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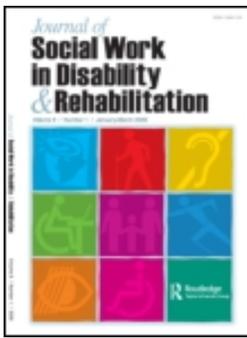
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The Story about Theater Organizations, the Public's Approval, and the Actors' Identity Formation in Nordic Disability Theater

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Nordic disability theater is a relatively new and interesting field of disability research. In this article, the authors provide an overview of the field of disability theater in a Nordic context. The article is based on a comparative analysis from 3 research projects conducted in Sweden and Norway. The projects used qualitative methods and were analyzed from different theoretical perspectives. Interviews were conducted at 4 different disability theaters involving actors with hearing impairments, intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, and mental disabilities. The aim of this article is to illustrate how the organizational settings reflect different goals and aims at the political and artistic levels. The authors will also address the relationship between the theaters and the public opinion and media. Finally, they will illustrate in what way organization, recognition, and public approval play an important role for the actors' identity formation and sense of belonging.

KEYWORDS *disability arts, identity and belonging, organizational settings, public approval, theater organization, therapy versus art*

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From an international perspective, artistic activities involving persons with disabilities are not infrequently associated with the emerging cultural movement known as disability arts (Barnes, Mercer, & Shakespeare, 2000). This movement has political dimensions and owes its existence to people's shared experiences of social dissociation. The ideology around disability arts is user controlled and critical to the fact that persons with disabilities are often forced into a role as clients to the welfare state. On the basis of these persons' shared deviation (e.g., disability), the movement is also a strong emancipatory motive power.

Nordic disability theater is a relatively new and very interesting field of research. In the period from 1999 to 2007, it was studied from various perspectives and with different theoretical foundations, both within dramaturgy and social work (Gürgens, 2004; Ineland, 2007; Sauer, 2004). This article provides a survey of Nordic disability theater and conducts a comparative analysis of the prevailing conditions in Sweden and Norway.

Despite the fact that Sweden and Norway have adopted relatively similar welfare policy models (Esping-Andersen, 1990), disability theater is organized differently in the two countries. The Scandinavian welfare model, or the social democratic welfare state according to Esping-Andersen (1990; Sweden, Norway, Denmark, Iceland, and Finland), is described as a welfare model with a high level of decommodification and strong universalism, and as actively working against social stratification. The degree of decommodification describes the degree to which a social service is recognized as a right and to what degree an individual can maintain a living income from the social security system. The social policy is redistributive and equalizing. The Scandinavian welfare model is furthermore characterized by its universal and general social security system and the fact that social services, health care, schools, and disability services are mainly financed by the public tax system and are carried out by the public sector (Arts & Gelissen, 2006; Esping-Andersen, 1990, 2007). The actor's perspective is of great importance in the Nordic countries, and this study will therefore have the actor's life world as its central focus.

This article is written within the framework of a humanistic perspective on human life and based on a hermeneutic approach, with the preconception that no two human beings are alike, but equal irrespective of functional level. The unique creative forces in each and every individual can be regarded as an emancipatory artistic force. This force is needed by society to enhance its development and creativity when facing a complex global world with enormous environmental challenges. Differences and the merging of horizons between people's various positions and life experiences constitute strength and a challenge, not a weakness and limitation. We consider Nordic disability theater in accordance with this view of the world.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this article is to show what consequences the organization of the theatrical activities has for the disability theater actors. The analysis is based on two organizational principles: theater as social welfare service, and theater as art. We also problematize the reception of disability theater by the general public. We draw on a reception study including both children and adults, as well as a study of the role of the mass media. Finally, we show how the organization of the theater and recognition or approval turn out to be two important components with an impact on Nordic disability theater actors' sense of identity, belonging, and self-understanding. Thus, it is hoped this article will pave the way for new knowledge that will enhance the understanding of disability arts in a Nordic context.

METHOD

The article is based on four research and development projects: *An Extraordinary Aesthetic*, *Extraordinary Theatre at Harstad University College*, *Theatre and Intellectual Disability* and *Between Art and Therapy* (Gürgens, 2004; Gürgens Gjørnum, 2008; Ineland, 2007; Sauer, 2004).

These projects problematize and analyze the work of five Nordic theater groups with respect to the aesthetic, social, and therapeutic theatrical experiences of actors with various disabilities. The disabilities represented in the two Norwegian studies were hearing impairment and intellectual disability; that is, physical as well as mental impairments. The participating theater groups were the Alfheim Theatre (Tromsø), The Norwegian Sign-Language Theatre (Ål/Oslo), and The Extraordinary Theatre (Harstad).

In the two Swedish studies, the informants were all persons with an intellectual disability. The participant groups were the Rebels (Umeå) and the Ålla Theatre (Sundsvall). The studies were based on modern hermeneutics, and the researchers focused on understanding the actors in the field on the actors' own terms. This was achieved by developing a common context, by interactive communication in the form of qualitative research interviews as part of the fieldwork, and participant observation conducted over time (Gadamer, 1995). The individual interpretative eyes of the researchers and the relational research perspective have therefore been central to the studies on which this article is based.

The article builds on qualitative research interviews of 16 Norwegian and 35 Swedish informants, and focus group interviews of 21 Norwegian children, between 7 and 9 years old. In part, it is also based on a quantitative study by means of a self-developed questionnaire filled in by 128 respondents, all from the Norwegian adult audience to the production "Mythical Narratives From the North—A Pictorial Journey Across the Vault of Heaven" (2007).¹

THEATER AND DISABILITY IN SWEDEN

Theater for persons with intellectual disabilities has become an increasingly common activity within disability services in Sweden. As an activity, theater is not a novelty. Like other artistic activities, however (e.g., painting and music), theater has traditionally had primarily therapeutic and (re)habilitating purposes. Now cultural and artistic objectives have become more explicitly the center of attention for theatrical work. The activity has expanded during the past two decades, so that now a great number of well-known and acclaimed theater groups are at work. They have captured the attention of the mass media on both the local and national level. As an employment form, theater groups are closely associated with the cultural initiatives for disabled persons initiated by the Ministry for Cultural Affairs.

These initiatives are a corollary of the primary objective of the national cultural policy, which is to promote the opportunities of all to have access to cultural experiences and make use of their own creativity (Proposition, 1996). The two Swedish theater groups focused on in this article, the Ålla Theatre and the Rebels, are both organized as daily activities. This implies that they are classified as a measure pursuant to The Act concerning Support and Service for Persons with certain Functional Impairments [LSS; Svensk författningssamling or Swedish Collection of Constitution (SFS), 1993].

Even though there are considerable variations as to organization and content, daily activities can, according to Bakk and Grünwald (1998), be characterized as employment just like other social and pedagogical activities. The development of daily activities also reflects the political objectives of the so-called working-line policy, which were partly to promote full participation for all in the life of the community, and partly to make sure that nobody was left out (Lindqvist & Borell, 1998).

By virtue of being daily activities, the Rebels and the Ålla Theatre are subject to certain organizational and institutional requirements and expectations. Most important is perhaps the fact that they are a special measure for persons with intellectual disability governed by the LSS (SFS, 1993). The LSS is a rights law stipulating 10 special measures for the following:

1. Persons with an intellectual disability, autism, or a condition resembling autism.
2. Persons with a significant and permanent intellectual impairment after brain damage in adulthood due to an external force or a physical illness.
3. Persons who have other major and permanent physical or mental impairments that are clearly not due to normal aging and that cause considerable difficulties in daily life and consequently an extensive need for support and service.

The LSS is a framework law, which implies that the municipalities have considerable freedom in shaping the actual support and service measures,

whereas the state (through explicit objectives and intentions) marks out the course on a more overarching level. The objective is to promote equality in living conditions and full participation in the life of the community. Key principles for activities within the LSS include self-determination and influence, accessibility, participation, and continuity and holism. The Rebels and the Ålla Theatre thus belong to the sphere of welfare policy, as opposed to the situation in Norway, where disability theater belongs to the sphere of cultural policy.

The tension between the theater groups' artistic organization and the institutional norms in the context of the welfare state is an interesting point of departure for a comparison with the Norwegian context. The neo-institutional organization theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Scott, 1994) provides a fruitful perspective for gaining an increased understanding of the Swedish theater groups' organizational conditions. A central starting point is the view of organizations as social constructions, which means that organizations are influenced by widespread and generally accepted notions of social behavior. The relation between the organizations and the institutional environment is central where the institutional environment according to Powell and DiMaggio (1991) refers to fundamental assumptions, valuations, and norms in the outside world. These, in turn, will influence the attitude toward how different kinds of activities and entities should be established, organized, and managed. For public organizations, it is important to adapt to the prevailing norms and valuations of society. This will ensure legitimacy and leave room for some freedom of action, which in turn is a prerequisite for survival (Scott, 1992). The better an organization is adapted to a prevailing culture, the more support it will get, improving its chances of survival.

On the other hand, potential conflicts might arise through the various demands and expectations that the environment directs against the organization. One way to handle this is to uncouple the formal structure from what is actually done. In that way the organization can preserve its legitimizing structure in the eyes of the outside world, and at the same time let the daily work be determined by more practical considerations (Ineland, 2006).

DISABILITY ARTS IN NORWAY

Disability art in Norway is now organized as an integral part of general cultural life, whereas in Sweden artistic and cultural activities for persons with disabilities are organized as part of social welfare services. These two ways of organizing artistic activities can be seen as governmental definitions of the actual activity and a kind of valuation of artistic, pedagogical, and therapeutic purposes. Prior to 1990, welfare offerings in Norway for persons with intellectual disability were organized both by the municipalities' health and social care sectors and by the centralized institutions, both being charged with the responsibility for the living conditions of this part of the population.

The year 1991, however, saw the Health Care for People with Intellectual Disabilities reform. People living in institutions dependent on extensive support and service were now to be given their own homes to live in and in every respect be treated like any other residents in the municipality. Their welfare offerings were from now on to be organized through the regular offerings within culture, athletics, education, and health in their respective home municipalities: "Pursuant to the responsibility reform which came into force on 1 January 1991, the home municipality is now charged with the responsibility for the total offerings to people with intellectual disabilities" (Kultur- og kirke departementet, 1991–1992, St.meld. nr. 61, p. 100).

After 1991, the responsibility for cultural activities for disabled persons was to a great extent left to the municipal cultural departments (Gürgens, 2004). Regrettably, this has had the consequence that the cultural offerings, especially for persons with intellectual disabilities, have not been focused on to the same extent as before the reform. Current theater activity offerings for persons with intellectual disabilities owe their existence solely to the initiatives of local enthusiasts. All the same, from 1991 onward, the government has aimed at including people with disabilities in cultural life by establishing relevant forums and settings and by focusing on the multiculturally inclusive Norway.

Disability theater, as part of this field, is therefore now seen as part of general cultural life. All cultural life is organized in accordance with guidelines laid down in the current cultural report, *Cultural Policy Toward 2014*. Here we find the statement that, regrettably, "there are still great socio-economical differences in the population as to participation in the cultural life" (Kultur- og kirke departementet, 2002–2003, St.meld., nr. 48).

Despite admitting the fact, the report offers no clear suggestions as to the road ahead for disability art. However, the recognition of the importance of cultural life for persons with disabilities permeates the report, and the visions are indisputably there. Despite the fact that the state now recognizes the artistic and creative capacities of the intellectually disabled in particular and the disabled in general, there is no political guidance when it comes to financial and practical initiatives (Gürgens, 2004). For this reason we can, from the point of view of research, consider the development of disability art in Norway as very ambivalent. Until 1991, the governmental attitude toward artistic and cultural activities for persons with functional impairments was rooted in therapeutic and pedagogical objectives.

The activities were well funded and taken care of by the social services inside the centralized institutions. Since 1991, the governmental view has been characterized by an increasing understanding of the importance of aesthetic experiences, identity-forming art production, and art consumption for persons with disabilities. However, funding and practical support arrangements for this new scenario are lacking. This reorientation of health and cultural policy over the past 19 years has regrettably had the opposite effect of what was desired. In the absence of funding systems and holistic

organizational measures, disability art will be left to its own devices as part of the voluntary cultural life, relying on the efforts of local enthusiasts.

THE ROLE OF MASS MEDIA AND PUBLIC APPROVAL

The media impart the impression that the disability theater activities in Sweden are legitimate, stimulating, and important to persons with intellectual disabilities. In the magazine *Allers* we can read the following about the Ålla Theatre's performance in Sevilla:

Never before had the Sevilla audience seen the likes of Carmen! The old familiar opera in a new wrapping charmed them to no end. The audience alternately wept and cheered. Standing on the stage in the hot summer night, Lisbeth and her 63 pals received the applause. (Carmen från Sundsvall, 1998)

Even what theatrical work means to persons with intellectual disabilities is covered by the media. The following politically saturated text, in the newspaper *Aftonbladet*, highlights a number of pertinent aspects:

People who previously had been mere appendages to their guardians or had grown up in an institution without a chance of gaining confidence in themselves, have gained self-respect. They are being noticed by others—and themselves. We all want to be noticed—to be free—knowing that we can have at least some influence on what our lives should be. This is important to all people—but perhaps of even greater value to Stig, Lisbeth, Kennet S, Bengt S, Bengt I, Maria, Per, Arne, Britta, Peter A, Peter R, Ylva, Yvonne and the others. They who have been trampled on time and again. (Carmen griper tag, 1998)

Within the field of disability services, the dependence of the institutional environment is expressed among other things through objectives and key principles. Generally these aim to lay the foundations for normal life patterns and support users and clients in their personal development, physically, mentally, and socially.

In Sweden, the increased efforts with respect to artistic projects involving persons with intellectual disabilities can in part be seen as a conviction that theatrical activities, more than traditional social care measures, can fulfill such objectives (Ineland, 2007; Sauer, 2004; Sauer & Ineland, 2007). The media have even played an important part in legitimizing theatrical activities as artistic practices.

Through news stories and descriptions, the media have contributed to a widespread belief in the importance of theater work for persons with intellectual impairments. As a direct consequence of the media coverage, the theater groups have hosted a great number of visiting scholars and

others, also from abroad. Moreover, both the Ålla Theatre and the Rebels have repeatedly received phone calls requesting information about their work, and numerous invitations to come and talk about or lecture on their activities. According to the instructors the media have also contributed to a better understanding of theater work, thus providing greater opportunities for putting forward increasing demands to high-level employees and social services decision makers.

It has now been seen how the Swedish mass media both experience and conceive of the various aspects of disability theater. It is therefore also of some interest to take a closer look at how an audience looks on Norwegian disability theater. In this connection we refer to the Norwegian reception study of the production “Mythical Narratives From the North—A Pictorial Journey Across the Vault of Heaven” by the group Extraordinary Theatre (Gürgens Gjørum, *in press*).² This study investigated the effect of inclusive postdramatic theater as an art form on a mixed audience (adults and children) and on an exclusively child audience. The findings are based on raw data from focus group interviews of 21 children, between 7 and 9 years old, and 127 questionnaires filled in by adolescents and adults (Wibeck, 2000).

To the audience, the performance by Extraordinary Theatre turned out to be a unique theatrical expression in which they were brought face to face with their own prejudices against those different from them, by being amazed at the artistic skills of the disabled actors. When we asked about their theater experience, the mixed audience group wrote in their questionnaires:

The actors were just amazing—I was overwhelmed. I never thought it would be possible for an actor with a disability to act this natural. (Two questionnaires, filled in on May 23, 2007)

The theatrical expression was experienced by some as emotionally touching. As one such individual from a mixed audience put it:

It affects me somehow—the theater performance spoke to my heart—really amazing. It went to the heart and spoke to the senses. (Two questionnaires, filled in May 23, 2007)

It turned out that the audience came to the Extraordinary Theatre performances between 2005 and 2007 because they wanted to experience something new, challenging, and different, and not because they had a special interest in disability art or because they knew one or more of the actors privately, as one might assume. The child and adult audiences alike were primarily concerned with the postdramatic form of the performance. They emphasized the close communication between actors and audience, the inclusive experience in the scenic space, and the multimedia montage of images, sound, and music.

The audience was not concerned with extraordinariness or disability as such. For most of the adults, this was merely a secondary thought mainly related to their positive surprise concerning the disabled actors' acting skills. The children, on the other hand, were more intuitive as to how they experienced the performance, and had very few prejudices against disabled actors:

The performance was beautiful—it was like a fairy tale—the music, light, and everything. (Questionnaire, filled in May 23, 2007)

When the children were asked if they noticed anything special with the actors, they discussed just one disability in the focus group, deafness:

One of the actors spoke strange, but she was very good in acting. I wouldn't have dared to walk on a stage if I was deaf . . . but the other actors spoke quite normal, didn't they? (Questionnaire, filled in May 23, 2007)

The children's assessments of the performance bore evidence of an emotional experience of scenic achievements and the capability of vivifying narratives. The adults had a variety of reflections in addition to their strong emotional experiences. They had reflected more on the social stigma than the children. The reception study showed that the performance was considered by the audience as a relevant arena for breaking down the barriers between people. From the mixed audiences questionnaires came the comment:

On stage it is clear that everybody is equal, but still we are all different from each other in an amazing way. The theater experience for me opens my eyes for other people's fantastic qualities which I haven't got myself, although I am not disabled at all. (Two questionnaires, filled in May 23, 2007)

The audience realized that a disability is not an obstacle in a theatrical context, but rather a distinctive feature that can be aesthetically exploited in a positive way.

THE BALANCE BETWEEN ARTISTIC AND THERAPEUTIC EXPECTATIONS

The organizational setting of the Swedish theaters implies that they have to relate to different expectations as to objectives and content. The theaters adapt to these expectations primarily by directing different focuses on their practices. According to our analysis, the two Swedish theaters encompass both an artistic and a therapeutic logic.

The artistic logic focuses on the cultural and artistic dimensions of the activities, and the work is given meaning through working toward future productions and the mutuality in the daily work. The therapeutic logic, on the

other hand, is based on the obligations of the welfare state. Here the theaters' potential for personal development is given priority, and the work is given meaning through the way the daily work succeeds in improving the social, psychological, and communicative skills of people with intellectual disabilities. The theater's social and psychological importance to the actors is emphasized. The following statement from the instructors at the Ålla Theatre is typical:

Let's take Nina as an example. We've never managed to get any contact with her before. She used to be very reserved and uncommunicative, refusing to answer and making faces instead at those asking her questions. But we have put in quite a lot of work with her . . . and now when she comes here in the morning, she's hugging us and talking all the time. She's really happy and a bit wild sometimes, and so . . . Well, it's a 100 percent improvement. (Interview with leaders at the Ålla Theatre, Sundsvall, 2001)

When the artistic logic is emphasized, the artistic work at the theater becomes the center of attention. The goals are explicitly artistic, and the long-term goal is to stage a performance, a rather large-scale production. The leaders' emphasis on and adherence to the artistic logic in the daily work is so strong that it also has an impact on how one perceives and gives expression to the role and status of the actors and the leaders themselves. The following dialog between two of the leaders is an illustrative example:

Kristin: Well, I cannot identify with the word "personnel." I, or rather we, have adopted the language of the theater. There you use terms such as musical leader, artistic leader, etcetera. Therefore we, the "personnel," are leaders. Karin is a theatre manager, Jenny is a producer, and I'm a musical leader and Siv a scenographer. The intellectually disabled are co-workers.

Karin: We are all colleagues at the theater, but to make a distinction between us and them, then we are leaders and they are actors and co-workers.

Kristin: We . . . well, regrettably it boils down to a distinction between us and them. (Interview with leaders at the Ålla Theatre, Sundsvall, 2001)

This dialog illustrates two aspects: that the artistic logic is embedded in the way the leaders relate to their work, and that there is an asymmetry in the relation between the leaders and the actors. As opposed to the asymmetry characterizing the relation between personnel and persons with intellectual disabilities within the more traditional disability services, the actors at the Ålla Theatre do not experience the relationship at their theater as paternalistic. This impression is based on a comparison with their relations to personnel both at previous daily activities and at their present group homes. At the Ålla

Theatre, they are co-workers and colleagues, not intellectually disabled users. The following excerpt from an interview with Barbro illustrates this:

Barbro: Yes, or as we say here, we are all co-workers and colleagues; we are not users any more, but co-workers and colleagues.

Researcher: The word “users,” you don’t like it?

Barbro: No.

Researcher: Why not?

Barbro: No, I don’t like it. A word like that should not be used to label anyone whether they are living in a group home or a nursing home. They are not users. They are people just like you and me. No one calls you a user either, do they? (Interview with Barbro, an actor at the Ålla Theatre, Sundsvall, 2001)

When the therapeutic logic is emphasized, the individual development of the co-workers becomes the center of attention. The artistic goals are replaced by goals that relate more specifically to each individual, characterized by an emphasis on the actors’ communicative, psychological, and social development. The theater work becomes therapeutic instead of artistic. One of the leaders puts it like this:

Well, we naturally aim at personal growth through theatrical activities, and people no doubt grow. Working with theater is a fine thing. You grow even though you get rather exhausted and because you have to give so much of yourself. . . . But to be allowed to grow and be able to do so within one’s own limitations. (Interview with leaders at the Ålla Theatre, Sundsvall, 2001)

The actors’ intellectual disabilities are central to legitimize the deviating views of the Ålla Theatre and the Rebels as professional theater groups. The tension between the theater and the welfare state has in other words contributed to the fact that such theater groups are characterized by a duality as a consequence of the need to relate their activities to the institutional expectations of the environment (Ineland, 2007; Sauer & Ineland, 2007).

The duality expressed through the alternation between art/culture and care/therapy, however, creates good conditions for relating their practices to a wider range of institutional requirements and expectations. The two logics can be regarded as an organizational adaptation to divergent expectation horizons around the theme of theater and intellectual disability under the auspices of the welfare state. To receive legitimacy, Swedish disability theater must through its practices relate to artistic as well as therapeutic expectations, the latter in turn relating to disability services policy goals.

ART IN PREFERENCE TO THERAPY IN THE THEATER

In Norway, where cultural policy steering documents legitimize a focus on the theater as art rather than therapy, we find a different empirical landscape from that in Sweden. Norwegian integrated, as well as segregated, disability theaters have art as their goal and focus. The following statement from a stage director is symptomatic:

The focus should be on the theatrical aspects, nobody should be in our theater group as a supervisor or some kind of paid friend. . . . The Alfheim Theatre is a hobby, not a therapy. Self-development and a kind of therapy are side-effects of the theatrical activities, not the objective of what we do here. (Interview with the manager of the Alfheim Theatre, Tromsø, 1999)

The manager of the Alfheim Theatre is adamant that art and not therapy is the objective of the activities. The Alfheim Theatre therefore stands as a theater group where the theatrical aspects as such are given absolute priority. This can also be clearly seen from the actors' work on the rehearsals. Despite the fact that social activities are given room, the stage director has a constant focus on the scenic work to be done. The leader's goal is to make the actors work actively, individually as well as collectively, with drama rehearsals and scenic productions with an artistic ideal in mind.

As in Sweden, the Norwegian disability theater groups have received very positive media coverage. The Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK) has over the past few years broadcast many documentaries and news stories revealing the artistic ambitions of people with intellectual disabilities.³ The performances receive attention in the national media, and are there defined as art, not as therapy or social care. Extensive nationwide media coverage was given to the *Cinderella* production in 2002 at the Thorsovs Theatre, the Small Scene of the Norwegian National Theatre. Stage directors Toril Goksøyr and Camilla Martens had cast a young woman with an intellectual disability (Goksøyr's sister) in the role of Cinderella. In a review in the Norwegian newspaper *Aftenposten* we read the following:

A young intellectually disabled woman as the leading lady on a Norwegian theater stage is a rare sight. Without making invidious comparisons, the experimental *Hamlet* production by the Copenhagen Royal Theatre two years ago created a heated debate about art and aesthetics because an actor with Down's syndrome was cast in the role as Ophelia. The play was taken off the bill before the opening night. Casting persons with disabilities in leading roles is really not that sensational. Performance artists often include persons from "real life" to challenge the borders between art and reality. Or, as is the case at Thorsovs, to promote confidence and tolerance. (Annerledes og rørende Askepott, 2006)

The choice made by Goksøyr and Martens was, as it appears from this review, considered a bold artistic decision, seen within the aesthetic framework of the performance tradition. The review continues:

Cinderella is played by Marte Wexelsen Goksøyr, a young woman with Down's syndrome. But at the same time she is also playing herself. Her own thoughts and reflections merge into the fairy tale; these are also all about loneliness and yearning, faith and hope. This alternation between illusion and reality relates directly to what is perhaps the major issue of theatre: "What is man? How does he live his life?" (Annerledes og rørende Askepott, 2006)

The review analyzes the aesthetic form of the performance in relation to the thematic structure and the measures used by the stage directors to sharpen and bring up to date the intrigue of the Cinderella fable. The media focus is on the artistic values of the performance, which is quite in line with the guiding principles of Norwegian cultural policy. The theater review just quoted is typical of how the media approach disability art in our time.

Within disability art in Norway we also find segregated theater groups. The Norwegian Sign-Language Theatre (DNITT) is such a segregated cultural offering for persons with a hearing impairment, and the only professional Norwegian disability theater. The actors are professional in the sense that they live by their work at the theater. Here the concept of professional is related to a combination of education, performance, and a working situation. They have no formal education as actors, but a broad experience from the Nordic theater and film industry. Quite a few of them want to professionalize themselves through formal education. The National College of Dramatic Art, however, does not admit deaf students, even though the Norwegian cultural policy clearly provides a scope for an inclusive art practice. Having their applications to the College rejected was therefore felt to be discrimination by our informants:

It is important for deaf people to have their own artistic expression, because it is not more difficult for those who are deaf to be actors than it is for those who can hear. It amounts to the same, it's just a different kind of theater...it's something about subculture. (Interview with Celine, the Norwegian Sign-Language Theatre, April 2000)

THEATER AND IDENTITY FORMATION

The deaf actor Celine speaks up for an understanding of sign language theater as a subculture in the Norwegian theatrical landscape:

Our theater is an important part of our deaf community—but it is also a kind of an art factory in a way. For me our theater is both art and

language put together equally. (Interview with leaders at the Norwegian Sign Language Theatre, Ål, 2000)

This subculture is built around linguistic and aesthetic components; it has a language of its own, a sign language, and it makes its own particular decisions as to repertoire, style of play, and scenic form.

Even though disability arts in Norway is part of the cultural landscape from a political point of view, and is looked on as art rather than therapy, there is nevertheless a dissonance between the established artistic and cultural life and the disability art groups. This seems in part to be due to the elitism cultivated by the well-established and renowned art institutions and colleges. The elitist focus on the very best, the specialized, and the talented represents a contrast to the inclusive nature of disability art. Consequently, in many contexts, artists with a disability do not feel that they are treated on an equal footing with their nondisabled colleagues, in spite of the fact that political steering documents and social rights resolutions call for equality in present-day Norway.

The Swedish organizational setting, with its divergent expectations for the theater groups, has left the actors with a balancing role between being actors and being social care clients. This implies a new situation for the actors, who have been assigned a very different role from the one in which they are socialized. One of the actors comments on this new role:

Then they (the audience) look upon you in a different way. Because then we are actors, and we show how good we are. They like that, and they applaud, but as soon as you get back in the street. (Interview with actors at the Ålla Theatre, Sundsvall, 2001)

The artistic logic, described earlier, is reflected in everyday ways of talking and thinking about the theater. The daily work is organized and practiced in line with the same goals and ambitions characteristic of ordinary theaters.

Through the processes and activities at the theater, the actors gain new meanings and understandings of intellectual disability. When they perform in a public context they are assigned the role of actors. The following excerpt from an interview with one of the leaders gives an illustrative example of how an audience can relate to the actors' achievements:

The next day (after a performance of *Carmen*) we received phone calls from the audience and from Dramaten, we didn't know that they had been there . . . They thanked us for a fantastic performance . . . they said they had been touched. I asked them how. And then there was a man who could explain this particularly well. He said that "I've never before seen a performance where the characters were so intensely personified. . . . I went by plane from Stockholm to Sundsvall to see a play performed

by intellectually disabled persons, but that was not what I saw. I was just sitting there watching and listening to a fantastic performance of Carmen.” (Interview with leaders at the Ålla Theatre, Sundsvall, 2001)

The positive daily response from their leaders and from external audiences gives the actors strength and self-confidence. They become acclaimed producers of cultural experiences. This positive feedback is in contrast to their experiences in the role of dependents and users of social care services. Through the daily work at the theater and performances in front of an external audience, a new construction of intellectual disability also takes place.

The two preceding empirical examples show how theater work helps to create new social senses of intellectual disability. The nature of the artistic work is a new experience. The following dialog with Barbro, one of the actors, illustrates this:

Researcher: If you compare your work here at the theater with other places you’ve been working, what would you say?

Barbro: I think it is different here. Here you do creative work, and you can take a break whenever you like. I see this as genuine work.

Researcher: Genuine work?

Barbro: This is genuine work! No day-care center, and if they try to make it one, they’ll have to deal with me. (Interview with Barbro, an actor at the Ålla Theatre, Sundsvall, 2001)

THEATER AND SUBCULTURE

The identity-forming dimension of the theater work sheds light on how one has constructed the meaning of intellectual disability and the actors’ way toward a new self-image and social role. What disability is and how it is regarded and understood at the theater are important components of the cultural fellowship that is developed.

This fellowship can be analyzed in terms of a subculture, as was earlier pointed out by the deaf Norwegian actor Celine. The fellowship can take different forms and is described by the actors and leaders in different ways.

There’s a tremendous difference, but why I can’t say, I don’t know the answer. There is really a tremendous difference, and you can see that as soon as you get out, for I sometimes also work elsewhere in my spare time. The group who worked on Carmen and who is working on the theater now is a very tight-knit group. They are like a gang, if you see what I mean. (Interview with leaders at the Ålla Theatre, Sundsvall, 2001)

Ylva's description, which is based on a comparison with how things are in another institution for persons with intellectual disabilities, implies that there is a difference in how persons with intellectual disabilities communicate and interact with each other and the personnel. At the theater, she claims, the atmosphere is characterized by friendship and communication. She describes them as a gang who also stick together after work. The cultural fellowship can be characterized in terms of the shared valuations of and conceptions about theater, and in terms of the actors' roles and social status. The total picture can therefore be described as a subculture.

The actors' balancing between their roles as actors and as intellectually disabled is not only an important building block in their formation of a new identity. It is also an essential component formed by a cultural fellowship that can be understood in terms of a subculture. In this respect the findings of the Norwegian and Swedish theater studies concur (Gürgens, 2004; Ineland, 2007; Ineland, Molin, & Sauer, 2009; Sauer, 2004). The fellowship experienced through theater work provides them with an identity as actors. This fellowship is in marked contrast to other everyday life experiences. Zeppelin, an actor with an intellectual disability, gives a pertinent description:

Researcher: Do you experience things when you're working with theater that you don't experience in other situations?

Zeppelin: Talking to people, I don't do much of that elsewhere. When I'm not with the theater group I stay at home most of the time and don't talk to very many people. (Interview with Zeppelin, an actor at the Alfheim Theatre, 1999)

In the Norwegian study *An Extraordinary Aesthetics* (Gürgens, 2004), the concepts of fellowship, belonging and self-development become the main themes in the analysis of the significance of theatrical experiences to the actors of the Alfheim and the Norwegian Sign language Theatre. The following aspects are among the important theater experiences to the actors at the Alfheim Theatre and the Norwegian Sign-Language Theatre: the identity-forming processes (on both the individual level and the group level), the need for using their own special language or alternative channels of communication, stimulation of self-esteem and self-development, the experience of integration in the theater milieu, and the ambivalent experience of segregation in the theater milieu (Gürgens, 2004).

The fellowship that we found significant in both the Swedish and Norwegian disability theaters can be described as subcultural. The subcultural aspect is relevant both in the theatrical landscape and in everyday life. In their everyday life, the actors seek fellowship with others in the same situation, while they at the same time wish to belong to the majority culture. Their bicultural identity therefore becomes apparent (Ekeberg, Aashamar, & Heiberg, 1998).

In the theatrical landscape, disability theater groups constitute a subcultural complement to international, national, and regional cultural life, as we pointed out earlier. The Swedish theaters have been characterized here by the duality that is expressed on the organizational and individual levels. On the organizational level, this duality takes the form of a tension between the artistic and therapeutic logics. This tension is due to the fact that the theaters are ordinary theaters as well as daily activities within disability services. This has contributed to the situation that they must achieve legitimacy from the surrounding environment both as a disability service practice and as members of the artistic sphere. In this situation the leaders and the actors put their efforts together, working toward the common goal of getting acceptance for objectives and contents as well as the social role to be assigned to persons with intellectual disabilities.

The other duality is constituted by the social role and status of the actors at the theaters. Their position is characterized by the fact that they are both users of services provided by the welfare state and actors at a theater. This situation has created a particular *us* spirit, which is expressed through the prevalent collegial fellowship. The internal social life can be interpreted via the subcultural perspective. The sense of belonging to the cultural fellowship prevailing at the theater is crucial to the actors' self-understanding and self-image.

The situation can be described as a movement where the actors go from an understanding of themselves as intellectually disabled to an understanding of themselves as actors and producers of art acclaimed by a broad audience. This new role is kept alive and nurtured by the daily processes and activities at the theater. The sense of belonging and fellowship is strongly influenced by the artistic logic. From the social constructionist perspective (Berger & Luckman, 1991) the actors and the leaders together have reconstructed the meaning of intellectual disability. Through the theater activities one has given a different presentation and representation of how persons with an intellectual disability can be understood.

DISCUSSION

This article has discussed and analyzed theaters and theater activities for persons with disabilities in a Nordic context. The focus has been on three central themes that point to similarities and differences between the Norwegian and Swedish theaters and that together characterize Nordic disability theater. The three themes are the organizational setting of the theaters, the issue of identity and subculture, and finally the theaters' relation to the surrounding environment.

From an organizational perspective, the Norwegian theaters have gone from being affiliated with the welfare state to becoming a part of the

voluntary cultural sector. A consequence of this organizational setting is the lack of support from the welfare state in terms of social and financial resources. This development implies that the Norwegian theaters have gone from an emphasis on a therapeutic logic to an increasingly strong emphasis on an artistic logic. As opposed to the Norwegian theaters, the Swedish ones are characterized by a more pronounced duality between artistic and therapeutic objectives. In our opinion, this is a corollary of their tighter association with the welfare state and its specific logic. The tension between an artistic and therapeutic logic has contributed to an ambivalent attitude to the theaters' objectives as well as to the roles assigned to leaders and actors. Compared with the Norwegian theaters, the Swedish ones are in a more favorable position with respect to resources because they are publicly financed as part of the public social welfare sector.

On the level of disability policies, the different disability theaters have managed to challenge the traditional understanding of work for people with intellectual disabilities. This is reflected both by the growing numbers of disabilities theaters within disability services and increased numbers of actors in the Nordic theater community.

Despite these differences in the organizational setting and the resulting conditions, there are great similarities between the theaters in the two countries in aspects such as identity and subculture. Our analysis shows that theater work for persons with functional disabilities has similar social meanings for the actors in both countries. This work has paved the way for new social roles for the actors, roles that are most clearly seen in relation to the surrounding environment and society.

In addition to their role as users of social services, these individuals have assumed the roles of actors and cultural workers, and when they perform in front of an audience they receive acclaim and attention for their artistic achievements. The analysis also shows that theater work, both in the Swedish and the Norwegian contexts, has provided a breeding ground for a subcultural belonging. All things considered, we are of the opinion that the theaters have had an emancipatory effect on the actors and have contributed to a more complex self-image and greater confidence in their own capabilities. The article has also shown that the reactions of the general public and the mass media in both countries have contributed to creating legitimacy for the theaters. Moreover, these reactions have created a confidence in the theater as stimulating and important to the actors. This is enhanced by the fact that the actors receive attention and acclaim via coverage in the mass media and the approval of the general public.

This article has also shown that theater performances in front of an audience can be seen as an arena for breaking down barriers between people. Audiences have come to realize that a disability is not an obstacle in a theatrical context, but rather a distinctive feature that can be aesthetically exploited in a positive way.

NOTES

1. Detailed distribution of informants and respondents on the various projects and theater groups: En usedvanlig estetikk (Gürgens, 2004) had eight informants at the Alfheim Theatre and eight informants at the Norwegian Sign-Language Theatre. Mythical Narratives From the North by Extraordinary Theatre (Gürgens, in press) had 21 informants and 128 respondents. Teater och utvecklingsstörning (Sauer, 2004) and Mellan konst och terapi (Ineland, 2007) covered two theater groups: The Ålla Theatre with 21 actors and four leaders as informants, and the Rebels, with seven actors and three leaders as informants. All fieldwork included participant observations.

2. Gurgens Gjørnum (in press). Extraordinary Theatre is an inclusive theater group at Harstad University College started in 2005. Half of the actors are persons with a disability. The other half are students from the Social Education Study at the college. Participating in the theater group constitutes the in-depth study for the bachelor's degree program.

3. In a Norwegian Broadcasting Company (NRK) interview on May 13, 2002, we can read the following: "The objective of the 'Knekten integrerte teater' is to provide each individual participant with challenges adapted to his or her resources. Marianne Gran Karoliussen, the leader of the theatre group, wanted to set the bar as high as possible in the play 'Prinsesse Pia i landet lengre foran.'" (Retrieved June 13, 2002, from http://www.nrk.no/programmer/tv_arkiv/faktor/1847669.html).

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