



WHEN AND HOW WILL THE NEW FINNISH THEATRE HAPPEN?

Panel discussion 28.9.2017 at Globe Art Point Helsinki

Speakers:

Davide Giovanzana, Erik Söderblom, Essi Räisänen, Irina Duskova, Maria Säkö. Saara Turunen.

Moderator: Martina Marti.

The panel was invited by Globe Art Point Helsinki to discuss the following issues:
Is there enough language or cultural diversity among theater-makers and their themes?
How about in education, audiences, venues?

In the beginning **Martina Marti** opened the panel discussion with a short introduction. She talked about diversity and integration which are closely linked. Diversity in Finnish society is a fact. However, it is an altogether different story how this diversity is reflected on different levels of society. As the questions proposed by Globe Art Point suggest, Finnish theatre does not reflect the diversity which is already characteristic to Finnish society.

The term diversity is closely related to the term integration, or social integration, which is used to describe the process of including people of different backgrounds in the dialogues and relationships within a society. The meaning of the term integration can maybe be better understood when thinking of its opposites which are exclusion and isolation. If integration is about including different people, what are we including them in? What is a foreign artists included in when integrating into Finnish society? She becomes part of the Finnish identity which is shaped by a grand narrative (kansallinen kertomus) of what it means to be Finnish. This narrative tells about the history of Finns, about what makes them who they are today. Identity is based on history. And history in turn is all around us all the time. It isn't something dead, it is something alive that surrounds us: the way we talk, the houses we live in, the food we eat, the festivities we celebrate. History is everywhere in architecture, in museums, in galleries and in theatres. If these institutions are exclusive, also the narrative they tell becomes exclusive. If we take a group of immigrant school children to the theatre to see *Tuntematon sotilas*, the children can understand the story and try to grasp why it is important for Finns. But it will not become their history. It is not the history of their parents or grandparents. Instead, they will have their own narratives which shape their identities. The danger of this exclusion is the creation of parallel narratives which don't enter into dialogue. It is here, where artists have a crucial role. What narratives are created? Whose story is told? Which doors opened? Both foreign and Finnish artists have the responsibility to be part of the process of integration. With this introduction Martina encouraged the participants to discuss the issues from a position of responsibility rather than taking the role of the victim which so often happens when we're talking of the situation of foreign artists.

The word is then given to **Davide Giovanzana** who proposed a definition of the New Finnish Theatre. He presented examples of foreign theatre troupes which visited Finland. These groups may have a homebase for example in Belgium but their teams consist of artists of many different nationalities. Still, when these groups tour abroad they are presented as Belgium. This is a natural situation in Central Europe, whereas in Finland it can be complicated for a foreign theatre maker to have access to work in local theatre institutions and to be treated as an artist making Finnish theatre. It is not just language which presents itself as an obstacle but also different theatre traditions. It is for example difficult to establish oneself in Finland making physical theatre. Davide also mentioned that new audiences have limited accessibility to venues, partly because of language barriers and partly because the programming is homogenous with no references to the daily life of culturally diverse audiences. Still, a change to the theatre may occur in the capital city area whereas in the countryside it is mainly the old stereotypes that still rule.

Erik Söderblom opened a historical view to the Finnish culture. He concluded that the Finns have always focused in keeping foreign ideas, people and nations out of its territory which still has its consequences in our art and culture sector. Also he spoke about the community of theatre makers as a tribe where mutual trust is crucial, giving also one reason for not letting foreign people join in. In Finland there is no bribery as such, but

there are cliques. Which means that one has to study in certain universities and to know certain people to succeed. For Erik it is obvious that theatre is in its turning point: there are so many audience groups that are not interested in theatre, that theatre is becoming an art form of elderly people and youngsters go elsewhere. This makes the role of audience development even more important. In Erik's opinion, the capital city area's diverse audiences have begun to be large enough to arouse the interest of the major theatre directors. Erik sees also the Globe Art Point Helsinki as a sign of this change.

Essi Räisänen has in her working groups and networks always an international dimension. She sees co-productions and collaboration with foreign artists, institutes and venues as very fruitful. For Essi the Finnish theatre is very white, although the white narrative has been lately questioned by artists like Sonya Lindfors. Essi has noticed that especially in small cities the theatre directors and producers claim to "know" their audiences' taste, which justifies their preference for easy theatre forms such as musicals and comedy. Her own experience has been one of "not fitting in" and therefore she has been searching for new forms and different ways of working particularly also with international collaborators.

Irina Duskova spoke about her career: she started as an exchange student in Finland and has ended up working very internationally, still based in Finland. Most of her international networks and projects take place in Europe, Russia and US. In Irina's experience a change has happened in the past ten years since she moved to Finland as a student. At the time, being foreign was not an issue. Irina felt that she was included quite quickly into the local scene and had the opportunity to educate herself and build an international career. Now, this kind of openness seems to have disappeared.

As a critic **Maria Säkö** sees audience development work as most important to provoke a change and new thinking in audiences and in their capability to understand and tolerate different ways of theatre aesthetics, cultures and languages. The critic's responsibility is to introduce new ideas and to verbalize them so that audiences can grow together with the art form. Critic's own blogs can be good platforms for introducing new phenomena and ideas since newspapers nowadays seldom give space to larger columns and articles. Maria reminded the participants of those Finnish theatre forms that have been left outside of the major theatre, naming especially puppet theatre and visual theatre. The strong hold of the mainstream has never been easy to compete.

Saara Turunen told about her latest theatre project in Teatteri Jurkka. She is in a process with three Thai women with no professional acting education as performers. For Saara this a natural choice because she prefers always to find new ways of making theatre and because she is interested in the performativity of "ordinary" people. It might also be a way of reaching new audiences and to have new response to one's work. In Saara's words "diversity happens when people are different".

Audience comments:

Alex Komlosi commented that there has to be also institutional mechanisms supporting the cultural change in theatre.

Rita Paqvalen introduced the term “power” to the discussion. Rita stressed that everyone can start to make the change in his/her own life, even with small steps. And those who have bigger power should start to act and not wait any longer for someone else to start. She also gave a concrete proposal to improve inclusiveness for different audiences. The use of subtitles on stage would open plays to multiple viewers.

An unknown man from the audience presented physical theatre as one solution in reaching new, more diverse audiences. It is a global form of presentation which does not require language skills. Also it could be a tool to include young audiences. The theatres have to realize that the younger generations have totally different needs and targets of interest.

An unknown woman commented on the issue of type-casting of foreign/foreign-looking actors. Actors who look foreign find it difficult to be cast in other roles than taxi drivers or pizza deliverers, even though there are a lot of foreign researchers and scientists in Finnish society. Why does theatre not reflect this? It was also said that film is still more conservative than theatre in this respect.

Conclusion / next steps / concrete proposals

- Theatres have to start to use more subtitles in their performances. That could open auditoriums to completely new audiences → there should be funding for the subtitles production costs
- Theatre education in Teak should be open to more languages: not everyone has to speak native Finnish
- Discussion of diversity in Finnish theatre has to be continuous
- Inclusiveness could be part of the criteria in public funding
- Themes, projects and working groups should be more diverse, multilingual projects should be “new normal”
- People everywhere have to have equal rights, we all are similar!
- Theatre makers should question their own position of power when deciding members of working groups etc -> change one’s own awareness of the issue of diversity!
- Stronger together: artists could write grant applications together, contact institutional theatres and their directors together
- All different cultural realities have to be made visible
- Critics should be more openly political in showing the choices of big theatre institutes and shouldn’t be afraid to show that there is no relevance of certain productions.
- Creating a sense of normality: eg. it is normal that other languages than Finnish are spoken on stage, it is normal that a foreign artist creates Finnish theatre etc.

→ **Artists can be students studying the new Finland!**

Panelists:

Davide Giovanzana is a theatre director born in Switzerland and living in Helsinki. He made his artistic Ph.D. in Theatre Academy of Finland in 2016. As a director, he has worked on several projects e.g. in Finland, Latvia, Russia and Switzerland. As a visiting researcher and pedagogue, he has worked in e.g. in UK, Latvia and Czech Republic. Giovanzana is also one of the founders of Helsinki-based Teatteri Metamorfoosi and the artistic director of the international MasQue Festival.

Erik Söderblom is a theatre director from Helsinki and he works as the director in Espoo City Theatre. He has worked as a director in numerous city theatres and opera productions, as the professor of acting in Theatre Academy and as the director of Helsinki Festival and Baltic Circle Festival. Among his latest directions are Dea Loher's Oskuld in Viirus Theatre, Mozart's Don Giovanni by New Generation Opera, Roland Schimmelpfennig's Den gyllene draken in Sirius Theatre as well as the stage version of J.S.Bach's Matteus Passio In Hämeenlinna Elenia Hall.

Essi Räisänen is a freelance theatre director from Helsinki. She works both in Finland and abroad on the fields of theatre and performance art. Her latest work Nightschool was premiered at Stage festival 2017 dealing with issues like change, future, and ecological crisis. Some of her latest works are Sotilaspoika (Lappeenrannan kaupunginteatteri, Kansallisteatteri, KOM, Stoa), Bonnie ja Clyde (Teatteri Jurkka 2016), Pelon maantiede (Avoimet ovet 2013) ja Amerikkalainen tyttö (Takomo 2012). At the moment Räisänen works on several international projects with Klockriketeatern, Von Krahl Theatre, Suomen Kansallisteatteri and with actress Julia Rosa Stöckl with themes of change, ecological crisis, feminism, and fascism.

Irina Duskova born in Lithuania studied International Cultural Policy and Management at the University of Warwick. She works as the Watermill International Summer Program Director at Byrd Hoffman Water Mill Foundation, NY, USA, as the curator of the international program at Revelation – International Festival of Performing Arts in Almaty, Kazakhstan, and as a freelance project-manager in Helsinki, currently working for Klockrike Teatern. As a theatre manager, she has organized many tours for Finnish, Lithuanian and American theatres and performances, as well as managed several international theatre and dance festivals.

Maria Säkö is a dance and theatre critic, free journalist, non-fiction writer and the chairperson of the Finnish Critic's Association.

Martina Marti is a theatre-maker and translator. Originally from Switzerland, she studied Drama and Theatre Studies in Canterbury and Paris and did an MBA with a focus on Arts Management. Along with her artistic work, she has worked as a festival programmer, an international project manager in the field of cultural mobility, as a producer and curator. Since 2006 she lives in Helsinki and works as a freelance theatre director and translator of plays.

Saara Turunen is a Helsinki based author and theatre-maker. She finished her MA degree in Theatre Academy of Finland in 2009 and completed part of her master

studies in Barcelona Theatre Institute. There is a strong international dimension in her work. Her plays, *The Bunny Girl* and *The Broken Heart Story* have been translated into several languages and staged all around the world, and she has directed her own pieces for example in Spain and in Lithuania. In her latest works, *The Love/Monster* -novel and *The Phantom of Normality* Turunen speaks about the demand of normality and her contradictory relationship with her country. *The Love/Monster* earned the Helsingin Sanomat Literary Prize in 2015. Turunen was also granted with Finland Prize in 2016 by the Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture.