

# NORWEGIAN POLITICAL THEATRE IN THE 1970s: BREAKING AWAY FROM THE 'IBSEN TRADITION'

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In this article I am mapping out the aesthetic strategies utilized by the political theatre groups in Norway in the 1970s. I argue that the political awakening, during the counterculture movement, created a need to break down the traditional barriers and artistic methods in Norwegian theatre, which resulted in a move away from realism and naturalistic dramaturgy, towards anti-illusionary and popular theatre forms, such as epic theatre and cabaret. In a Norwegian context, realism and naturalist dramaturgy is best represented by Henrik Ibsen's dramas. I argue that the clearest and most decisive break with Realism and the Aristotelian dramaturgy, in a Norwegian political theatre context, was made in the late 1970s, instigated by the independent theatre groups Perleporten Teatergruppe and Tramteatret. Independent and political theatre groups were provoked by the elitist attitudes of politicians and cultural policy makers, and instigated a public debate focusing on questions like 'who is the theatre for', the 'elites' or the 'people'? The theatre groups, when searching for an oppositional stage aesthetics, turned to popular theatre forms, such as cabaret and review, and stepped away from the traditional stage aesthetics and the 'Ibsen-tradition', which they saw as both antiquated and elitist. In this article I will place Tramteatret and Perleporten Teatergruppe's debut performances *Deep Sea Thriller* (1977) and *Knoll og Tott* (1975) within a historiographical and cultural-political context.

**Keywords:** political theatre, Norwegian, cabaret, Red Revues, agit-prop-Theatre, anti-Aristotelian theatre, independent theatre groups, cultural policy

The dominant theatre aesthetics in Norwegian theatre has been, and remains at large to be, psychological-realism and the bourgeois 'living room drama'. In a Norwegian context this tradition is best represented by Henrik Ibsen's dramas, staged at Nationaltheatret and Den Nasjonale Scene. However, throughout the 20th century there have been several attempts to break with the 'Ibsen tradition', especially among left-wing political and socially engaged theatre-makers and playwrights, such as Gunvor Sartz, Olav Daalgard, and Nordahl Grieg in the 1930s and Jens Bjørneboe and Odin Teatret in the 1960s. I argue that the clearest and most decisive break

with Realism and the Aristotelian dramaturgy, in a Norwegian political theatre context, was made in the late 1970s, instigated by the independent theatre groups Perleporten Teatergruppe and Tramteatret. Their break did not only constitute an aesthetic and dramaturgical break, but also a break in organizational terms, by breaking the hierarchy of the institutional theatre 'machine'. Perleporten Teatergruppe and Tramteatret aimed at making a political progressive theatre both in form and content. Perleporten and Tramteatret were both inspired by contemporaneous political and experimental theatre in Europe and the Scandinavia and by the historical avant-garde

experiments, and for Tramtetet's part the workers' theatre movement from the 1920s and 30s, in their search for a theatre that could express the social and political climate of the day.

### THE 'IBSEN TRADITION'

A clear example of the continuing dominance of Ibsen's dramas and the psychological-realistic dramaturgy is shown through Ivo de Figueiredo's historical overview over Norwegian Drama from 2014, titled *Ord/Kjøtt- Norsk scenedramatikk 1890-2000* [Word/Meat Norwegian Stage Dramas 1890-2000]. In his words, the Ibsen-norm points to dramas written in a "realistic, psychological and retrospective" vein, "with the careful use of symbols and types and where the plot circles around the individual and society, and how both inner and outer powers hinder us from becoming our selves."<sup>1</sup> The Ibsen-norm and tradition is, by Figueiredo, accredited to Gunnar Heiberg in his time as the theatre director at Den Nasjonale Scene in Bergen (1884-1888) and furthermore, to Bjørn Bjørnson under his direction at Nationaltheatret in Oslo (1899-1907 and 1923-1927). The two playwrights and theatre instructors set a powerful precedence of the 'correct' way of staging Norwegian dramas such as Ibsen's and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's, as well as the "foreign" classics, by means of "psychological-realism with a hint of naturalism."<sup>2</sup> This aesthetical tradition has been described by Figueiredo, as well as other theatre scholars, as so powerful and dominating that it has overshadowed and marginalised the attempts at establishing other styles of dramaturgy and theatre aesthetics in Norway, such as symbolism, expressionism, and epic-drama. Knut Ove Arntzen writes in his article on "Arctic Dramas and landscape-dialogues: Hamsun, Løveid, Junker and Fosse" maps out an alternative Norwegian canon.<sup>3</sup> Whereas Arntzen mainly focuses on the symbolist and expressionistic theatre traditions in his article, I will in this article focus on the trend within Norwegian theatre, which Arntzen has defined as: "the theatre tradition developed through Bertolt Brecht, inspired by Erwin Piscator, in traditions from the popular and

political cabaret-tradition to the epic theatre."<sup>4</sup>

### THE EARLY BREAKS WITH THE 'IBSEN TRADITION'

As mentioned earlier, Gunvor Sartz, Olav Daalgard and Nordahl Grieg created a break with 'Ibsen-tradition' in the 1930s, by utilizing cabaret and epic-dramaturgy. Gunvor Sartz was the founder of Det Social Teater. She was inspired by Piscator's red revues and documentary theatre and is known for her staging of Piscator's play *§245*.<sup>5</sup> Nordahl Grieg was inspired by Soviet theatre, especially Meyerhold, and in his critically acclaimed drama *Våre ære og vår makt* (1935) [Our Honour and our Glory] he utilizes montage and epic theatre techniques. Whereas Sartz started off working with a semi-professional cast at The Sociale Teater, Grieg was mainly working within the institutional theatres, especially with Den Nasjonale Scene and Hans Jacob Nielsen under his time as theatre director (1934-1939). However, it was the labour movement's amateur players who would conduct the most decisive break with the psychological-realistic-dramaturgy in the 1930s.<sup>6</sup> These groups were known as TRAM-gjeng [group]. The first part of their name was taken directly from the Russian acronym TRAM [Teatr Rabochey Molodyozhi], which was the name of the young Soviet workers' theatre movement.<sup>7</sup> It was Daalgard and Sartz who instigated the agit-prop line within the workers' amateur theatres. This contrasted with their former line, judging by their repertoire from the early 19 hundreds, which mainly consisted of farces, folk comedies, and revues, one could say that the workers' amateur theatres formerly had a character of entertainment and diversion.<sup>8</sup>

Sartz and Daalgard saw theatre as a political weapon, which could be used to mobilize and instruct the proletariat into taking action against their oppressors, rather than just a diversion and entertaining hobby to take the workers' minds off their hard conditions.<sup>9</sup> Sartz and Daalgard were instigators of a more 'aggressive' and agitational theatre style within the workers' amateur groups. Sartz, who started working for Arbeidernes Opplysningsforbund (AOF) [The Workers'

Educational Organization] as a theatre secretary in 1933, met Olav Daalgard, who had just been on a trip to the Soviet Union; there, he experienced the Workers' Theatre Olympics.<sup>10</sup> The two decided to make an infrastructure for a workers' amateur theatre based on the combination of Sartz experience with Piscator's theatre techniques and Daalgard's insight into the acting style of the Soviet TRAM-groups.

The Norwegian TRAM-groups became very popular. In their hey-day around the mid-1930s, there were 800 registered members throughout Norway.<sup>11</sup> These groups, which in Norway mainly were connected to the Labour Party's youth organisation (AUF), would meet up to agitate and entertain at union meetings, strikes, demonstrations, and at political rallies. The TRAM-groups were also a part of the Labour Party's election campaigns in 1934 and 1936.<sup>12</sup> The theatre groups used a combination of songs, speech- and -movement-choir, sketches, and acrobatics in their performances. The characters in the agit-prop sketches tended to be allegorical types such as the proletarian and the capitalist rather than psychological-realistic characters. The TRAM-players 'actor-training' focused on developing a set of physical and expressionistic performance skills with a weight on facial gestures, song, dance, and acrobatics.<sup>13</sup> The performances seldom had a singular plot, instead they utilized a cabaret-dramaturgy, a collection of different sketches and numbers, which might or might not be connected by a common thread.

The left-wing political theatre and the agit-prop workers' theatre were naturally discontinued under the Nazi occupation of Norway (1940-1945). After the Second World War the Labour Party had left the revolutionary line in favour of a policy of collaboration across the classes, which resulted in a dismantling of the TRAM-groups.

#### POLITICAL CLIMATE AND CULTURAL POLICIES 1945-1979

While the Labour Party had benefitted from the agitation and agit-prop plays performed by TRAM-groups during the Labour Party's election campaigns in the 1930s, the agit-prop and epic

theatre aesthetics did not become a part of their Social Democratic cultural policies when they entered the government in 1945.<sup>14</sup> On the contrary, governmental cultural policies mainly focused the country's sparse public cultural funds on strengthening and spreading the 'Norwegian cultural heritage', which, for the theatre's part, meant a support for the national romantic and bourgeoisie 'living room' dramas. According to Einar Hovdehaugen, the preconditions for post-war cultural politics were laid under the years of Nazi-occupation. He claims that the war created solidarity between people, which contributed to some extent at breaking down the old class barriers.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the post-war cultural policies resulted in an emphasis on the 'shared' national values in contrast to the more specific class bound culture of the 1930s.

The theatre historian, Øivind Frivold, describes the Labour Party's cultural policymaking in *Teatret i Norsk Kulturpolitikk* (1980) ["Theatre in Norwegian Cultural Politics"], as "promoting the 'best' of the bourgeois art and culture, and funding institutions that could bring this art to the 'people' at an affordable price."<sup>16</sup> The state established cultural institutions such as Riksteatret, Riksutstillingene, and Rikskonsertene (National Touring Theatre, Exhibitions and Concerts), which presented classical plays, fine arts and classical music to the Norwegian population outside the main cities of Oslo, Bergen and Trondheim. In contrast, popular cultural forms such as cabaret and revue, masquerades, ballroom-dancing, circus, pop-music, and cinema screenings were not seen as art by the policymakers; in fact, these 'popular' cultural forms were being taxed to fund fine arts institutions such as Riksteatret and Nationaltheatret.

The cabaret and entertainment tax had been debated since its implementation in 1917. Lise Lyche writes in *Norges teaterhistorie* [Norwegian theatre history] (1991); how the cabaret theatres in the 1950s would essentially be paying the institutional theatre's governmental subsidies through the entertainment tax. When the entertainment tax was finally abolished in 1964,

many cabaret theatres had gone bankrupt due to the high taxes.<sup>17</sup> Its abolition was argued as a technocratic problem of definition, rather than admittance of the unjustness of the tax. Arts-policy-makers argued that it had become increasingly more difficult to discriminate between theatrical productions: which production constituted entertainment and which the dramatic arts?<sup>18</sup>

Nonetheless, when the Labour Party government set down a theatre committee in 1960 (Hauge-komiteen) to advise on funding policies for the theatre, the committee kept to the traditional divide, stating that: "only theatres which uphold the classics, both Norwegian and international dramatic literature, are worthy of state funding".<sup>19</sup>

One could say that the government, with its ideals of supporting the 'shared' national cultural heritage, had a paternalistic arts-policy view. Ole Marius Hylland argues that the Social Democratic arts policy is ideological through a 'choice-framing paternalism'.<sup>20</sup> There are certain choices and types of art that are more valuable than others. Thus, in the post-war years, it is clear that commercial cultural ventures, like cabarets and professional revue theatres, were seen to be of less artistic quality than the dramatic arts. The aesthetic connected to the dramatic arts was psychological-realism and therefore, essentially: the 'Ibsen-tradition'. The 'choice-framing paternalism' also extends to the government's funding of amateur theatre. According to Ingeborg Lyche, who was the first director of the Norwegian Arts Council, the Labour Party instigated cultural policies on funding amateur theatres already in 1945.<sup>21</sup> This shows that the Labour Party's commitment to amateur theatre, albeit not in a political agitational form, was not abandoned after the war. However, similar to the attitude of the theatre-committee of 1960, the Labour Party's cultural policies on the function of amateur theatre groups was to "play a role in awakening the interest [of the amateur players] for professional art on the highest quality levels."<sup>22</sup>

#### THE RE-EMERGENCE OF POLITICAL THEATRE AND THE FIRST INDEPENDENT GROUPS IN NORWAY

The playwright, Jens Bjørneboe, was one of the few Norwegian authors in the 1950s and 60s to attempt a break with a psychological-realistic dramaturgy in his plays. Bjørneboe was highly inspired by the historical avant-garde's theatre experiments, especially Bertolt Brecht's anti-Aristotelian theatre, and he wrote several dramas utilising collage and *verfremdung*-techniques.<sup>23</sup> This aesthetic influence can be seen especially in his plays: *Til lykke med dagen* (1965) *Fuglelskerne* (1966) and *Dongery -En collage om forretningsstanden og om markedsførers liv* (1976). Bjørneboe became an important figure for the counterculture and anarchist movements in Norway. The anti-authoritarian 68' generation were highly inspired by Bjørneboe's novels, plays, and essays criticising the Norwegian school system, the prison system, and the conformist and provincial attitudes in Norwegian society.<sup>24</sup> However, Bjørneboe's rebellious and critical attitudes were not very welcome at the institutional theatres in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War, when the focus was on reconciliation and rebuilding the country. It was not before the generational shifts at the institutional theatres with theatre directors such as Erik Pierstorff (Trøndelag Teater), Knut Thomassen (Den Nasjonale Scene), Torolv Maurstad (Oslo Nye Teater) and Arild Brinchmann (Nationaltheatret), and the emergence of the independent theatre groups in the late 1960s and 70s that Bjørneboe's plays were staged. There was a renewed interest in Bjørneboe's dramas in the late 1960s, but this was, according to Perleporten Teatergruppe; too little, too late! They staged a 'Bjørneboe-stunt' in 1977 at the Nationaltheatret to mark their righteous anger and through this, attempted to vindicate Jens Bjørneboe and his dramas.<sup>25</sup>

The first independent theatre groups in Norway experienced similar difficulties to Bjørneboe, not in staging the plays they wanted but in obtaining funding altogether. Odin Teatret was established in Oslo in 1964. With a paternalistic cultural-policy firmly embedded in Norwegian

bureaucracy, where the quality criterion was seen as the 'Ibsen-tradition', there was little understanding for finding funding to a theatre group who was neither connected to a theatre institution, nor wanted to adhere to traditional theatre aesthetics. Furthermore, the fact that the group claimed to be professional, despite none of the participants having any formal theatre education, did not work in their favour. This wall of prejudism, which Odin Teatret met, and which drove the first independent experimental theatre group in Norway, perhaps since Sartz's *Det Sociale Teater*, to emigrate to Denmark (1966), would prevail within Norwegian arts funding until the late 1970s. This attitude was one of the main reasons that the first attempts at making left-wing political and socially engaged theatre since the 1930s was not to happen in the format of an independent theatre group, but was organized through mainstream theatre institutions. For example, the outreach theatre projects: *Svartkatten* (1971), *Pendlerne* (1972) and *Jenteloven* (1974) at Nationaltheatret, which were instigated and protected by the theatre director Arild Brinchmann. Another political theatre initiative was formed in 1971 by a group of actors from den Nasjonale Scene and from Nationaltheatret. They saw the chance to form an egalitarian and socially engaged theatre company in Northern Norway when the theatre director of Riksteatret announced that a regional theatre was to be established in Tromsø, Hålogaland Teater.

The first political and independent theatre group to be formed in Norway was Perleporten Teatergruppe, which was established in 1975. Tramteatret was founded in 1977. These two theatre groups would work from an idea of making both the content matter and their working-format mirror their political ideals. Their working process was conducted through collaboration and improvisations as well as group debates. The independent theatre groups emerging in Norway in the 1970s still encountered difficulties of getting public funding, despite a change in the arts-policy to decentralise arts funding, in what was known as the 'expanded cultural-concept' instigated by the Helle-

theatre-committee in 1968.<sup>26</sup> In order to influence the policy-makers and the Norwegian Arts Council, the independent groups formed their own interest organization called *Danse og Teatersentrum* in 1977.<sup>27</sup> Perleporten Teatergruppe was one of the initiators of the organization, which followed the Swedish model. Teatercentrum in Sweden had been formed nearly ten years earlier, in 1969, and they had more success than its Norwegian counterpart in obtaining funding for the independent theatre groups. This was due to a greater degree of corporatism in Swedish cultural policy, according to Per Magnset, where the Swedish artist organisations, especially in the 1960s and 70s, would be taken on-board when new policies were to be made.<sup>28</sup> The Norwegian independent theatre group community was much smaller than its counterparts in the other Nordic countries. In 1977, there were 16 independent theatre groups in Norway. It would take another three years before the independent theatre organisation's political campaigning gave results. Even then, in 1980, the sum granted by the government was "so vanishingly little that its neither to live or die for," writes Aslaug Bisselberg in an article in *Aftenposten* titled "Perleporten closed down - many live on."<sup>29</sup>

#### TRAMTEATRET - THE FUN IN GETTING ENGAGED THROUGH CRITICIZING SOCIETY

Social Democratic rule in the post-war years was, by the late 1960s, increasingly felt as authoritarian and undemocratic by the radical youth. Independent and political theatre groups were provoked by the elitist attitudes of politicians and cultural policy makers, and instigated a public debate focusing on questions like 'who is the theatre for', the 'elites' or the 'people'?<sup>30</sup> Not surprisingly, the theatre groups, when searching for an oppositional stage aesthetics, turned precisely to popular theatre forms such as cabaret and review, and stepped away from traditional stage aesthetics and the 'Ibsen-tradition', which they saw as both antiquated and elitist.

Tramteatret was founded by students from the University of Oslo: Liv Aakvik gathered a group of her friends - Arne Garvang, Terje Nordby, and

Marianne Krogness in 1973 - to make a theatre ensemble.<sup>31</sup> In their ambitious mission statement, they wrote: "Tramteatret shall stand on the underprivileged and oppressed people's side against the oppressors. And our theatre shall be an outreach theatre, travelling throughout Norway."<sup>32</sup> Tramteatret wanted to make socially engaged music-theatre. Their musical taste was a mix of rock, blues, jazz and protest songs à la Bob Dylan. Artistically, they were influenced by the agit-prop worker's theatre and Piscator, and wanted to update the red revue of the 1920s and 30s into a political revue on contemporary issues.<sup>33</sup> Several of the theatre collective's members had studied theatre history and their choice of name was in reference to the Norwegian Workers' theatre troupes of the 1930s, the TRAM-gjeng.<sup>34</sup> Thus, Tramteatret saw themselves as a contemporary workers theatre group using topical political issues and updated musical references for their agit prop theatre and red revues.

Tramteatret was a child of the Maoist movement, which was very active in the students' cultural clubs in the larger cities in Norway. The movement sprung out from a radicalisation of Sosialistisk Ungdomsforbund, which was the youth-party of the Norwegian Socialist Party. A split was created in 1969. The radicalised youth were fed up of the pacifistic-line in the Socialist Party. Inspired by the student riots in Paris in 1968, they wanted to create the dictatorship of the proletariat and armed revolution basing their ideas on Mao Tse-Tung's thoughts and a Marxist-Leninist party model.<sup>35</sup> The Maoist movement grew drastically under the fight against EEC the campaign leading up to the Norwegian referendum on whether to join the European Economic Community (now; Union) in 1972. What started up as a loose movement became more stringent by 1973, when all the Maoist-groups were placed under the control of Arbeidernes kommunistiske parti (Marxist-Leninist) (AKP m-l) [The Workers Communist Party]. AKP (m-l) would have representatives in most youth and student clubs, at workplaces, and in most NGOs, as they had at the student club at

University of Oslo, the club went under the name Rødfront (Red Front).<sup>36</sup> Even though the youth, who started rebelling against what they had seen as a stiff Socialist Party and in general had an anti-authoritarian attitude, especially towards the pillars of society such as the Labour Party, AKP, and with it the large Maoist-movement, turned into an authoritarian and centralised organization, and the ideological fundament of the movement also turned out to be as totalitarian as the ideas they at first had rebelled against.<sup>37</sup> Disillusionment started to show in the late 1970s and many of the party's members chose to quit the party. The same disillusionment hit the members of Tramteatret, they chose to leave the student club Rødfront and become an independent theatre group in 1976.

#### DEEP SEA THRILLER

Even though Tramteatret had decided to leave the student theatre and through that, the grip held by the Workers' Communist Party (Akp-ml), they had no wish to leave politics behind. Tramteatret chose, for their first production as an independent theatre group, to create a red revue criticising the Norwegian oil industry. The members of Tramteatret were curious about what was going on offshore in the industry. Many rumours were circulating about the working conditions on the platforms and about illegal foreign workers being shipped in, and these workers having to work under extreme conditions for low wages. The oil industry had been steeped in secrecy and mystique. From the beginning in 1966, there had been several deaths and serious accidents, but the numbers were underreported to the Norwegian State.<sup>38</sup> Tramteatret researched the topic for one and a half years, interviewing oil-workers and environmental activists. Another important influence was Petter Vennrød's documentary film from 1976, *Oljeeventyret* [The Oil Adventure].<sup>39</sup> At the end of the rehearsal process, a special event made Tramteatret famous. On 22 April 1977, there was a serious accident at the Bravo platform in the Ekofisk oilfield, and a large oil blowout that took seven days to stop turned Tramteatret's *Deep Sea Thriller* into a more influential performance

than the theatre group had expected. The theatre critic, Steinar Wiik, from *Aftenposten* mentioned the "lucky coincidence" in his review on 13 May 1977:

*Deep Sea Thriller* is a piece about Norway in the Age of Oil, in a musical form. It is self-evident that oil currently is a hot topic...Thanks to the chance of circumstances; Tramteatrets performance has had the stroke of fortune to become so highly up-to-date. It is evident that oil politics are highly topical these days this would have also been the case even if the Bravo accident at Ekofisk never had happened. In addition, comes a historical perspective on Norwegian oil politics, despite it being presented in a slanted way

(which must be allowed in political theatre), it is not without a political interest. [...] It is tempting to coin the performance as being dangerously good.<sup>40</sup>

The success of *Deep Sea Thriller* meant that a group of students without any formal theatre or music education were welcomed into theatre establishments and into the national broadcasting company (NRK) to show their productions. Tramteatret had initially planned only to stage *Deep Sea Thriller* one time, at the student theatre, but the great media attention and the favourable theatre critics led the theatre director Thoralf Maurstad to open the cabaret theatre Chat Noir to the theatre group. After playing for sold out



*Deep See Thriller*, Tramteatret. Beste Sanger, Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, Oslo, 1984.

theatres in Oslo, Tramteatret embarked on a tour throughout Norway.<sup>41</sup>

Deep Sea Thriller consisted of 12 satirical musical numbers, looking at the relationship between the oil industry and the Norwegian state. The playwright, Terje Nordby, chose to set the scene in a mythological world, using the Norse gods as parable figures representing big business and corrupt politicians. The leading god, Odin, represented the Norwegian bourgeoisie; Thor (who is known to be a little dumb despite his great powers), represented the Social Democrats; and the half god Loke represented the international oil companies. Loke is known for his sly and tricky behaviour, always managing to get his own way by his ability to shape shift. The presentation of these Norse gods was done in a clearly vaudeville, anti-illusionary fashion with, for example, Thor's hammer being made out of silver foil.

Two contemporaneous political theatre groups inspired Tramteatret: the Swedish group Fria Proteatern and the Norwegian group Nationaltheatrets Oppsøkende Teater ("The National Theatre's Outreach Group"). Both groups used the red revue format, but their musical influences differed. The composer of the Norwegian group Finn Ludt was from an older generation than the musicians and composers of the Swedish Fria Proteatern. Ludt was inspired by Norwegian folk songs and by Kurt Weill's political theatre music, while Fria Proteatern's musical expression was influenced by a mix of contemporary popular music, such as British pop, rock, and psychedelia, together with music from the workers and protest song tradition.<sup>42</sup> Tramteatret's musical influences were much closer to Fria Proteatern's, with their garage rock and reggae sound. Terje Nordby wrote the lyrics, whilst Arne Garvang composed the music.

Tramteatret's musical profile made the group highly popular. Between 1977 and 1986, the theatre group produced over 10 albums and their music topped the chart on the Norwegian 'top of the pops' *Norsktoppen* several times. As for the theatre groups political line, the popular music choice was contentious in the contemporary left-

wing political climate. As mentioned before, Tramteatret originated at the student club Rødfront, which was controlled by AKP (m-l). In the late 1970s, AKP (m-l) had decided to follow the Albanian Communist Party's guidelines when debating what the ideal music for the 'people' would be. The Albanian line prohibited all North American cultural influences, since the USA was the number one enemy of Albania and the communist dictator Enver Hoxha. Therefore, popular music forms such as rock, blues, and especially jazz were forbidden. The 'true' music of the people was decided to be traditional folk music, and music sung by socialist choirs and orchestras.<sup>43</sup> AKP (m-l)s dogmatic and authoritarian attitudes towards what was the 'right' working class and communist aesthetics aggravated many socially engaged artists, such as Terje Nordby.<sup>44</sup> Hence his comment in the NRK documentary *Tramteatret - på barrikadene med pop go satire* [Tramteatret on the barricades with pop and satire] where he specifically pointed out that Tramteatret's aesthetics was not political in a party programmatic sense: "I would say yes, we in Tramteatret wanted to make political theatre, but it was never theatre catering to a political party line or political dogmatic theatre. There was more of a joyfulness in it, the fun in getting engaged through criticizing society."<sup>45</sup>

This joyful criticism would not have been possible to produce if it had not been for the 'lucky' events surrounding their performance *Deep Sea Thriller*. Many important people in the Norwegian cultural sphere gave them a foot-up: such as Sigmund Sverud and Klaus Hagerup from Hålogaland Teater and Finn Ludt from Nationaltheatret together with Thoralf Maurstad from the cabaret theatre Chat Noir, giving the group members - with no formal theatre education - opportunities both for an alternative schooling, and to play at their theatres. Tramteatret made 13 red revues and four children's television series, nevertheless the theatre group had to close down in 1986, despite their vast popularity, mainly due to the lack of public funding.



### PERLEPORTEN TEATERGRUPPE - MERGING THEIR POLITICAL IDEALS INTO PERFORMATIVE ACTIVISM

The members of Perleporten Teatergruppe ("The Pearly Gate Theatre Group"), like Tramteatret, wanted to produce socially engaged theatre, but their choice of political stance and their artistic training differed from the latter group. The members of Perleporten Teatergruppe saw themselves as anarchists and liberal socialists. They were connected to the anarchist collective in Oslo at Hjelmsgate 3, a hangout place for squatters, gays, lesbians, atheists, eco-activists, and all shades of anarchists. Their social engagement was reflected in the name they picked for the theatre group, the Pearly Gate, which was meant as an atheist statement by the founding members, proclaiming that heaven should be on earth.<sup>46</sup> The three members, Karl Hoff, Birgit Christensen and Cathrine Telle, had been studying together on the Drama course at Hartvig Nissen's Gymnasium in Oslo. The college was in line with an alternative pedagogic tradition and was the first college in Norway to establish a course based on drama pedagogy. The members of Perleporten Teatergruppe were part of the first batch of students at this drama course (1969-1972). Their drama teacher, Maja-Lise Rønneberg Rygg, who had been an actress at Nationalteatret, stated in an interview that her professional acting background was not adequate for devising a drama college course in an alternative pedagogic spirit. Rønneberg Rygg refers to the first years of the drama course as a time "when group dynamic processes, sensitivity training, improvisational games and personal challenging exercises came as a breath of fresh air from the West."<sup>47</sup> Rønneberg Rygg took part in drama classes hosted by the drama pedagogy society, Landslaget Teater i Skolen, led by Nils Braanaas, who was a teacher at Forsøkgymnasiet, a college for experimental pedagogics, where he held the drama workshops in the evenings and weekends.<sup>48</sup> Braanaas was highly influenced by the alternative and political theatre movement in his teachings, and utilized the theatre manuals and exercise books published by political theatre collectives such as the Danish

Christianhavnsgruppen and the Swedish theatre group Narren.<sup>49</sup> Maja-Lise Rønneberg Rygg would directly apply Braanaas' workshop teachings in her classes.<sup>50</sup> Karl Hoff from Perleporten, recalls in a conversation on Maja-Lise's teaching methods and her social engagement that "she wasn't dogmatic, she was a free thinking person with a humanist philosophy. Through her way of teaching as a dialogue, we were able to understand society in new ways."<sup>51</sup>

When Hoff, Christensen and Telle graduated from college, they aspired to make their own theatre. The only problem at the time was that there was no funding or infrastructure for independent theatre groups in Norway. As before mentioned, even Odin Teatret, decided to move to Denmark in 1966, since the city of Holstebro could offer them better conditions than any Norwegian council could.<sup>52</sup> Hence, the young actors in Perleporten started their theatre group in 1975 with no prospects of getting any funding. According to Hoff, it was the strong artistic conviction of the group members that kept them going throughout the eight years Perleporten Teatergruppe existed. The group was influenced by anti-illusionary theatre, such as Brecht's epic theatre, and Peter Weiss' dramas. While still at college, the group members had worked with Peter Weiss' documentary play from 1965, *The Investigation Oratorio in 11 Cantos*. Hoff tells how working with this play, set at the Auschwitz Trial, had made a lasting impression on him. Another one of Perleporten's role models was Jens Bjerneboe, though the members of the group deny any direct aesthetic or dramaturgical influences by Bjerneboe or other playwrights or theatre groups. They would coin their performances 'poetry and politics'. For them, the textual work was very important, and all the group members contributed with texts and with suggestions on how to manifest the texts on stage.<sup>53</sup> Their collective working process and the use of improvisation gave each performance multiple ideological and artistic influences, which made their work difficult to pigeonhole. If one were to compare their work or attempt to classify their performances, the closest form would be

literary cabarets of the 19th century due to Perleporten's emphasis on poetic texts and their use of a non-linear dramaturgy.

#### KNOLL & TOTT

Perleportens debut play from 1975, *Faren satt på første benk og moren satt på annen og Knoll og Tott på galleri og lo som bare faen* [The father sat on the first row, the mother on the second and Knoll and Tott in the gallery laughed like hell] was collectively written and devised by the group. The piece was a text-collage with no uniform dramaturgy, yet each part was performed in a semi-realistic mode. The performance 'painted' a picture of a Norwegian social democratic and conformist family living in the suburbs of Oslo. Through the dialogues between a young married couple, a TV presenter, a family on a car trip, and a puppet sequence with

life-sized puppets, Perleporten Teatergruppe criticised the conformity and heteronormativity of post-war Norway. The acting style was slightly stylized, portraying the figures on stage with a comic distance. The actors would change between the different textual parts with a physical gesture, e.g., making a turn on the stage before presenting the next character.

To Perleporten's great surprise, their debut performance was well received by critics and audiences alike, despite the untraditional format of the performance and the subject matter criticising the nuclear family, heteronormativity, suburban lifestyle, and social democracy. The group was considered fresh and new, their texts were well written and presented in a humorous way, which probably took the sting out of the theatre group's biting criticism of Norwegian



Rehearsing *Knoll & Tott*. From the left: Catrine Telle, Birgit Christensen and Karl Hoff. At the Henie-Onstad Art Center, Bærum, Norway, July 1975. Photo: Stine Eriksen.

conformist society. Moreover, their poetic stage language received favourable attention from the critics.

While their next performance received more mixed reviews, nothing compares with the condemnation the group received after their 'Bjørneboe stunt' at Nationaltheatret in 1977. The stunt was organized in response to the Nationaltheatrets staging of a 'Bjørneboe collage', *Jeg tar meg den frihet* [I take the liberty to]. The plays director had put together parts of Bjørneboe's less controversial texts, branding the assemblage "a collage in homage to the recently dead writer". Jens Bjørneboe had been found dead the previous winter. Perleporten Teatergruppe was outraged by Nationaltheatrets treatment of Bjørneboe's legacy. In the group's opinion Nationaltheatret were 'cherry-picking' Bjørneboe's texts in order to create a less controversial and critical play. Perleporten Teatergruppe decided to arrange an anarchistic intervention in "commemoration of a dead dissident".<sup>54</sup> Karl Hoff writes in the theatre groups biography about their reasoning for arranging a theatre action: "To us, liberal socialists and anarchists in Oslo at the time, he [Jens Bjørneboe] was highly regarded, both as an author of novels, essays and as a playwright, and as a human being. I think it is right to say that we experienced him both as our mouthpiece a supporter and as an inspiration, yes, as a bedrock in the invisible but still felt 'house', which we defined as our community, our life."<sup>55</sup> As mentioned earlier, Perleporten saw Nationaltheatret's collage as hypocrisy in regards to how they had formerly treated Bjørneboe when he was still alive, and even after his death, the Nationaltheatret did not have the decency to stage one of his plays in its entirety. On 12 March 1977, the members of the theatre group were seated in the auditorium of the Nationaltheatret watching *Jeg tar meg den frihet*... At a given signal one of the group members rose up from her seat and blew a whistle. With all the commotion, the theatre director Arild Brinchmann decided to turn the lights on in the auditorium. One of the activists proceeded to read out loud the theatre group's manifesto. The manifesto compared

Nationaltheatret to grave plunderers, looting Bjørneboe's grave even before his corpse had gone cold. After this anarchistic theatre stunt, Perleporten Teatergruppe was no longer seen as a charming and fresh addition to the Norwegian theatrical landscape. Even the theatre critic, Erik Pierstorff, who initially had endorsed the theatre group, now saw them as rebels.<sup>56</sup> However, this stunt was just one of many performative demonstrations that Perleporten instigated either alone or in collaboration with other anarchists.<sup>57</sup>

One could say that by Perleporten instigating and participating in political activism in the form of street theatre and 'invisible theatre', the theatre group managed to merge their political beliefs, ideals, and their 'way of life' through performative activism. Perleporten Teatergruppe produced, in all, eight performances on a tight budget. Besides their performative stunts and activism, their theatre productions could formally be compared to the literary cabarets of the 19th century. Perleporten was the first independent theatre group in Norway, but in 1983 - three years before Tramteatret - Perleporten decided to close down due to lack of funding. One of the reasons for Perleporten's demise was their resistance towards the institutional theatres, as shown by their Bjørneboe-action at Nationaltheatret. Perleporten Teatergruppe was ostracized by the official theatre world, which ultimately affected their artistic status.

## CONCLUSION

Perleporten Teatergruppe's and Tramteatret's use of anti-illusionary theatre and popular theatre forms, as well as the literary cabaret and features reminiscent of Piscator's red revues, moved the boundaries of acceptable theatre aesthetics in Norwegian Theatre. The independent theatre groups of the 1970s combined popular theatre forms with political satire and epic-theatre techniques in addressing current events, which gave the mentioned theatre group's great media attention. Perleporten and Tramteatret could, through being independent groups, choose their own working structures. In accordance with their anti-authoritarian political views they chose an

egalitarian working form, where improvisation was an important feature. While Jens Bjørneboe's play scripts had been refused by the institutional theatre establishments in the 1960s, the independent theatre groups bypassed these institutions by producing their own kind of theatre. Before Perleporten Teatergruppe was created, there existed no infrastructure in Norway for creating independent theatre. Perleporten and Tramteatret, together with 16 other independent theatre groups, took the initiative of establishing their own organisation to fight for their interests, Teatersentrum. However, despite their efforts, the financial support from the Norwegian Arts Council was not substantial. Even though cultural policies do not make art, they do sustain and disseminate them. It is clear that the Norwegian paternalistic and centralised cultural policies have both delayed the formation of alternative aesthetics and of alternative organisational forms to the institutional theatres. Both Perleporten and

Tramteatret had to close down due to a lack of funding, but their political and anti-illusory theatre had opened a space for the coming Norwegian independent theatre groups to continue their experimentations.

Whereas Tramteatret preferred the use of popular theatre forms and Brechtian distancing effects as a means to reach their audience with their political messages, Perleporten, on the other hand, created its own political aesthetics, shedding light on the family setting through the lens of absurdism, cut-up characters, and characterizations. Yet, due to their use of poetic texts and highly stylized acting, Perleporten's performances were difficult to pigeonhole into one definable theatre form. However, Tramteatret and Perleporten Teatergruppe helped break down the aesthetic divide between the institutional theatres and the cabaret theatres by using popular theatre forms, thus breaking away from the 'Ibsen-tradition' in Norwegian theatre.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

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2. Knut Ove Arntzen, "Kan det skje noe nytt på Nationaltheatret?", *Spillerom* no. 4, 1986.
3. Knut Ove Arntzen, "Arktisk drama og landskapsdialoger i scenisk resepsjon: Hamsun, Løveid, Iunker og Fosse – en annerledes norsk dramatikk?", *Nordisk samtidspoesi : Cecillie Løveids forfatterskap*, Ole Karlsen Vallset, ed. Oplandske Bokforlag, 2016.
4. Arntzen in Wenche Larsen's trial lecture entitled "Diskuter perspektiver på norsk scenedramatikk slik den er fremstilt i Ivo de Figueiredo, *Ord/Kjøtt- Norsk scenedramatikk 1890-2000* (2014). Legg særlig vekt på fremstillingen av scenedramatikk I perioden 1967-1986 og 1986-2000." 2015, p. 9.
5. Sartz staged the play in 1930 with a group of semi-professional actors. The play was a huge success, however the owners of the theatre building were not happy to house a communist theatre group and, according to Sartz, they company was kicked out of the building in 1931.
6. When speaking about a break with psychological-realism I am aware that the cabaret and revue- and vaudeville-theatres in the largest cities in Norway in the late 19th century had "already" broken with realism in the theatre. However, since this article focuses on a left-wing political and socially engaged theatre, which the cabarets and professional revue-theatres in Norway represented, I will not go further into this topic-matter.
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8. *Ibid.*, pp. 49-51.
9. Olav Daalgard in "Møte med kulturarbeideren Gunvor Sartz." (1983) <http://tv.nrk.no/program/FOLA02006882/moete-med-kulturarbeideren-gunvor-sartz>, NrK.
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12. Tor Bang, *Under Hammermerket : Hvordan Utvikler Norsk Arbeiderbevegelse En Retorisk Instruksjonslitteratur På 1930-tallet?* Universitetet i Bergen, Institutt for Informasjons Og Medievitenskap, 2013, p. 42.
13. Gripsrud, *op.cit.*, p. 241.
14. The Labour Party sat in government uninterrupted from 1945 to 1963.
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18. Frisvold, *op.cit.*, pp. 143-144.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 147.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
21. Ingeborg Lyche, *Norsk Kulturråd. Kultur Og Kulturpolitikk : Norsk Kulturråd - Fortid Og Framtid*, Edvard Beyer, ed. Cappelen, Oslo 1985, p. 130.
22. Helge Sivertsen, "Norsk Kulturpolitikk 1945-1965," *Norsk Kulturråd. Kultur Og Kulturpolitikk : Norsk Kulturråd - Fortid Og Framtid*. Edvard Beyer, ed. Cappelen, Oslo 1985, p. 22.
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37. Jensen, op.cit., p. 16.
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56. Erik Pierstorff, "Anarkistene i Teateret," *Dagbladet*, 15 March 1977.
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