlight performing arts for children and youth. We speak with playwrights, analyze events and trends and hope to provide some inspiring reading about how theatre and dance in Sweden addresses its youngest audiences.

by *Ann Mari Engel*

Director

Teaterunionen

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and

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ASSITEJ Sweden

Photo page 2:

Ola Kjelbye

Kicktorsken

Backa Teater,

Göteborgs Stadsteater

Lia Jacobi

Svansjön

Scenkonstbolaget

Childhood as a resource for the soul of the artist

by Pia Huss
Theatre Critic

Photo page 5:
José Figueroa

Årtusendets mest fantastiska
födelsedagskalas,
Barndomsprojektet
Stockholms dramatiska
högskola

José Figueroa

95 % är totalt jävla mörker,
Barndomsprojektet
Stockholms dramatiska
högskola

A ROYAL THEATRE DAY CARE CENTRE where 93 individuals create a three-hour long performance for pre-schoolers, interrupted only for toilet visits and a bag lunch. A long chain of experimental productions for primary and secondary school children; new plays about love, life and death. Opportunities for various occupations to collaborate and find ways of working together, mind-blowing insights into working with theatre for children and youth.

This is just a sample of the many things generated by the "Childhood project", a project whose entire aim can be sorted under one simple heading: the child's perspective. Obvious, because the nucleus of this exploratory, experimental, developmental process initiated by Suzanne Osten when she in 1995 took her professorial chair at what was then the Dramatic Institute, and is now, in a much larger costume, The Stockholm Academy of Dramatic Arts, was to focus on the child. On children as subjects, as fellow human beings. On children as respected parts in dialogue, as sources for inspiration.

Of course there had been initiatives in other places that consciously and consistently focused on young audiences. A radical re-thinking of children's theatre began during the heyday of the independent groups in the 1970's with the same Suzanne Osten and her colleague Per Lysander. Still, there was a persistent and prejudicial perception of children's theatre as being a lower and less interesting form of theatre, which in turn revealed

an enormous ignorance regarding the new possibilities that opened when working towards a young audience.

Suzanne Osten herself explains:

– Along with my professorship I was given a position of power that allowed me to force people to acknowledge the decisive importance that childhood holds as a resource for the soul of the artist. That theatre for children was indeed art.

– "The Childhood Project", which during a several year-long period was undertaken as a collaboration between a number of fine arts academies, collected artists of different disciplines in one collective effort. Aspiring actors, playwrights, directors, set designers, light and sound designers, producers and make-up artists following different lines of study came together to explore, both theoretically and practically, the children's perspective and theatre for children and youth. Following the tradition established by Suzanne Osten and groundbreaking work with Unga Klara, her theatre company, they worked and created alongside children in the children's own environments; day care centres and schools.

Suzanne Osten:

– Meetings such as these are an essential part of the process. Through The Childhood Project many students were forced to actually spend time with their audience and by doing so gained deeper insights. Looking back, I can see the unbelievable

amount of progress that we've achieved in the field since 1996. The whole attitude towards children's theatre was transformed. Many of our finest playwrights now work parallel both with children's theatre and with theatre for adults, letting the different expressions and themes enrich both. The child audience is demanding and intelligent, but there are large reserves open for theatrical fantasy. We had become stuck in our preconceptions of what children's theatre ought to be, the small format for example. Throwing all our combined efforts into the gigantic *Kungliga Teaterdagiset* (Royal Theatre Day Care Centre) showed us that the opposite was possible. In dialogue with children you have the possibility to be braver than you do when dealing entirely with adults. This is inspiring. But for all that, it has never been the aim of The Childhood Project to force an unwilling student to create something for children. The basic idea was to consistently keep the child's perspective in focus. Of course the child's perspective can also permeate drama for adults. The method entails among other things a return to one's own childhood memories.



The Childhood Project has without a doubt made a difference. At Ung Scen Öst in Linköping/Norrköping, Måns Lagerlöf introduced a new and bold theatre by addressing and involving the young audiences, more or less directly, in the creation of the work. This attitude was appreciated and is emulated by the present artistic director, Malin Axelsson. A number of the country's stages are employing theatre artists who, through The Childhood Project, have opened their eyes to the power structures in the child/adult relationship. Directors and playwrights such as Lucas Svensson, Rasmus Lindberg, Greta Sundberg, Carolina Frände, Åsa Lindholm and a great many more are contributing to the steady forward development of Swedish theatre for children. When in 2009 the Dramatic Institute was awarded the Prix d'ASSITEJ, part of the motivation read: "The Childhood Project taught young generations of theatre professionals that working with theatre for children and youth is an artistic challenge ... The Childhood Project has contributed to a boom in new plays and has been a major factor in raising the quality of children's theatre in Sweden".



Artistic development on the frontline

by Karin Helander
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Professor,
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Photo page 7:
Roos & Tegnér
Fantasticks
Operaverkstan,
Malmö Opera

Linn Sandholm
Uppfostrarna & De
Ouppfostringsbara
Unga Klara

Sören Vilks
Titta livet – en lek
Unga Dramaten,
Kungliga Dramatiska
Teatern

TO A LARGE DEGREE the most interesting, ground-breaking, high quality theatre for children and youth in Sweden today can be seen at the special youth theatre venues attached to the state supported theatre institutions. The artistic development of children's theatre that for many years had been the hallmark of the independent theatre movement, has relocated to the better endowed, state theatres, many of them led by artistic directors with a specific interest for this target group. Some of these annexes of large institutions have a tradition several decades long, while others are considerably newer.

One group who has spearheaded the movement of artistic children's theatre since the 1970's is Unga Klara at Stockholm Stadsteater, led by Suzanne Osten. Recently, Unga Klara has separated from the institution to which it belonged and now operates as an independent group. The experiences gathered during 35 years of pioneering work still provide a basis for new ideas, the present three year-old "upbringing" project being a good example. Here the concept of upbringing is examined both from the child's perspective and that of the adult. Active dialogue with particular associations and groups of children contribute to an on-going ideological and artistic discussion.

Stockholms City Theatre recently opened an annex in the Stockholm suburb called Skärholmen. The space, run by Caroline Frände, constantly seeks to examine the relevance of the theatre to the locality's heterogeneous population with its diversity of languages and cultural references. Current social issues concerning identity or the status of refugees find their way onto the stage. These per-

formances are often clothed in a strong physical language, using dance and newly composed music. Through collaboration with the Swedish National Radio's radio theatre youth program, they have constructed a listening lounge where new radio dramas or sound plays are presented to audiences slung above the floor in hammocks. They listen through wireless headphones.

Sweden's national theatre, The Royal Dramatic Theatre (or Dramaten) has over the past several years run a separate theatre for children and youth. Unga Dramaten has their own venue lying just a few blocks away from Dramaten's main house. Agneta Ehrensward has successfully concentrated production to a large degree on new dramatic writing, on woman directors, and manages an excellent troupe of young actors, often recruited fresh out of the theatre academies.

In Gothenburg, playwright and director Mattias Andersson has taken Backa Theatre, an affiliate of Gothenburg City Theatre endowed with its own performance space in a former factory, in new directions. Large encompassing works take precedence, projects often initiated through long research periods employing sociologists and delving into the audience's own experiences and opinions in relation to a chosen subject. The results are then woven into the performance. During the autumn of 2012 the subject was drug use and the performances, collected under the title *Utopia 2012*, explored drugs and the dreams and future aspirations of the young audience.

Östgötateatern in Norrköping/Linköping houses Ung scen öst, which over the past few years has been the venue for some of the boldest theatre



in Sweden, especially for the younger audience. Artistic director Malin Axelsson allows the theatre to work with researchers in gender and social issues. Several projects push the limits of what classroom theatre is expected to be, by inviting the audience to participate actively. They have also established a performance laboratory for youth between the ages of 18 to 25 years where participants receive coaching from theatre professionals.

Even the music theatres sport examples of auxiliary performance spaces for youth alongside their main houses. For the past ten years, the Malmö Opera has supported the experimental Opera Workshop under the direction of Maria Sundqvist. Modernism and creative curiosity are strongly positioned in relation to the audience in a manner resembling Osten's work at Unga Klara. The repertoire is a mix of new work and adaptations of the classics. At the Royal Opera in Stockholm, Young at the Opera is a small operation within the main house but without an own performance space. Here children are invited on special tours behind the scenes, may visit opera or ballet rehearsals and see specially tailored dance or opera performances. Unga på Operan works in collaboration with a couple of interesting independent groups, Pantomimteatern for example in *Pierrot at the Opera*, autumn of 2012. Common to many of these separate stages for young audiences is their willingness to work with the school system, allowing students to participate in different stages of the artistic process.



Swedish children's theatre: Still brave and bold?

by *Margareta Sörenson*
Theatre Critic

Photo page 9:
Martin Skoog
Charlies unge
Pantomimteatern

Sören Vilks
Säg att du är hungrig
Unga Dramaten,
Kungliga Dramatiska
Teatern

THE PRESENT FINANCIAL crisis is a cat o' nine tails lashing the state supported theatre. What will this mean for the long-term development of the art form? If it can be some comfort, the situation in Sweden is no worse than in other countries, in fact it is better. Throughout Europe budgets for the state theatres and the publicly funded independent groups are being slashed. A cultural inheritance built on our common efforts and economic support is at risk of being hollowed and in the worst case demolished completely.

Is this trend noticeable in Sweden, in the best theatre children's theatre in the world? Yes, you see it in the cold-handed attitude towards a pioneer such as Suzanne Osten, whose theatre, Unga Klara, is able to continue in large part due to a donation from the Post Code Lottery Foundation. You can see it in Stockholm, in the increasingly arrogant attitude the city takes towards small and vulnerable independent companies whose comprehensive work is fundamental to theatre for children and youth.

Who bears the responsibility for the development of art? Who takes the responsibility? In the end of course, it's the responsibility of the artists themselves, those who will and can develop their art. The political establishment, at the behest of its citizens, plays a supporting role in making art accessible. With regard to theatre for children and youth, even our minister of culture subscribes to this, on paper anyway: our cultural

inheritance and our children are areas of priority. Cultural inheritance must certainly include theatre, a cultural cornerstone in a Europe that since the 1800's has erected theatres for all the people, though we admit that the definition of "all" has varied over the centuries.

Is this tightening belt noticeable in what we see of artistic quality? The risk that companies begin to produce performances mainly to appease the audience is tangible, when margins have shrunk to the limits: it has to be a sell-out, needs to get those reviews. However, looking across the past few seasons we are still able to assert that Swedish theatre for children and youth continues to be serious, ambitious and full of life. Despite everything.

Theatre for adults might be struggling to keep up, but children can still see theatre that commands a full palette of artistic expression and trusts in the imagination of its audience. Performances integrate dance or are borne on musical wings where each actor sings an aria in the middle of an otherwise traditional drama. While the adults start nervously wondering "is it supposed to be a musical, or what", the children seem content to experience a moment of musical contemplation in the middle of an exciting narrative.

Complexity

Theatre for young audiences allows itself to be complex and fascinatingly complicated, as is Unga Dramaten's *Säg att du är hungrig* (Tell Me That

You're Hungry), a dance theatre production signed Kajsa Giertz about eating, but perhaps most of all, about family structures around the dinner table. Genuinely multi-layered images were created, for example when a human family donned dog or animal heads and brought discussion to new levels while simultaneously giving a nod to comic book tradition and childhood staples like Goldilocks.

Complexity however isn't merely a question of finance. One long established independent group with a tiny budget has continued to forge new paths since they reinterpreted their name TUR-teatern as "Theatre Utan (without) Reactionaries, at the same time creating a laboratory for young theatre practitioners called Young TUR. By dividing the theatre's leadership they have freed production capacity, allowing for a higher frequency of new shows and making an indelible mark on the theatre landscape. Their anarchistic and provocative productions brim with fantasy and successfully target teens and young adult audiences. The division into age-based categories has shifted, with the definition of "children" being anything from new-born and up, while youth can denote ages from twelve years to almost thirty.

By comparison, Young Dramaten and the Skärholmen stage of Stockholm City Theatre, the largest theatre in Scandinavia, are heavily resourced production houses and manage only a couple of large new productions per season with six to eight actors on stage.

Dance and Puppetry

Dance is these days, at long last, a vital part of the performing arts scene. The great wave of youth theatre that swept the country in the 1970's was never to find its counterpart in the dance scene, which first came of age in the 1980's. It was during the 1990's that a modern repertoire of dance for younger audiences became a small but essential ingredient in the cultural offerings for children and youth.

Important in this context was that with Zebra Dans, a specific venue for dance performances for children was born, even though it isn't the only place where dance is being presented to young audiences. The establishment of a network for touring has been vital to the growth of dance and the proximity of contemporary dance to the visual arts, seen through the performance art tradition, has also left a mark. Claire Parsons' *Four Little Girls (Fyra flickor)*, based on Picasso's play with the same name, was performed at Stockholm's Museum of Modern Art, during an exhibition of work by Picasso and Duchamps. It then set off on tour.

In general, dance has a younger audience than theatre does and when performed at the bigger venues it also attracts a large audience. Dansens Hus in Stockholm has had a lengthy run of *Swan Lake (Svansjön)* choreographed by former Bounce member, Benke Rydman. Swan feathers fly, both literally and figuratively in this youthful reinterpretation of this old folk tale where drugs, prostitutes and pimps provide the backdrop. The dance itself is updated combining hip-hop, jazz and theatre dance with projected imagery filling the stage.

Puppet theatre and mime still hold their own; both forms are low status and have been for centuries, and are perhaps for historical reasons accustomed to years of hunger and diminished resources. Old and well-established com-





Photo:
Mats Bäcker
Svansjön
Dansens Hus

panies like Dockteatern Tittut, Pygméteater or Pantomimteatern tour, collaborate and combine performances with workshops. Dockteatern Tittut and Pantomimteatern have both collaborated with the Royal Opera, a grand institution that has, until recently, all but ignored the younger audience. The Opera now has chosen to work with these well qualified companies, utilizing their intimate knowledge of the youngest audiences and genuine puppetry or mime that only a small and highly specialized company can nurture.

The intensive discussions these past years concerning the theatre's male ego and the objectification of women has imprinted itself to no small degree on theatre for children and youth. An ever-larger number of performers engage in cross-dressing or zealously comment traditional gender roles by sticking small holes in them or examining them at arm's length. Puppets, new circus, masks and projections are employed to variously strengthen or distance the narrative. Newly composed music often bolsters qualified dramatic art as in *Skärholmen* (composer Niklas Brommare) or at *Fria Teatern* (Patrik Lasbo) or *Unga Dramaten* (Janne Tavares). Of course one notices that the large institutions also have greater resources while the independent sector has had to learn to scale down in terms of stage and costume design, to roll with the punches when public funding is suddenly withdrawn and plans are brought to nought.

It is thus no surprise that the large, publically funded theatres have only succeeded in establishing companies that reflect the demographic makeup of the audience in terms of cultural diversity.

The smaller theatres often have a small core of performers and less mobility in terms of bringing non-Swedish, non-European performers into the mix. It remains to be answered, why the questions of gender equality have landed with such resonance in the theatre world while efforts in terms of diversity have meandered along more difficult paths. Despite the globalization of art forms, especially in the arenas where youth are prevalent, where everything from hip-hop to manga has become mainstream, the dramatic arts are still predominantly blond and middle-class.

It is clearly not yet a question of the theatre of appeasement, but how long can the many practitioners in the performing arts duck the slings and arrows of adversity and avoid giving in to the straight jacket of scarcity economics and ever-slimmer cultural budgets? Many of our best artists already subsidise the arts with their own creative energy and endurance, while subsisting on a patchwork of project grants and unemployment initiatives, even while they are working at some of our most prestigious cultural institutions.

Dance and Democracy

AS CITIZENS IN A DEMOCRATIC society we are guaranteed the right to art and culture. Our cultural institutions, stages, galleries and museums are accessible. We even have stages and festivals that focus entirely on children and youth. Art in the democratic society craves freedom from censorship, but at the same time demands that the artist, in his or her role as 'member of society', undertakes the education of his fellow citizens in the understanding and appreciation of the different forms of art.

Regarding dance for children and youth, efforts during the past decade have focused on diversity. Peter Sunesson, producer at Salto, maintains that we have today several choreographers and companies that develop performances with a conscious multi-cultural perspective. That many performances are played at schools, automatically putting them in contact with a culturally diverse audience, is one explanation for this emphasis.

ZebraDans, a Stockholm dance venue for children and youth, was established a couple of years ago by choreographer Liza Spets. Besides housing a permanent venue, ZebraDans ventures into the audience's home turf, for example with a dance project in Tensta, a Stockholm suburb in which the overwhelming majority of citizens are either new immigrants or children of immigrants. Targeting the community's children with dance performances is both a way of building an interest in dance as an art form and at the same time, underlining the relevance of dance to modern society. Recent debates concerning publically funded art in a democratic society have focused on quality

in art or literature, ignoring art forms that have not yet been embraced by the art academies and educational institutions. Festivals and platforms supporting different dance styles, especially those rooted in non-western cultures, are important to the development of a dance culture for children in Sweden.

The dance company Odissi is partnering with ZebraDans in an initiative called Movement in Exile, an effort to exhibit the wealth of expression, the shifting artistic and cultural influences that marks dance as an art form in a democratic Sweden. This experience reassures children and youth that dance is an art form that absorbs diversity in flux and accords equal respect to the artistic expression of every corner of the planet.

by *Katarina Lion*
Senior Lecturer
University of Dance and Circus

Photo:
Helene Berg
Hej vad heter du
ZebraDans



Martina Montelius: A playwright for our time

by Lars Ring
Theatre Critic

Photo page 13:

Sören Vilks

Mira går genom rummen

Unga Dramaten,

Kungliga Dramatiska

Teatern

MARTINA MONTELIUS IS A dramatist headstrong in the extreme. Her mix of good-natured, naïve realism and drastic, absurdist comedy results in plays that careen wildly between hilarity and breath taking gravity. Always with an exact feel for language and for the value of every word.

Her first plays, *Grew tucked up in teat-warm cat litter, loved beyond sanity* (Spenavarm kattsand) and *Det epileptiska riktmärket* (The Epileptic Benchmark) were dark and unsettling descriptions of young people, whose self-images were disfigured through their relationships to uninterested, narcissistic parents. These were followed by a series of short plays brimming with an almost violent, verbal rage.

Her plays for children, *Drömström och Rundlund* (*Drömström and Rundlund*) and most recently *Mira Passing Through* (*Mira går genom rummen*), both for the Royal Dramatic Theatre, display a calm and natural mixture of all of the above elements combined with a pedagogic pathos that allows the children portrayed on stage to also be heroes: proud, wise and valuable.

We meet one afternoon at her theatre, Teater Brunnsgränd Fyra, a basement theatre where one would expect to find a Swedish independent theatre company. She took over the space a few years ago and runs it successfully, despite being the mother of three and much in demand as a playwright. The Ibsen Society of Sweden made her the recipient of their prize in 2010 and *Mira Passing Through* was selected in 2012 as the Swedish nominee for the Nordic Drama Prize.

This play about seven year-old Mira is doing well. Its been translated into English, German, French, Finnish and Danish and was presented in a reading at a festival in Iceland, still no foreign theatre has staged the play.

"Well, it is in truth a pretty provocative play. I come out and say that the only meaningful definition of a "family" is love. A family might be composed of any number of individuals or mix of genders. Care is what's necessary. And absolute trust."

Mira Passing Through tells the story of two bonus children – siblings not by blood, but through the relationship between their parents – children who don't want to separate, even when their parents do. A child, the drama states, should also have the right to chose the context of their lives. Playfully, the script winds its way into the heart of great trauma: divorce and separation. Here the children are clear-sighted and mature while their parents are ruled by impulses and desires.

"Children often pay the price for their parent's self-realization", says Martina Montelius. "And divorce, with all the attending shame and guilt, is still very much a taboo. No seven year-old will want to admit that their parents are getting divorced, and it's certainly not high-status to be the child of two fathers."

"I want to offer courage. I want to propose that a child with two fathers and two mothers can actually be twice as loved. That such a wealth of love is something to be proud of. And I'd like to say that children from "broken homes" aren't necessarily unhappier than others, in fact, the opposite may be true. Holding on to a worn-out marriage for "the

children's sake" can easily be a long, drawn out and brutal form of torture."

"The normative nuclear family is too often dysfunctional. What I have written is a love epos in which anything is possible. It is my firm belief that this piece is important for adults as well, and I do hope the discussion continues long after the play is over."

On writing for a young audience Martina says: "Its definitely different, the goal is more defined. Nothing should get in the way. It's an enormous responsibility. There's an aspect of usefulness when I write for children that adds meaning to the play, to me as a writer and to the children. After that it's all up to the actors, because the kids are receptive to different things, we need to recognize what each individual needs. To be a co-creator is the essence of the theatre experience."

Martina paints several different family constellations, also a queer couple – what we in Sweden call rainbow families. Mira herself has a whole trio of daddies. The world around us is changing and Martina Montelius is one of the few taking these changes seriously.



Aspects of power and powerlessness in Swedish Children's Theatre

by *Natalie Davet*
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CHILDREN'S THEATRE IN SWEDEN is known to be of high quality. This article will explore how trends and tendencies in Swedish theatre for children and youth have developed or been formed in relation to changes in cultural politics, to society at large, to reigning discourses concerning childhood and to debates in the public media.

This article is based on a research report entitled *Power and Powerlessness – Aspects and Tendencies within Modern Swedish Children's Theatre* commissioned by the Children's Theatre Academy in Gothenburg. The terms "power" and "powerlessness" are presented in the article as two terms that are relative and subject to change. The time span explored in the report covers the last thirty years, and I will endeavour to focus some light on specific important changes that took place since the 1970's, the time when the real boom for children's theatre occurred in Sweden. It was at this time that one first began in earnest to write plays for children. It was also the time in which theatre for children and youth first "came to school" with performances in assembly halls and gymnasiums, finally breaking its association with a single socio-economic class. A new type of audience came into being and the existing theatre institutions hurried to establish stages aimed to produce theatre exclusively for children and youth. Some of the central points

of exploration are: How did the children's theatre repertoire interpret or mirror the changes taking place in society? How did children's theatre choose to portray power or powerlessness? How do performances about children speak to children?

The structures of power and stories for children

Research shows that Swedish children's theatre effectively portrays the powerlessness that children themselves experience or can relate to, but that it is less effective in describing the structures of power. A series of different childhood discourses have been evident on the children's theatre scene since it first mushroomed during the 1970's. Among these we have seen; the victimized child, the competent child, the cute child, the stressed and self-destructive child, the new-to-Swedish-culture child, the political child and the girl-child becoming a subject and playing the leading role.

Viewing the of the concept of childhood and the texts written by adults for children with eyes of a constructivist, I am inspired by childhood researcher David Buckingham. He speaks of an adult construction of childhood and posits a clear dividing line between the way in which adults imagine children and the way in which children imagine themselves, between what children themselves wish to become and that which adults want



them to be. From this perspective we can see that children's theatre does reflect the world we live in. We recognize definite correlations between shifts in the social climate, the financial market and media debates reflected in the subject matter that is manifested on the stage in theatres for children and youth. The dominant childhood discourses are witness to the shifting values the adult world places on the needs and abilities of children, indeed they determine what stories might be good, bad or downright destructive for our children to experience in the theatre. A clear example is the way in which the socio-political messages, which often accompanied the children's theatre of the 1970's, were replaced in the 1980's by the psychological perspective. The focus shifted from society to individual, family and close relationships. Myths and sagas – which during the 1970's were considered irrelevant, moralising and old fashioned – were in the 80's reintroduced into theatre dressed in a psycho-analytic perspective and framework for interpretation. The major influence for this kind of children's theatre was Bruno Bettelheim whose book *The Uses of Enchantment* (1976) was published in Swedish in 1979. The 1980's and 1990's saw a trend in which theatre performances were built around well-known books for children. Often, the aesthetic and artistic ambitions were grand while the financial situation was increasingly meagre. The

independent theatre sector, which blossomed during the 1970's and focused on experimental and research based performances, was now encountering a new stringency in cultural politics and funding policies. This contributed to the children's theatre's need to scale down and work with simpler forms. Touring productions featuring "two actors and a box" became a sort of norm, dominating the theatre experiences of children during the financially weak years at the end of the 80's and the beginning of the 90's.

A more clearly defined child's perspective

An increasingly strong tendency over the years focuses on the staged child as the subject in whatever story is being told. Most children's theatre in Sweden takes the child seriously, and the state and regional institutions as well as independent groups work hard to formulate and introduce the child's perspective as a clear point of departure for the company's work. There are still differing views concerning the portrayal of children and adults on stage. It seems that children in some instances are portrayed as clumsy or "cute" and that many theatres don't know how seriously to portray children. One explanation might be that children's theatre, as opposed to theatre for adults, tends to produce shorter performances with smaller casts. This in many instances necessitates a simplification in

Photo:
Markus Gårder
Vad ska vi göra?
ung scen/öst,
Östgötateatern



Photo:
Carl Thorborg
Orlando
Stockholms stadsteater
Skärholmen

the portrayal of the world, a simplistic delineation in the characteristics of opposites such as power/powerlessness, fear/security or freedom/constriction. In embodying these concepts on stage, one risks coming off as over-simplifying or stereotypical.

The Swedish children's theatre has over the years offered up a varied repertoire consisting of everything from children's tragedy to philosophical dilemmas, performance art, dance and new circus. They have cultivated a children's perspective strongly steeped in modernism in which participation and influence have become the new measuring sticks. Many theatres today invite groups of young people to be part of the creative process. The use of devising and other methods for making audible the voices of the children themselves, became a popular way of building theatre productions. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (1989) alongside a dominant discourse on the child as a competent social entity has strongly defined children's theatre in the new millennium as well as the methods that are now receiving focus.

Children's theatre – wing clipped and undervalued

Another overall tendency that casts a historic shadow over the modern children's theatre's development is the general polarization between children's

theatre on one side and on the other side, adult theatre being regarded as its complete opposite. This has seldom benefited children's theatre. Despite the avant-garde nature of Swedish children's theatre, its ever increasing tolerance of genre crossing, its acceptance of influences from the world at large, in spite of the common view that children's theatre is a great source of inspiration for theatre in general; children's theatre suffers from a low status position rooted in a long-serving gender prejudice and a polarized view in which children's theatre is seen as the opposite of adult theatre. Children's theatre is and always has been dominated by women, starved of resources and ignored by the media. An explanation for this low status is the absence of the adult observer; actors, directors and producers would rather be seen and spoken of in the adult world. The hierarchical order of age and power, the generation system in our society, creates contempt for the childish. Children's theatre is for many merely a stepping-stone leading to a career in the "real" adult theatre. It is worth noting that even within children's theatre there is an imbalance in which those working in the independent sector are valued less than their colleagues in the state theatres. This is visible in both research and in media attention throughout the time period examined. A probable explanation is that independent groups (and even some regional theatres) are often performing one



might say "under the radar" because touring performances in schools and classrooms are less likely to attract media attention. For many independent groups this marks a path towards greater economic instability, in contrast to the state institutions whose resources remain relatively strong.

Questions of power and age

A reoccurring theme in children's theatre is the balance of power between children and adults. The image of authoritarian parenthood is ever-present in children's theatre. Parents and other adults are often portrayed as all-powerful in relation to children; allowing room for two dominant childhood discourses: the victimized child and the competent child.

The expression of power is portrayed as something that affects both the child and the adult. In the child it finds expression in powerlessness often through loneliness or the feeling of being small or weak. Stressed, constricted, absent or unsympathetic adults are rampant in portraits of power relationships in children's theatre and contribute to a picture of the child as victimized or abandoned. The child is often the victim of social and emotional insecurity, violence, cruelty, poverty or other facets of oppression. The victimized child is a fragile and vulnerable child in need of protection from a dangerous and grim world.

Through examination we see that Swedish children's theatre tends to describe the power balance between children and adults in different ways determined by the age of the audience. For younger audiences one chooses most often to show the child's powerlessness by portraying adults as constricted, somewhat frightening, authoritarian and in possession of "tiny souls". For older children it is more common to portray the lonely outsider, the outcast. Powerlessness becomes thus an extension or result of the unsympathetic adult's behaviour.

The (un)accessible children's theatre

Accessibility of children's theatre is another central issue in discussing the power aspects in the performing arts. Who are the children portrayed on stage and which are the children sitting in the auditorium, the prospective targets of the art we are producing?

Research shows that Swedish children's theatre is generally wrapped in "blond and blue-eyed" packaging. By this I refer to the producers of theatre for children and youth in Sweden, a homogeneous group consisting predominantly of white, middle-class and middle aged women. One aspect of powerlessness and discrimination is that the majority of actors standing face to face with our young audiences are poured from the very same standard

Photo:
Carl Thorborg
Barnen från
Frostmofjället
Stockholms stadsteater
Skärholmen



Photo:
Markus Gärder
Kaspar Hauser
ung scen/öst,
Östgötateatern

Lesley Leslie-Spinks
Babydrama
Unga Klara

Swedish blond and blue-eyed moulds. You really must search hard to find linguistic, dialectical or genetic divergence. If you examine the children portrayed in the performances you will find the same homogeneous collection of children, exhibiting the same ethnic, social and class backgrounds. This should be seen as general tendency rather than an absolute truth. There are also examples of performances that discuss ethnicity and diversity, especially since the emergence in the 90's of a medial debate concerning questions related to immigration. At present there are research collaborations with universities and institutions of higher education in several parts of the country designed to explore ways in which the performing arts can become more accessible and create the heterogeneous, inclusive children's theatre which our society is beginning to demand. Worth mentioning are initiatives taken by Stockholm Stadsteater in Skärholmen and UngScen Öst in Linköping. Both have opened new theatres in neighbourhoods with culturally diverse populations.



The competent but sheltered children of today

Questions of class, ethnicity and segregation remain some of the most taboo subjects in children's theatre today. Another taboo or subject on which few plays are written is children's sexuality. One can see a tendency among adults to be over-protective in relation to reality's injustices, violence and our global conflicts. In contrast to the 1970's educational, socially engaged sometimes to the point of bitterness "kitchen sink realism", the children's theatre of today can on the whole be seen to focus more on the individual than the collective. The children have a central role as subjects and competent agents of the narrative. We speak often of the rights of the child and their influence, but more seldom about the responsibilities and duties that come with power and influence. A final example of the 21st century's dominant discourse of the competent child is the birth of "baby drama". Inspired by the Norwegian *Klangfugl-konst* for the youngest (1998-2002), the European Union project *Glitterbird* (2003-2006) and Suzanne Osten's *Babydrama* (Babydrama), a new audience group is occupying theatres and theatre productions for babies are almost commonplace.

The Robbers – A Political Performance



WHAT DISTINGUISHES A SUCCESSFUL revolution from a despicable crime of violence? Who is the perpetrator and who is the victim? Who decides what is what? Can it simply be that "right is on the side of the stronger"?

With our drastic re-working of Friedrich von Schiller's *The Robbers* (*Rövare*), written seven years before the French Revolution, we wished to pose to a young audience questions concerning concepts such as "freedom", "power" and "rights". Schiller was but 23 years old when he penned the play. The production's target audience (the producing theatre was The Royal Dramatic Theatre's youth stage, Unga Dramaten) consisted of secondary school youth (ages 16–19) and "young adults". Our stated ambition was to use Schiller's text in a discussion of politics and ethics, without getting stuck in predictable party positions or preaching moralistic doctrine.

Schiller's *The Robbers* is constructed around a pair of brothers, widely different, in which one brother represents all good while the other brother represents evil. The hero, Karl, despises his wealthy

father and all that he stands for. Even so, he remains the favorite son and supposed heir to the family fortune. The plotting younger brother Franz goes to great lengths to be loved by his father. Despite all his efforts he is treated with disdain. Each in their own way revolts against the role they are given, as they vow to take control over their own lives. The consequences are far bloodier than they could have imagined.

We have taken great liberties with Schiller's text, three quarters of which has been cut. Our associations to other writings that cropped up during rehearsals were embraced and thrown into the pot. Interspersed throughout the play are passages from August Strindberg, Ulrika Meinhof and even quotes from you-tube clips about someone's unfathomable love for kitty cats.

Our adaptation contrives to allow the 1780's age of illumination to crash against the individualism of our own times. This is evident in the ideas, the costumes, the make-up and the soundtrack. We have also endeavored to contrast genres and performance styles. The wild leaps between then and now, comedy and tragedy, high and low are engi-

by Hannes Meidal

Actor

and

Jens Ohlin

Director

Photo:

Emily Laye

Rövare

Unga Dramaten,

Kungliga Dramatiska

Theatern

neered to instill in the audience a feeling of insecurity; ideologically we wish to occupy every possible position, but to feel at home in none.

In our version, the Von Moor brother's father is a dying patriarch. Owner of the von Moor concern, his considerable wealth is founded on centuries of weapons dealings with recent forays into all other areas of society. A finger in every pie one might say. The von Moor concern happens also to be the main benefactor of the private school in which our robbers are enrolled. The robbers wear Harry Potter style school uniforms throughout the play, partly to avoid stressing any particular context in time or space and partly to escape the cliché images of revolutionaries – to bypass our natural tendency to place them outside of anything that we might be.

Karl's fellow students are attracted by his disgust with his father's world, mostly as a lark to begin with, but with growing earnestness as they discover the links between politics and business, between peace-keeping troops and the weapons industry, between democracy and dictatorship. The group that Karl gathers has no real common objective. Karl is content that his private revolt against his father gains meaning in the light of his comrades' political and moral agendas. Others just want to be part of a group or a project whereby they can garner some self-respect.

Together, the students seek to understand the moral costume their school is preparing them to wear, and the power relationships that those who bear this moral costume are meant to uphold. The linguistic acrobatics that the school administration employs, recognizable pro-democracy lingo,

seems to constantly shift focus and confuse the main moral issues. The questioning, the indignation of these young people is never taken seriously; instead, their curiosity is punished. In this way we try to describe the destructive mechanisms at work between the students and the establishment, a process radicalizing both.

A number of events took place in the world while we were working on our adaptation, which made these themes of revolt, violence and ideologically motivated murder even more poignant: the Arab Spring, the mass murder at Utøya in Norway, the capture and assassination of Osama bin Laden, the street riots in England. At what point does the imbalance of power necessitate a violent uprising? Who would define themselves as powerless?

Images from the summer's youth riots in England got us thinking about marginalization and class identification; we saw the daughter of a millionaire, in her school uniform, looting a shop, or a judge in a wig from the 1700's confronting a young man in a hoodie in the courtroom. The production is full of contemporary imagery, but rather than concrete pictures of actual historical events, we wished to focus attention on the underlying weave of ideas.

This same thinking inspired the production's program, full of authentic quotations from famous thinkers with their names left out. The audience is forced to weigh the content of each quotation before discovering that the source of the quote was Hitler, Gandhi, the Swedish Prime Minister Fredrik Reinfeldt or Schiller himself. How do the sentiments in each statement resonate in my mind when I don't have the positive or negative contexts to help me judge them?

Our version of *The Robbers* is pregnant with thought rather than intrigue, which is possible as the dramatic structure of Schiller's play ensures the story's forward movement. We haven't shied away from addressing complex topics, but have trusted that issues that we find interesting ourselves will also interest others, and through their interest become illuminated. In fact, we are ourselves somewhat ambivalent, not always in agreement concerning many of the topics brought forth in the play: what are the exact limits for your freedom, or for mine?

Photo:
Emily Laye
Rövare
Unga Dramaten,
Kungliga Dramatiska
Teatern



The Childish Theatre

The aesthetics of play and contempt for the infantile

“DON’T ACT LIKE a child”, the teacher roars at his high school student, the father admonishes his daughter, the girl says to her boyfriend. An adult mustn’t cry like a baby, think like a child, sing out loud or babble like a tot. Wier knot supost too rite liKe litel kiDs eether. In our society it is evidently wrong to be “like a child”, and playing is not a thing to be taken seriously, that goes without saying. The same norm applies to Swedish theatre where contempt for the “infantile” is an impediment to renewal. It sounds like a serious problem, doesn’t it? Well, it is.

Within the field that we call theatre for children and youth there are vast unexplored territories that carry along with them a creative freedom. This is because, in comparison to adult theatre, the children’s theatre is relatively new. Since the fairy tales and educational school plays of the 1950’s, through the groundbreaking work in the 70’s pioneered by Suzanne Osten and Unga Klara, children’s theatre has witnessed a creative explosion. In children’s theatre there are still artistic discoveries being made for *The Very First Time*, implying that the field is in the true meaning of the word *avant-garde*. Those working within children’s theatre are the advance troops, the explorers of Swedish theatre.

In the official report from the Swedish government, *Places please, Reflections of the Committee for Gender Equality in the Dramatic Arts* (2006) investigators write that “Women and men are to be found in different arenas within the theatre. Women,

to a greater degree than men, write and direct theatre for children” and they state that “Where the greater resources are found you will also find the men.” Or perhaps one might surmise that where women and children are found, resources are suddenly scarce, along with attention and recognition? Because what this unusually radical government paper forgets to spotlight, is that Swedish children’s theatre with all its artistic merits, its international reputation, its central roll in building new audiences; that it is of unrivalled importance to the renewal and development of theatre in Sweden. Why is this fact ignored, time after time?

And why won’t Swedish theatre see the huge potential in investing in children’s theatre? A deep contempt towards children’s theatre and the child’s perspective pervades the theatre field alongside a frequent unwillingness to open the doors of the theatre institutions to groundbreaking initiatives or strong ambitions, ambitions that would serve to raise the status of our theatre on the world stage. This contempt mirrors the structural depreciation of children and women in society at large, and is palpable in the manner in which children’s theatre is largely ignored or ridiculed.

So what is this “children’s theatre” that differs so from “adult theatre”? Sometimes, when I look at that which is variously termed children’s theatre, theatre for children and youth, youth theatre, baby theatre, young performing arts, school theatre, pre-school theatre, classroom theatre and the

by *Malin Axelsson*
Artistic Director,
ung scen/öst



Photo:
Markus Gårder
Jag blir en bubbla
ung scen/öst,
Östgöteatern

like, I don't understand what actually distinguishes it from "adult theatre", which by the way is never called "adult theatre", since we agree that theatre for adults is simply called theatre. Many productions for children might just as easily have an adult audience. The eagerness by which children's theatre is categorized seems above all to enforce an already potent segregation between culture for children and culture for adults.

Imagine if we started calling "children's theatre" theatre and contended that it should be seen both by children and adults. It's a good idea, because adults are really missing out on something, something that apparently is so strong that it needs to systematically categorized and depreciated. It's the "childish theatre".

The Childish Theatre

The "childish theatre" has its roots in the children's theatre revolution of the 1970's and its examination of play as a tool and means of expression. It was a revolution that took place alongside and was influenced by a comparable development in child psychology, which in turn arrived hand in hand with the new and freer attitudes towards child rearing appearing in the 1960's. "In 1971, I rec-

ognized children's theatre as an avant-garde position in the theatre and decided to attempt something never done before. As youth do, I began by eschewing the rotten, weeding out the old clichés, the dust, the cobwebs." Writes Suzanne Osten in her article *A Backwards Journey*. And she certainly did some cleaning. Today children's theatre can still be considered an avant-garde position and many practitioners of that which I term the "childish theatre"; playwrights Gertrud Larsson and Åsa Lindholm for example, directors Kajsa Isaksson and Nasim Aghili, Teater Moment with director Andreas Boonstra at the helm, are in fact born in the seventies and nurtured on the children's culture that prevailed during that genre's golden age. Some of them work regularly with children's theatre, are strongly influenced by Suzanne Osten's work and/or European performance art.

What then, are the "childish" elements that define the "childish theatre"? The "childish theatre" is often expressed in its mixing of genres, of being neither comedy through and through, or tragedy. It can also be defined in the permeability of the border between audience and actor. It is a theatre that approaches semiotics theoretician Michail Bachtin's description of "the carnivalesque". Bach-

tin's point of departure is the European carnival tradition of the middle ages, the celebrations that took place before the fasting of Lent, but carnival is a form found in all eras and in all cultures. The "childish theatre", like carnival, uses the "high" arts; classical techniques, excerpts or narratives from the classic canon, but mixes it with "low" cultural expressions that throughout time were associated with the lower classes, women, filth, prostitution, sentimentality, comedy and folklore.

The "childish theatre" addresses its audience and engages each member, moving among them like the players in a carnival. In Unga Klara's performances fiction often greets the audience already as they enter the theatre. The actors and the narrative press in, they ask questions, they come close. There is almost always a direct communication with the audience as well as a consciousness of "theatre" dominating the performance situation. Everyone entering the performance space is part of

the game. There is no protective fourth wall, and those who dare to enter must also dare to play the game. This doesn't necessarily mean the audience will be actually pulled up on stage, but it does happen. Play is a reciprocal activity and demands response and exchange.

The aesthetics of play

Fundamental in the "childish theatre" is its use of play as aesthetic. We might describe the young proponents of the "childish theatre" as being part of the "play competent" generation, a generation that through society's investment in day care centres and children's culture has been encouraged to play. My own interest in theatre came at the age when "playing" had begun to lose its lustre and I was forced in shame to pack my toys and costumes away in some dark closet. It was suddenly "childish", yes, shameful and ridiculous to play. This happened sometime around the age of nine or

Photo:
Markus Gärder
ung scen/öst kontaktar
framtiden
ung scen/öst,
Östgötateatern





Photo:
Markus Gärder
Vad ska vi göra?
ung scen/öst,
Östgöteatern

ten and I remember it as a source of great sorrow. But child's play is very close to the play we in theatre engage in, and through school, through after school programs and at a youth theatre called Vår Teater, I came once again in contact with playing.

And I've continued in my life to approach theatre in this way; as play.

The "childish theatre" plays forbidden games. It parodies absurd reality. It goes even farther by, through play, questioning what "reality" is by manipulating the border between reality and fiction.

One characteristic of play is that it is non-linear. Play is often chaotic, moving forward in one instant then suddenly veering off in another direction, getting caught up in a multitude of repetitions and then once again lurching forward, fastening in a new discovery or exploring new sidetracks. There is no steady forward progress.

The "childish theatre" explores and questions power structures and hierarchies. It is deeply inspired by the child's perspective, which is "all about (the description of) power. The child is always more dependent on the adult than the other way around." (Suzanne Osten in *Taboo and Children's Theatre*). The "child's perspective" is not a matter of stooping to the child's level or bending low to meet them face to face. The "child's perspective" is about climbing up to the level from which the child views the world, above the hierarchies of society, and to know oneself in the role of oppressor/oppressed.

It is to adopt the child's critical view of the language of power, which we in our socialisation have lost. The child's perspective is soul searching and self-critical. To see through the child's perspective is to identify power and to relate to it.

The "childish theatre" hasn't fastened in any one feeling or means of expression, it "leans into the curves", it is eager and open and receptive. Like play, it is enthusiastic and passionate. The "childish theatre" feels. It takes play seriously.

The "childish theatre" of the future

The "childish theatre" strives towards everything that typifies play: the "unhealthy", the non-educational, the critically reflective, the unpredictable aesthetics that don't end by reproducing the myth of social harmony, but continue to have an effect outside the doors of the theatre.

In the Swedish theatre for children and youth, and residing above all in the woman artists who generally and happily work in the field, I often notice this aesthetic of play at work in experiments and forms; and I see it spreading like a steady current into Sweden's theatre. It is a rebirth of the low forms of play, the carnivalesque, old forms in new guises filled with sharp and darkly critical content, many times with a feministic or post-colonial theoretical base, exciting gender angles and intersectional approaches. These theatre women, and even a small number of their male counterparts, are active in "small", marginalized theatres, but value the possibilities of these small stages. In a time when the main stages are often petrified artistically, lifting the status of the despised small stages and their potential seems self-evident. The "childish theatre" crops up everywhere in the theatre's periphery and sometimes as a wonderful and unexpected anomaly in its centre, throwing its shameful light of ridicule over all the rest. With the aesthetics of play it stages an acute and merciless critical foray, which in threatening scenes shows a destructive society stripped bare and exposed in all its sad lunacy.

I look at it all "as a child", with a feverish eagerness to join in the game. Because I know that it is not a matter of someone suddenly taking play seriously or even caring about it. Play doesn't give a damn. Play cannot be stopped. It is ongoing, growing and continues to make itself felt.

Mattias Andersson – artistic director and playwright with a passion

HE BEGINS BY POSING a number of questions, without any idea what the answers will be. Mattias Andersson creates a theatre rooted in the present. He is the artistic director of Backa Theatre, a separate stage for children and youth attached to the City Theatre of Gothenburg. One of Sweden's most successful and sought after playwrights and directors, he moves effortlessly between making theatre for young audiences and for adults. No matter if he is writing a new play for children or mounting August Strindberg's *A Dream Play* (Ett drömspel), his radar-like ears are tracking the conversations and events taking place just now, in society at large. He's developed a special sensitivity to the environments inhabited by youth. For Mattias Andersson, working with theatre for children and youth is a conscious and wholly ideological choice. He says, "This is the real people's theatre. Here you're forced to consider your artistic goals in relation to what's going on around you. This is a responsibility you can't mess around with. I like kids and I like teenagers. I'm interested in them and in their lives and I want to work with a theatre that sees each piece through the eyes of its audience."

Mattias Andersson has strong roots in the town where he lives and grew up. He knows every part of the city and has, through Backa Theatre, amassed an extensive network. He took over as artistic director six years ago. The first thing he did was to negotiate some time off for his acting company who had just moved out of the building they had

been using for years and were waiting to move into their new building, still under construction. He let them engage in active field studies. They spent the time in schools, in recreation centres, around in town, just about any place that young people in Gothenburg liked to hang out. The material that was gathered during these encounters became the ingredients for three plays that targeted three different age groups. Together, these plays inaugurated the new performance space. This prize-winning project, "Crime and Punishment", was inspired by the existential questions contained in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's novel.

This is the way that Mattias Andersson prefers to work. He talks about "colliding" materials from different forms and eras; classical texts with contemporary, documentary material with fantasy. The great questions that art attempts to answer are of enormous interest to young audiences. "When I write I'm never really interested in NOW-NOW-NOW. It's the collisions that interest me. What happens when things collide?" In reaching out to the audience, it is never a question of asking young people "What is it you want to see?" Mattias Andersson always has a subject he wishes to examine, a series of questions to test against reality. In his most recent project the questions were about drug use. Three sociologists interviewed a large number of Gothenburg citizens of all ages in relation to their experiences using drugs. He and his actors took this authentic interview material, totaling seven hundred pages! – and collided it with

by *Lis Hellström Sveningsson*
Theatre Critic



Photo page 26–27:
Ola Kjelbye
Brott och straff
Utopia
Backa Teater,
Göteborgs Stadsteater

English author Thomas More's classic tome from 1516, *Utopia*. The resulting production, *Utopia 2012* (Utopia 2012), opened at Backa Theatre at the end of October, 2012. A similar method was used in Andersson's production of August Strindberg's *A Dream Play* at Stockholm's City Theatre during the spring of 2012. *A Dream Play* was composed to two thirds of Strindberg's original text, eleven percent new material written by Andersson himself, with the remainder being documentary material gathered from interviews.

Mattias Andersson's vision embraces his many points of entry to the theatre he makes. He started out as an actor and first encountered Backa Theatre while studying at The Gothenburg Theatre Academy. He was employed as an actor at Backa for some years during the 90's. He had already started writing plays and directing. Today, his plays, as well as he himself, in the role of director, are in demand across Sweden and internationally. He has high hopes for the future of the theatre. "Theatre today is exposed to some pretty heavy stuff. Everything is totally directed towards "the experience" and so much can be experienced on a screen. But then, just gathering together in the same room creates a sensation", he says. In fact, the room and how one creates a space relevant to the story one wants to stage, is another points of entry in his work. His

productions tend to fracture the traditional positioning of the stage and of the audience. "The set is important. As a playwright I am constantly directing my writing towards a space. Or towards an actor. Traditional theatre has a hierarchical structure, a central perspective where the stage stands in a particular relationship to the audience. The room is also a creative partner, which is why collaboration with the set designer is so important. Ulla Kassius, who I often work with, comes into the process at an early stage. She is full of energy throwing out cascades of ideas all the time, which sometimes results in certain design elements preceding the text itself."

The story is of course another important point of departure. "What is theatre, or dramatic art? What stories are we talking about? How does one person's story become theatre? At what stage does a particular story become a 'dramatic event'? I'm fascinated by this sort of thing."

Which is why he's opened his performance space for other modes of expression. What happens when you show films at a theatre? Or when you send radio documentaries in an auditorium where people are listening together?

Mattias Andersson likes to have his actors on board from the very beginning. "We start from position zero and ask the questions together. We



discuss, we read, we look at films. We discuss the text; what stories are we going to tell? Are they from real life? So, what does that mean? At Backa this way of working is especially tangible. It's unique to have access to fourteen actors and four musicians for all of thirteen weeks. All day long. This isn't possible anywhere else. At many theatres hierarchies grow up during the production process, a scale of importance from those with small roles to those playing the big ones. Here everyone works as much as the next person, which means that everyone is an integral part of the whole."

He makes an effort to meet all the actors and talk to them before starting a new production. He himself is always meticulously prepared before rehearsals. Starting with nothing only leads to a feeling of insecurity. Coming to work with an idea makes it easier for everyone to get moving. "We're like a rock band, we trust each other, we jam. We know we'll have something in the end. But coming from position zero at the big theatres is tough. The expectations there are so different."

Mattias is ambidextrous. He switches between theatre for children and for adults. He believes that actors should do the same. "Theatre for children and youth shouldn't be marginalized. Playing in different arenas is important. Backa's remit is to play for kids, and that means having contact with

the schools because that's where the kids are a lot of the time, but it's important to widen your perspectives. Getting out and playing at other theatres and festivals is important for development."

Backa Theatre has a strong tradition. With roots leading back to the 1970's it stands, alongside Unga Klara in Stockholm, a leader among the children and youth theatres in Sweden. Alas, Swedish theatres aren't adept at getting their productions invited to festivals. In Mattias Andersson's opinion, economics has a lot to do with this. Which makes it especially exciting that in March 2013, Backa Theatre and Andersson's own *Little King Mattias* (Lille kung Mattias) will play the Nordic Cool festival at the Kennedy Centre in Washington D.C. The play, based on Janusz Korczak's classic children's book from 1923, discusses questions concerning children and power. Loved both by audiences and critics, it received the Association of Swedish Theatre Critic's award for Children and youth theatre in 2009.

Mattias has been approached about making *The Mental States of Belgrade*, adapting the production *The Mental States of Gothenburg* (The Mental States of Gothenburg), which was for him and Angereds Theatre a great success in 2006. The play was about the lives of young people and was 67 % percent material from interviews. "On the international



Photo:
Ola Kjelbye
 Lille Kung Mattias
 Backa Teater,
 Göteborgs Stadsteater

stage there is almost a water-tight division between children's theatre and theatre for adults. You will rarely find a director working in both fields. It's absurd when you look at Berlin for example, where theatre in general is so developed and children's theatre so very far behind. It's a joke."

Mattias describes how many international visitors to Backa Theatre are at first sceptical, simply because it is a theatre for children and youth. "But once they've spent some time here they usually change their tune. They say, Wow! And finally perhaps the big theatres in Europe will start to re-think some things. I was at a seminar in Cologne last year where the theme was 'whose stage is it?' The mobile performance groups coming up these

days aren't structured for those big institutions. They force the big theatres to find other ways to meet the audience."

Even Swedish theatres are beginning to emulate performance art. "Parading through town with headphones is getting popular. It's economically cheap theatre! But I'm more interested in the '35 millimetre' sort of theatre, the HD quality stuff, to borrow a comparison from film. This is the kind of handicraft we need to fight for. Composition and rhythm, communicating through the performance space with sound, lights, actors all in relation to the piece. Every part is essential and this kind of craft is more demanding than many people understand. It's about precision and it has to cost money and it needs time." Mattias Andersson talks about how important it is for the director to sit on the sidelines and observe everything that happens in the space, to be attentive and sensitive and cut when there are too many words, when action on stage doesn't add to the work. His productions are free of pedagogic finger pointing and strive always for an artistic clarity. He looks to grasp the point at which the "room starts to vibrate". This is probably where his feel for what is current enters the picture. He won't plan his season long in advance. "It's something I've pushed for consciously, waiting really until the last minute with everything. Not booking productions several years in advance. Three productions a year at Backa, that doesn't demand any enormous lead-time."

Language and text are a passion for Mattias Andersson who is always writing no matter what he's involved with otherwise. "I never try to push a theory in my plays. I throw it out to the actors right from the beginning, I have a set of questions, but no answers. I have this attitude that somehow it will all turn into theatre. That gives me a sense of security. And I think it's inspiring and fun to work with the text as we go along. I cut and paste. I sample material and the end result vibrates with echoes from the times we live in. For all ages."

New plays for Young Audiences translated into English (2011–2012)

Emma Broström

Katitzi (Katitzi), Publisher: Colombine Theatre Agency

One is Frightened, One is Cross, One Does Anything to Show Off (En är ilsken, en är rädd, en gör allt för att bli sedd), Publisher: Colombine Theatre Agency

Anders Duus

Monday is Fish Cakes (Måndag är fiskbulledag), Publisher: Colombine Theatre Agency

Martina Montelius

Mira Passing Through (Mira går genom rummen), Publisher: Colombine Theatre Agency

Ann-Sofie Bárány

Am I Comforting You Now? (Tröstar jag dig nu?)

Mirja Unge

It's a Free Country (Man är väl fri), Publisher: Colombine Theatre Agency

Selma Lagerlöf (adapted for the stage by Jakob Hultcrantz Hansson)

The Wonderful Adventures of Nils (Nils Holgersons resor)

New plays for Young Audiences translated into French (2011-2012)

Malin Axelson

Je suis une bulle... (Jag blir en bubbla...), Publisher: Colombine Theatre Agency

Ann-Sofie Bárány

Je te console, la? (Tröstar jag dig nu?)

Martina Montelius

La traversée de Mira (Mira går genom rummen), Publisher: Colombine Theatre Agency

New plays for Young Audiences translated into German (2011-2012)

Emma Broström

Als wir allein auf der Welt waren (När vi var ensamma i världen), Publisher: Colombine Theatre Agency

Isa Schöier

Edgar vom Stern (Stjärnpojken), Publisher: Colombine Theatre Agency

Lippenstift für Untote (Läppstift för odöda), Publisher: Colombine Theatre Agency

More information about Swedish plays translated into foreign languages can be found in A Catalogue of Contemporary Swedish Drama, at www.teaterunionen.se

Prizes

The Association of Swedish Theatre Critics

The Association of Swedish Theatre Critics each year rewards exceptional persons or performances in different disciplines. There are three prizes awarded; a theatre prize, a prize for children and youth theatre and, as of 2004, a prize for dance.

The 2011 prize for theatre was given to director and playwright Carin Mannheimer and her company of actors "In the Last Minute". *The Swedish welfare-state's very own seismograph, Carin Mannheimer, endowed with self-irony, critical distance and an eye for any humor lurking in the shadows, registers the challenges of growing old today. Community is the subtext and the company at Gothenburg City Theatre, spearheaded by the dynamic trio: Inger Hayman, Gerd Hegnell and Ann Lundgren, serve an incisive, tender and brave comic masterpiece; salty, clever and full of surprises.*

The 2011 prize for children and youth was awarded Martina Montelius. The motivation text reads: *Playwright and director Martina Montelius has in Mira Passing Through (Mira går genom rummen) followed her own path as a playwright, demonstrating once again her unique ability to allow humor to perforate the ceiling of gravity. Our modern families, with all our step-parent constellations, rainbow variations and single parent problems is spotlighted seriously through a child's eyes.*

The Swedish Association of Theatre Critics awarded the Dance Prize for 2011 to Helena

Franzén. *During the past year, through several new works, she has given us the opportunity to experience her sense of time, motion and space, demonstrating her virtuosity in both small and large venues. Helena Franzén reshapes the familiar and leads us through new and uncharted territories.*

Prix d'ASSITEJ

Every year since 1986 the board of Swedish ASSITEJ announces a winner of the organization's prize of honour, the Prix d'ASSITEJ. The prize is awarded to companies, theatres, organizations or individuals who have contributed something extraordinary to performing arts for children and youth.

The board of directors of Swedish ASSITEJ has awarded its Prix d'ASSITEJ 2012 to Projekt: ID and Regionteatern Väst "for consistently working with a modern social perspective. With a point of departure in questions of power and norms, Projekt: ID has challenged and bent the structures and working methods of the theatre. Projekt: ID has utilized the tools of art in exploring the functions of actor and audience and the balance of power between them in the creation of a theatre production. Through collaboration with other theatres, these experiences have spread like rings on water across the whole of Sweden."



Photo:
Ola Kjelbye
Projekt: ID,
Regionteater Väst



About us

Photo:
Anna Diehl
BIBU, Lund

Teaterunionen

Teaterunionen is the forum for cooperation and information within Swedish performing arts and a centre for contact and exchange across the borders. We address issues within education, documentation and cultural policy.

We are a member organization for Swedish theatres, theatre and dance institutions and organizations within Swedish performing arts. We represent Sweden in the Nordic Theatre Union, NTU, and we are the Swedish centre of the International Theatre Institute, ITI.

Teaterunionen arranges the Swedish Biennial for Performing Arts, which is the largest Swedish national festival and theatre meeting, organized in different cities in Sweden in close co-operation with the Swedish theatres.

We run various national and international theatre projects such as promoting Swedish drama internationally, organizing workshops in children's theatre in different countries, and showcasing Swedish performing arts for the international market and cooperation across borders.

We are also responsible for a database with documentation and publication of facts and statistics of all performances produced in Sweden, www.scendatabasen.se.

Read more about Teaterunionen and our work at www.teaterunionen.se.



ASSITEJ Sweden

ASSITEJ Sweden is the national centre of international ASSITEJ consisting of more than 85 member countries worldwide. The organization is a platform for everyone working with or having an interest in the performing arts for children and young people.

Our members include theatre and dance groups, organizations and institutions, critics and cultural journalists, programmers, amateur theatres, organizers and associations as well as actors, directors, set designers and playwrights.

Swedish ASSITEJ works to spread knowledge of Swedish theatre for children and young people by organizing exchanges, performances, festivals, workshops and seminars and arrange contacts. ASSITEJ Sweden provides increased knowledge of international theatre for children and young people.

Swedish ASSITEJ is a partner in bibu.se – the Swedish Performing Arts Biennial for Children and Youth.

We work to increase quality awareness and to increase the interest in and knowledge of theatre for children and young people including organizers, the media, politicians and policy makers. We run joint projects with international partners from different parts of the world.

Read more about ASSITEJ Sweden and our work at www.assitej.se.

Our festivals

Scenkonstbiennalen (Swedish Biennial for Performing Arts)

The Swedish Biennial for Performing Arts is held every second year and is a festival for Swedish theatre-, dance- and music theatre performances. A committee of representatives of various performing arts fields select the most interesting Swedish productions from the past two years, which are presented during the festival.

The Biennial also features international guest performances, workshops, seminars, master classes and many other opportunities for artistic exchange and dialogue. It is both a meeting place for theatre professionals and a public festival.

The first Swedish Biennial for Performing Arts will be arranged in 2013. It was preceded by ten Theatre Biennials, 1993–2011 and five Dance Biennials, 1998–2008.

The Swedish Biennial for Performing Arts will be held in Jönköping May 21–26 2013. For more information about the Biennial, please visit www.scenkonstbiennalen.se.

bibu.se

bibu.se is the Swedish Performing Arts Biennial for Children and Youth. It is the place to be inspired by the wide range and quality of Swedish theatre and dance productions.



With an impressive selection of shows, seminars, workshops, forums and other happenings, bibu.se creates a venue for inspiration and innovation. Swedish productions for children are attracting the attention of international stages and bibu.se wants to be the oasis where national and international guests can take part in and learn more about the development and organization of new, exciting and wonderful performing arts.

bibu.se always offers a selection of Swedish stage productions together with international guest performances as well as an extensive seminar programme looking out at the world and giving an insight in current research. With a cascade of handpicked performances, discussions, lectures and workshops bibu.se aspires to stimulate to reflexion and artistic innovation, laughter, fright and wow-experiences.

Next bibu.se takes place in May 2014.

Photo:
Lars Kroon
Kulturhuset Spira,
Jönköping




teaterunionen
SWEDISH ITI

ASSITEJ SWEDEN 
SCENKONST FÖR BARN OCH UNGA

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Petra Hellberg
Meningen med livet
Stockholms stadsteater
Skärholmen

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Martin Skoog
Siv sover vilse
Teater Tre

Michael Koitzsch
Röd Måne
Pygméatern

Carl Thorborg
System från havet
Stockholms stadsteater
Marionetteatern

Photo page 35:
Jonas Jörneberg
Sanningens Vågar
Unga Tur

Sara P Borgström
Flygräddare
Unga Klara

Ola Kjelbye
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