

EMULATING THE SWEDES:  
AN EXPLORATION OF THE DEVELOPING TRENDS IN  
SWEDISH THEATRE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES

by

AMANDA WOLGAST  
B.A. University of Central Florida, 2003

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
in the Department of Theatre  
in the College of Arts and Humanities  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term  
2008

## ABSTRACT

As a practitioner in the field of Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA), I have always been drawn to looking at literature and productions that challenge my preconceptions of what constitutes good theatre for youth. I enjoy the bold and innovative, versus the cute and playful. My training and education in this developing branch of theatre has undoubtedly exposed me to the many accomplishments of the American TYA system, but quite often – through attending conferences, as well as participating in class discussions – I find that many debates/conversations center around what *more* we need to do in this field or what *else* we can do to make this field more relevant and interesting to young people. In my experience, I've found that discussions and opinions center around Americans looking elsewhere for theatrical models on which to shape their own practices.

I began looking at international models of TYA, particularly those of European countries. Historically, theatre has been recognized and valued as an essential part of traditional European life, and Sweden is often recognized as a forerunner in creating and supporting experimental art forms. With this, I question what American theatre educators and artists can learn from Swedish TYA as we work to create more artistic and educational outlets that incorporate the youth perspective of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

For this thesis, my interest lies in what I can learn from Swedish TYA. I question how major social and cultural factors shape Swedish children's theatre as a field, and how those factors play out within the artistic arena. I dissect various social and cultural factors

in Sweden that contribute to the TYA field, and examine if/how two pieces of Swedish dramatic literature for children reflect those trends and influences occurring in Swedish theatrical practice. Specifically, I also examine how Swedish TYA scripts use elements of non-realism, and deal with taboo topics. Through an exploration of *The Dreamed Life of Nora Schahrazade* and *One Night in February*, I find considerable use of elements that extend beyond realistic norms, and it is through those non-realistic approaches that the taboo issues are dissected and explored.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My sincere appreciation is first to Julia, Megan, and Vandy, who have stuck by me in this long path of finishing one of my toughest projects. It is because of their leadership and knowledge that I was able to continue through this writing, and actually have a glimmer of hope that it would be completed. These women are constant inspirations to me, and they have all pushed me to the boundaries of what I believed I could (and couldn't) do in this field. They have helped me to become an educator who has faith in her capabilities.

To my mom and dad who have supported me throughout my entire college career, to say thank you is not nearly sufficient. I thank them for all those little pushes. Their constant stressing of continuing higher education has fully sunk in and paid off, so I can only imagine their excitement knowing they can let go of that breath they've been holding for so long.

Finally, I owe a debt of gratitude to Rogier for dealing with me on those rough days where I wondered what I was doing in graduate school in the first place. His push for my success never went unnoticed, and my love and appreciation for him is too strong to put into words on paper.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS/ABBREVIATIONS

|     |                                 |
|-----|---------------------------------|
| TYA | Theatre for Young Audiences     |
| ITI | International Theatre Institute |

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

The TYA system in Sweden began to fascinate me while reading a small selection of dramatic works while enrolled in a children's literature course during the early part of my graduate studies. I read one script that challenged my perceptions of youth theatre (*The Runner*), and subsequently began to read the other plays in the small Swedish anthology. Each script in the collection shifted my aesthetic and pushed me to reconsider what makes strong literature for children. Within the scripts, I found: hard issues, challenging language, and non-linear structure. For this thesis, I examined children's culture in Sweden, as well as the country's theatrical history. I set out to discover how the Swedish culture plays out in TYA scripts, as well as what I can learn from the way Sweden organizes its arts and education programs.

My research began with a brief examination of August Strindberg, who is known as a prominent Swedish playwright who made great advances in current theatrical trends. After looking at Strindberg's haunting script, *The Ghost Sonata*, I found striking similarities between how he used non-realism, and how many Swedish TYA plays, written over 65 years later, did the same. This parallel cements for me the long theatrical history that built Swedish theatre as it is today. This blending of historical influence on current youth dramatic literature illuminates for me the need for various hands in the pot to create more diverse theatrical works.

During my year of creating this thesis, I was hired at a private school as a drama teacher for children ages 3 through 9, and essentially, I could do whatever I wanted in the classroom. Finding myself in the role of “teacher” with all eyes on me, I wanted my kids to learn from me; to trust me; to benefit from me. I began examining other teacher’s practices and procedures and subsequently generated question after question – specifically, what can I do with children so young to help them appreciate theatre, and what can I offer such a diverse group of students? I became more interested in entering and remaining in theatre education than ever getting a job in a playhouse. It was because of this new career that I began to look not only at Sweden’s theatrical structure, but at the education system as well. How can the Swedish education system and its policies on arts education illuminate the country’s relationship to youth?

I moved out of examining the educational practices and into exploring the actual playhouses producing works for young people. I began my research toying with key phrases on popular search engines: Swedish Theatre Companies, TYA in Sweden, Theatre for Youth in Sweden, etc. The language barrier proved difficult as much information was only available in Swedish. However, this cultural roadblock did not halt my determination in finding *something* that could help me learn more about this international theatrical entity, and I discovered that one company in particular offered information in English: The Unga Klara Ensemble.



My attempt to examine the Swedish TYA system through the Unga Klara Ensemble led me to research general Swedish theatre history. The Actor King, King Gustav III, was of particular interest because he established the country's first national theatre in hopes of bringing his people theatrical art rooted in Swedish themes. He wanted Swedish theatre with Swedish themes for Swedish people, and aimed to develop a sense of pride in the Swedish people's culture. Perhaps this practice of examining and depicting a nation's people was something to include in my own work – the nation being the students in my class. How would our work together change if I took new approaches to displaying their life experiences? This pride also resonates in Unga Klara's approach to TYA with, and for, children. For example, Unga Klara's artistic director goes so far as bringing children into the rehearsal process to act as liaisons between what is being portrayed on stage, and what is true to a child's culture. The company listens to the youth perspective.

I began my final step in my journey by analyzing two Swedish TYA scripts to see how they use non-realistic elements, as well as how they approach taboo topics. I use the term “non-realism” throughout this entire exploration to describe situations in which there is no objective reality; where characters could be living, dead, or something in-between; and where the structure of the text appears, at times, disjointed. This textual exploration consists of Staffan Göthe's *One Night in February* and Mia Törnqvist's *The Dreamed Life of Nora Schahrazade*. Within these scripts, I set out to discover how dramatic literature might reinforce the social and cultural factors prevalent in Sweden.

Additionally, it is in these two scripts where I looked to find how non-realistic elements

are used, as well as the approach taken towards taboo topics. The feelings expressed by the characters in both scripts are not filtered for a younger audience, but rather, are intensified in order to portray the youth perspective.

By exploring how Swedish social and cultural factors play out in theatre practice, the use of non-realistic elements, and approaches to taboo topics, I hope to understand more about the Swedish TYA system and what it can offer me as an educator and artist. Much is said and praised about Sweden's prominence in TYA, and perhaps I can gain some insight as to why and how it became so highly regarded.

## CHAPTER TWO: AUGUST STRINDBERG'S STYLE AND INFLUENCE

Swedish and Scandinavian theatre gained prominence with the writings and methods of August Strindberg in the late 1800s, and continued to maintain a stronghold even through his transition from Naturalism perspective in his plays to a more experimental approach of theatre production. For this study, I'm interested in how Strindberg's techniques and transitions influenced the social and cultural climate of Sweden's current theatre practices. To this day, theatres throughout Sweden often pay homage to Strindberg by producing his plays in his original style – adhering to his stage directions and philosophies of live theatre. One theatre in particular, Stockholm City Theatre, is producing two of his plays in 2008, along with four scripts by Strindberg's Scandinavian predecessor Ibsen. Additionally, Strindberg's very own Intima Teater was fully reconstructed in 2001 and now focuses on staging Strindberg's works, bringing new productions from around the world to its stage, and offering its space for school performances for children.

Aside from a brief overview and background of Strindberg's transition from Naturalism to Expressionism, for the purposes of this thesis, I'm selecting only certain elements of his playwriting: non-realistic elements and the use of mystical characters. I use this term "mystical" throughout the script analyses to describe character traits and behaviors. In particular, an otherworldly essence in which I wonder if characters are alive, dead, or something out of a dream. I choose this narrow look at Strindberg in order to create a

more guided study towards the connections to Swedish TYA, rather than attempt to analyze his worldview philosophies and entire theatrical cannon.

By the end of the 1890s, Strindberg seemed to realize that a revitalization of the theatre could only be accomplished through redefining the nature of the entire theatrical experience itself. His developing theories went through a succession of experiments that, as Frederick and Lise-Lone Marker point out, “led, gradually but surely, to a total rejection of the accepted conventions of stage illusion and dramatic construction, as inadequate means of expressing the mystical and visionary aspects of life that, to an increasing extent, he came to regard as the true fabric of reality,” (2). And aside from just changes in literary style (e.g. Naturalism to Expressionism), Strindberg also undertook experimental approaches to staging and set construction (e.g. distinct walls and flats transitioned to representative drapes). His advancement of theatrical elements began to push the bounds of standard practice of his time.

August Strindberg’s popularity began in the school of Naturalism, but began a shift towards the genre of history plays. He experimented in his early playwriting years with the period setting, in which he not only chose a time in history to set his plays (e.g. The Medieval Period), but he used these settings as general backdrops for domestic dramas. Essentially, one could ponder if the time period in his history plays is truly relevant to the story at hand. For example, in *Sir Bengt’s Wife*, marriage is represented as an emotional battleground against the *backdrop* of the Medieval period, with the struggles of marriage

being the overriding focus. Another prominent Medieval setting is *Lucky Per's Journey* (roughly translated to *Peter* in English), yet the drama centers around a mystical pilgrimage rather than the time period in which it is taking place. Perhaps Strindberg deliberately chose to move the locale somewhere else; or perhaps, he made a bold move disregarding time period altogether in favor of exposing what lies beneath facades and the supposed “important” theatrical elements. This question, as a mere example, sets the stage for newer low-context plays being developed where not everything may be laid out for the audience.

Even in his association with Naturalism, Strindberg proved a forerunner in stretching the bounds of what that particular theatrical school of thought was about. He might have been a Naturalist writer, but as Marker and Marker point out in their work *Strindberg and Modernist Theatre*, the dramaturgical arguments presented in the Preface to *Miss Julie* often combine aspects of the Naturalistic aesthetic with notions of a new post-Naturalistic aura (9). The complex motives often customary of a Naturalistic character – psychological, biological, hereditary – are blended on stage with Strindberg's use of a meandering, non-sequential pattern of dialogue, mirroring the randomness and casualness of everyday conversation (Marker 10). Even more indicative of Strindberg's post-Naturalistic tendencies is the allusion to musical composition in the *Miss Julie* Preface, an element that becomes extremely meaningful in his chamber plays like *The Ghost Sonata*, which will be discussed later in this chapter. These constant forward movements made by Strindberg certainly helped him find an early home in Naturalism, however, his

later writings rested solely on the outskirts of this genre as he moved into more experimental territory.

Through the mid-1890s Strindberg went through an intense mental crisis, which he called his Inferno, only to emerge with a renewal in his attitude toward questioning on-stage theatrical illusion. What *is* illusion in the theatre? As opposed to the external realities that dominated his Naturalistic dramas a decade prior, his post-Inferno plays did not provide a hard distinction between what is “real” and what is not. Marker and Marker explain their understanding of Strindberg’s theatrical real-versus-not concept in this fashion: “Life...*is* a dream, and so the dream (the play) is life itself...The problem [for a director] is to project a perception of the dreamlike quality of reality that is always conjoined with the sharply insistent reality of the dream,” (13). The dreamlike qualities of reality must be shown along with the intense reality feelings of dreams, and it is *how* these characters are living *within* that dynamic that Strindberg aimed to explore on stage. Essentially, this form of “psychic dynamism,” is an outward projection of what it feels like to experience life in this particular way (Marker and Marker13). Strindberg gave his audience the opportunity to enter the subconscious of his characters and observe and scrutinize their dreams and fears. A sense of otherworldliness began to take shape within Strindberg’s scripts, a feeling carried not only through *The Ghost Sonata*, but also *A Dream Play* and *To Damascus*.

Strindberg's new approach to visuals in his stage pictures, which consisted of suggestion, stylization and simplification versus clear cut set pieces, resulted in his "dreamlike life" plays resting in drastic opposition to the Naturalistic sentiments expressed only a few years earlier. The New Stagecraft of the time (practiced by Adolph Appia and Edward Gordon Craig) contained backgrounds that *represented* locations, versus creating an entire environment with props, décor and painted flats. Scenery, costumes and props used to increase believability were becoming increasingly absent. Symbolist-inspired shadow effects began to emerge, and eventually moved from projected pictures, all the way to fully projected scenery. Perhaps the new style of writing by Strindberg influenced the New Stagecraft, or vice-versa; regardless, Swedish theatre began to incorporate various avenues of innovative theatrical techniques. A constant progression of non-realistic elements began to unfold in setting, characters, and dialogue.

By pushing the boundaries of popular theatrical thought, August Strindberg helped set the scene for theatrical innovations that were to come out of Sweden less than a century later. He challenged the conventions of Naturalism, and began to blur those conventions with qualities of non-realism; by doing so, he helped put Scandinavian theatre on the map with his prominent displays of dreamlike qualities and his examinations of character psyches, as well as the confrontational dynamic between those two elements. Inner struggles of the people involved in the play, and their survival through that dreamlike state began to take place in the theatre. Characters not only struggled through life, some struggled through death and faced the corruption within themselves as well as of those around them.

Strindberg exposed the emotional and psychological scars that characters carried, which in turn, exposed the scars that the audience carried as well. The theatre could continue to be a place of enjoyment, but the peeling away of facades perhaps made the theatre an environment of self realization and examination.

### The Ghost Sonata

I'm interested in Strindberg's *The Ghost Sonata* as an example of how Strindberg uses mystical and non-realistic elements to explore various topics throughout his scripts. Within this script, my interests lie in the dreamlike qualities of the characters, in both who and what they are. The multitude of characters range from a mummy who speaks as a parrot, to vampires, to a mystical milkmaid that shows herself only to one old man. To me, these descriptions sound more appropriate as a story of adventure in a youth play, or a strange dream; but, these characters in Strindberg's play appear metaphorical of what is beneath the surface of a tormented woman (Mummy), and a young girl who was led astray by a trusted man (Milkmaid). They represent metaphors of the twisted and painful attributes that people carry, yet attempt to hide every day. The Mummy is not seen as a genuine mummy similar to one in a horror film, but rather as a woman who has been beaten by the sins of those around her. Her bandages are indeed an attempt at healing and shielding her wounds. In his script, Strindberg does not characterize the vampires as mere horror-film stereotypes, but instead, portrays those *around* the vampires as feeling that they have had their longevity sucked straight from their bodies. The "vampires" have the qualities of blood-sucking Draculas, but are not necessarily attaching their teeth to any



necks. It is metaphorical and representational in nature. In their critical anthology *Theater of the Avant-Garde: 1890-1950*, these representational characters all fit into what theorists Bert Cardullo and Robert Knopf call Strindberg's "purpose of gradually revealing the real human horror lurking behind the façade of affluence and respectability," (128).

Beyond the dreamlike and metaphorical characters, *The Ghost Sonata* flows in dreamlike structure and movement. In reading this script, I found myself always eager to read ahead, regardless of how confused I was with the story and plot. At times, I couldn't understand what I just read, or how it connected to the next sentence of dialogue.

However, during the moments of clarity, I built for myself a beautiful visual image about what I was reading. For me, this wonderment-yet-confusion is what dreams are all about. Dreams are often images and stories we don't understand, yet we push through them and often wake up wondering what it was all about. We might relate to the idea of what we experienced in our slumber, but it is often difficult to relay the entire story from beginning to end. This is also true for *The Ghost Sonata*, in that we don't need to know what's going on at every moment in order to get the general idea of what is happening. What was important for me to accept about this play's structure is that somehow the stories and people are related, though I didn't always know exactly how.

Strindberg put forth a play that contained deep meanings, and metaphorical symbols and characters; years later, several Swedish TYA playwrights followed suit. Strindberg made

bold moves in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century by moving away from current theatrical norms, only to be later followed by playwrights Göthe and Törnqvist also challenging perceptions of reality.

## CHAPTER THREE: SWEDISH EDUCATION AND THE ARTS

Exploring the influence of social and cultural factors present in the country helped me learn more about children's theatre from the Swedish TYA model. Socially and culturally, the education system in any country has the great potential (and in some cases, the responsibility) to be a source of artistic involvement for children. How are education and the arts connected for Swedish youth? How do the two influence one another? My interests focus on the proper preparation of teachers, the mandatory incorporation of the arts in schools, and what theatre training is available through an educational institution.

According to the ESTIA website (Sweden's online educational information resource), education is free to all Swedish children, including university degrees depending on the student's choice of a private or public institution. The actual funding for schools is provided by the government, with a municipal tax serving as the main source of income for local government. To note, each individual municipality within Sweden who receives government funds has the right to decide on the allocation of those resources and organization of activities, including artistic endeavors. Drama critic Margareta Sörenson notes that the Swedish education system continues a long tradition of introducing art and literature of the highest standards to every child; there is great public interest in education and teaching methods, and an ability to adapt education to meet the demands of the time. The apparent connection Sörenson makes between the "demands of the time" and introducing art to every child leads me to consider that a demand of the time *is* an

incorporation of the arts into education. In connection, a growing number of municipalities have created committees that entrusts to each school an overall budget for salaries, the costs of teaching materials and equipment, and the cost of renting facilities for school-related events and services (ESTIA). Without any specifications listed on ESTIA, I question if any school-related events are in-house theatre productions and/or field trips to playhouses.

The educational training process for Swedish teachers is similar for both core-curriculum instructors and those in special areas (languages, arts, electives, etc.). To qualify as a teacher, a person must have completed a Swedish teacher training program from a certified higher education institution. If a person obtained their university degree in a field other than Education, such as Visual Art or Theatre, they are able to professionally teach in compulsory school after the completion of a stringent one-year course in the theory and practice of teaching. A colleague informed me that this either-or option is a similar practice to that of her former residence of Scotland. I question whether this is a normal practice in a majority of European countries, considering the geographical distance span between Scotland and Sweden; they don't necessarily share any common geographical borders. Regardless, anyone interested in teaching in Sweden must complete one form of rigorous educational training, and have a general background in their subject area.

The ESTIA website provides a timetable outlining the allocation of classroom hours in each subject area throughout the entire nine years of study in compulsory school. It ensures that each subject receives various amounts of classroom instruction time. While less than Math, Science, and other core curriculum, children are required to take 230 hours of Art Education (theatre/drama falls under this auspice). Along with Art Education, 230 additional hours are required for Music, and 330 hours for a subject area titled Crafts. Additionally, 382 hours are allocated throughout the nine years for students' choice – 382 hours possibly distributed throughout further artistic endeavors. Without including the hours for student electives, a student moving through the compulsory system has a grand total of 790 hours devoted to creative and artistic courses, just 10 hours shy of the entire Science curriculum. Though less, I find it interesting that artistic mediums are included as a genuine curriculum benchmark, and given significant emphasis in required hours.

### Upper Secondary Education

During the 1970s and 1980s, Sweden took many measures to improve upper secondary education in order to match the needs of the labor market, as well as make opportunities available to young people who were interested in a more personalized course of study. This piece of information from ESTIA is in line with Sörenson's claim that the social systems are ready to shift in order to match the demands of the time, whether it be art-related or not. A new system of upper secondary schooling was introduced by the government in the 1992-93 school year and was fully implemented by the 1994-95 term.

According to ESTIA, the most important objective of the reform was to raise the general educational level and prepare everyone for life long learning. A second objective of the plan was to increase the scope of individual choice for each pupil. The impetus for this reform was the rapid development of new occupations that required knowledge in more areas of schooling, and if the upper secondary education was more flexible for young adults, they would be equipped to meet those new challenges. What excites me about this reform is Sweden's focus on occupational preparedness occurring throughout the upper secondary level (ages 16-19) – which is roughly equivalent to the American upper high school age (ages 16-18). The reform resulted in two key outcomes: the upper secondary program became a full three years in length, and the same core subjects are prominent in all of the seventeen national programs (ESTIA).

The national programs are sixteen separate frameworks of schooling that prepare students for career specializations. Along with generalized upper secondary schooling, all national study programs contain the same eight core subjects: Swedish, English, Civics, Religious Studies, Mathematics, Science, Sports and Health, and artistic activities. For those students whose interests are not covered by the sixteen national programs, they may opt to follow a specially designed program that corresponds to a national program in terms of the level of education (ESTIA). These specially designed programs also contain the 8 core subject areas, but give students more freedom in selecting their courses because they are able to combine courses from different national programs. During this selection

process, students are given the opportunity to work with the school administrators and teachers in completely tailoring their individual program.

The supplementary school system, an offshoot of upper secondaries, offers a form of independent schooling that offers education above the compulsory level. The supplementary schools include those that offer fine arts or handicraft programs such as Theatre, Dance, Fashion, Flying and Fitness. Initial research into this form of independent non-compulsory education demonstrated that young adults can enter a theatre program at age 17 or 18 and become completely devoted to the craft even before college-level schooling. This is somewhat similar to the U.S. practice of magnet schools where the intensity of study in one subject is stronger than others. However, further reading on the Skolverket (Swedish term for Education System) website showed that supplementary education programs do not provide any eligibility for further higher study, and are only viewed as vocational training. This means that because the schools don't follow a national syllabus, their diplomas – called leaving certificates – have no official status in applying for higher education. I question why Sweden places emphasis on theatre as a subject of study, yet grants it no educational value for university placement. Does this send any kind of mixed messages to students interested in this path?

Having the artistic program as an optional path at these supplementary schools is a step in the right direction of validating the arts as a career, but I wonder what the Swedish job market looks like for people without college degrees. Further research shows that after

approval from the National Agency of Education, individual people and/or organizations provide the supplementary education, versus the municipalities. This may allude to more freedoms a supplementary school may have over regular upper secondary institutions, but the literature on supplementary education does not acknowledge it as a college-bound program. The Swedish system of education not only emphasizes the general subjects of learning like math and foreign language, but requires years of involvement in the arts through both compulsory and upper secondary schooling. While there may be no college-level rewards of an arts education at the upper secondary level, Sweden is constantly placing its students in programs where all ages are constantly exposed to various creative outlets.



## CHAPTER FOUR: THEATRE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

In July 2006, Margareta Sörenson, theatre and dance critic for the Swedish newspaper *Expressen*, wrote an informational article about the theatrical culture amongst the Swedes. The article includes a portion of text titled “The Best Children’s Theatre in The World,” and while possibly biased in tone, it addresses the historical background on educational practices combined with artistic opportunities, and breaks down various scripts dealing with difficult subject matter. According to Sörenson, the high standards of education, as well as the almost constant incorporation of the arts, aim to produce children that are fully capable of thinking independently and are able to question the societal values by which they live. Sörenson’s article addressed a range of topics from “Baby Drama” to “Is the Theatre Prejudiced?” Her writing took me on a journey through theatrical and social changes occurring in Sweden, which pushed me to look closer at Swedish theatre reform on a general level, and consider what societal and cultural factors push for reform at certain times in history.

Theatre reform and development were certainly the demands of the time in the 1960s and 1970s, and the interest of young people rose to the top of the list of society upheaval. While there are theorists who praise original Swedish theatre, like Sörenson and Glenn Loney, whose article from *Educational Theatre Journal* outlines the state-supported theatre practices of the country, in the 1960s Sweden took inspiration from visiting foreign influences like The Living Theatre and La Mama from the United States and

Jerzy Grotowski from Poland. The country also began to produce works from Bertolt Brecht and Peter Weiss, whereas before the 1960s, much of their work was never touched upon. In his discourse, Loney explains the practice of Stockholm school children attending multiple theatrical events that centered on their own Swedish heritage. Foreign influences were not prominent in Sweden in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. In his *International Guide to Children's Theatre and Educational Theatre*, Lowell Swortzell outlines new theatrical developments even further: the training of actors moved from established schools at large theatres to state theatre schools linked to the universities. Essentially, actors were training for the upcoming change and development, instead of for maintaining traditions (Swortzell 299).

What strikes me most about this reform is that international influence become increasingly prominent. As an artist, I'm interested in incorporating the international influence of Sweden into my work, and I was struck to discover that Sweden sought innovative practices from foreign practitioners as well. A small realization like that makes me understand, and appreciate, that artists are always borrowing from someone else, whether it be an individual theorist/practitioner or an entire culture's practice.

According to Swortzell, these changes in the Swedish theatre coincided with two changes in the Swedish society at large: a growing interest in children's issues, and a growing political awareness of social injustices between wealthy industrialized countries and the poverty in the Third World (Swortzell 299). Throughout the mid-1960s, it took just a

few years for an uprising of left-wing opposition to grow incredibly strong, and many participants in that uprising were theatre artists that aimed to bring the best of theatre to every age group, regardless of stature. In regards to the interest in children's issues, theatre artists focused on the culture being offered to children as well as the education/curriculum reform being set forth by Parliament. It appears that this societal and political reform from the 1960s might have been the initial momentum for the cultural upheaval for children.

Many Swedish theatre companies had (and continue to maintain) divisions dedicated to TYA, but the dwindling financial circumstances of the 1970s forced companies to be experimental with ways of working outside the traditional auditorium. This meager financial state afforded very little funds for staging, scenery, and actors. Also during this time, Swedish marionette theatres and mime troupes for children became increasingly prominent. I question if these two occurrences helped lay the foundation in the 1980s and 1990s for further developments in TYA as an independent institution regardless of affiliation with larger playhouses. Larger playhouses couldn't afford to take care of their TYA divisions, and rather than falter, those divisions shifted in aesthetic and practice.

Theatre reform was not a new concept for Sweden; King Gustav III (the "actor king") created the Royal Dramatic Theatre in 1788 specifically for the purpose of giving the Swedish people their own national theatre. Prior to the construction of the Royal Dramatic Theatre, any theatrical production was presented in the court theatres,

performed by court actors – King Gustav being among them – strictly for court audiences. These plays were often performed in French or Italian simply because they were brought over from France and Italy (Flakes 26: 84-96). Gustav called for plays that contained Swedish themes to be played in the Swedish language by Swedish actors – a practice that was to be permanently changed during the future theatre reform in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> Century. Referred to presently as Dramaten, the Royal Dramatic Theatre is home to 8 stages, with Young Dramaten currently running on the Lejonkulan stage.

In addition to Young Dramaten, producing drama for child audiences is presently a common practice for many national and regional theatres, such as Östgötateatern in central Sweden and Växjö's Regionteater in the Southeast. Further, Riksteatern added a special interest area in sign language theatre under the TYA umbrella. Pantomimteatern and Teater Pero are two theatres who work almost exclusively with mime, or occasionally have a mixed dramatic idiom. Marionett-Teatern is the oldest art theatre for children and resides at the Stockholm Stadsteatern, while Pygméteatern is home to a special field of shadow plays that uses comic strip cartoons and rock music in their productions. Discovering the use of non-verbal art forms for children – sign language, mime, and shadow plays – I'm led to question if Swedes view their young people as competent-enough audience members who don't need high-context scripts. Will young people understand the meanings presented to them, or is it preferred, in some way, that they create their *own* meanings?

## The Unga Klara Ensemble

I began examining the ways in which Swedish TYA companies view art for children, as well as the approach each theatre takes in producing children's works. The language barrier made a few companies available for exploration, but yielded surface information pertaining to show dates and ticket prices. The Unga Klara Ensemble, however, outlined their artists, approaches, and views towards theatre and young people.

Referred to in English as the Stockholm City Theatre, Stockholm Stadsteatern is the "governing body" of the Unga Klara Ensemble headed up by artistic director Suzanne Osten. This ensemble is *within* the Stockholm Stadsteatern, but is actually its own entity with two personal stages, its own budget, as well as its own actors and organization. It began in 1976 under Osten's directorship, and she continues in that role to this day (2007/2008). Throughout each season, Osten commissions authors to write plays and then brings them into the rehearsal process, resulting in a finished play that is a full collaboration between author, actors, and director. She also uses groups of children during the rehearsal process for honest reactions, reference tools, and inspiration. Osten's incorporation of multiple artists reminds me of the theatre reform occurring during the 1960s where foreign artists (Grotowski and La Mama, as mentioned previously) were incorporated into mainstream Swedish theatrical practice.

Suzanne Osten began to gain notoriety while working at Fickteatern, which was an organization that ran from 1967 to 1971 and prided itself on producing pure and simple

theatre. To them, pure and simple meant that they would not use more props and scenery than they could carry in their pockets. It is from this concept which the company name developed; “Ficka” translates to “pocket” in English. This “pure and simple” approach seems analogous to Sweden’s emphasis on low-context productions.

In both Fickteatern and Unga Klara, Osten emphasizes close connections between actors and the audience, and in his *International Guide* Swartzell claims that it is mainly Osten’s intimate productions that have created the favorable public image that Unga Klara now maintains (302). Within the company’s website, Osten describes an adult’s approach to TYA as being like a condom, suggesting we always want to put a stopper on the full emotional explosions of those on stage: “Things only almost become angry, almost become sad, almost become disgusting. When children are supposed to vomit on stage, it’s diminished to a little sob...I get so bored when I see bad children’s theatre, well-meaning crap,” (*What is Unga Klara* PDF). Further, she points out that the classics were so powerful because they embraced catastrophe and took it seriously, yet nowadays, people trivialize and over-analyze it.

As an ensemble, Unga Klara looks at the condition of children, and takes on important issues such as alcoholism, madness and suicide. I can’t help but wonder if explorations into these heavy issues are ways of promoting some form of dialogue amongst the children being exposed to the productions. One of the first productions at Unga Klara was *Medea’s Children* by Osten and Per Lysander – a play about divorce seen through the

eyes of the children. The classic tale by Euripides only briefly mentions the children, but Osten and Lysander set out to give a voice to the children and have them explore what their parents' fighting really meant to them. Again, perhaps a play such as this is a springboard for dialogue about the subject of divorce. According to Osten, divorce for a child can be as powerful as a murder threat – the divorce threatens their very existence.

Erik Uddenberg, dramaturg for Unga Klara, says that examining and portraying the child's perspective is undoubtedly at the heart of the ensemble (*What is Unga Klara*): In *The Piggle*, the psychoanalysis of a two-year-old child was the centerpiece, and *Irina's New Life* portrays a woman with Down's Syndrome retelling her reading of a novel in her own words. According to Unga Klara's website, even plays labeled as non-TYA are produced with young people in mind at Unga Klara. Tobias Theorell, director and actor, read Calderón's *Life is A Dream* and decided that it must be produced at his theatre because the child's perspective in the story was so strong. His concern for the two young characters is what made Theorell choose to produce an adaptation of the work on Unga Klara's stage. He partnered with dramatist Lucas Svensson, and local teacher Monica Nyberg to explore the 17<sup>th</sup> Century text with 13-16 year olds. Theorell and Nyberg both believed this play had a clear teenage perspective with the questions of "Who am I?" and "Why am I doing this?" I find it interesting that this company actively seeks out youth perspectives, possibly in places where others assume there is none. I wonder if Unga Klara does this simply because they need to create a season with youth-oriented scripts,

or are the minds of all the artists somehow aligned to see youth perspectives in almost any script or situation?

While not a representation of the entire landscape of Swedish TYA, the Unga Klara Ensemble paints a picture of what at least one theatre seems to strive for in their work: honestly depicting the youth perspective. Topics being presented represent various young people's life experiences as well as the ways in which they react to and perceive the world around them. What interests me is the prominence of mime and sign language used in Swedish TYA companies. I wonder if the incorporation of those elements allows room for more personal interpretation, thereby giving young people an opportunity to fill in gaps and create individual experiences of the theatrical event. Rather than offer a nicely told, happy ending story, I'm interested in the Swedish TYA that exposes young people to decision-making, creative license, and personal interpretation.



## CHAPTER FIVE: REFLECTING THE DRAMATIC TRENDS

The Swedish Centre of the International Theatre Institute (ITI) received financial support from the National Council for Cultural Affairs to produce an English-translated anthology of Swedish TYA plays that depict the trends of the country. *5X Swedish Plays for Children and Youth* presents scripts indicative of the Swedish TYA culture. Within this anthology, I am interested in non-realistic elements of the scripts and how the playwrights approach taboo topics within the scripts. The majority of eclectic plays contained within the anthology all have elements which seem mystical and dreamlike in structure and substance. For my use of the term “mystical,” I define it as an otherworldly sensation surrounding the character or situation. What links the scripts into a cohesive anthology is the content which stimulates discussion by its dealing in topics such as bullying, death and the subconscious. To further my exploration into non-realistic content of Swedish children’s theatre, my selections for analysis were two plays from ITI’s anthology: *One Night in February* and *The Dreamed Life of Nora Schahrazade*. What draws me to these two scripts in particular is that both are low-context plays; mere suggestions are sufficient for understanding.

### One Night in February

Staffan Göthe’s script centers around a young boy’s thoughts about admitting an accident to his father; during the course of a ski trip, he crushed the flask his father let him borrow for hot chocolate. The unique and interesting aspect of this play to me is that not once do

we ever meet the boy – we meet his actual thoughts at work in his mind as he falls asleep. Arr, Be and Elle, the boy's thoughts, are personifications of the boy's wishes, fears and hopes, and it is only through their colorful and subtle language that we learn of the day's terrible events and see how the boy works through his fear of disappointing his dad.

Within the script, I was interested in the flow of language from the three characters – the flow of language being the flow of *thoughts* the boy experiences. Arr, Be and Elle are windows into the boy's mind; their dialogue is the boy's stream of consciousness. They are not the boy's dreams, but rather, they are those constant reminders and ideas that don't shut off until true dreaming begins. Toward the end of the play, Arr finally announces that the boy has drifted off to sleep, while Be responds, "In the dream the thoughts disappear," (Göthe 28). The three thoughts begin to drift offstage reminding the children in the audience that "the dream" is when the ugly and pretty thoughts all mix up together. They dress up in flamboyant costumes chanting the line, "Come with us on our ski trip," (Göthe 28). This is the mixture of ugly and pretty for the boy. In that brief moment, the audience could be led to believe that the boy's slumber will continually be disrupted by his thoughts of betraying his father. However, it is with great poignancy that Elle softens the blow: "He's still asleep, but he isn't dreaming any more. He's deep inside his sleep and we can never reach him there. Never," (Göthe 29). To let the boy rest further, Elle whispers to the audience, "Now I think we'd better leave quietly so he doesn't wake up and start thinking again," (Göthe 29).

At the culmination of this script, I am drawn to the versatile elements of our personal thoughts: they have the power to hurt us, as well as the power to help us. Arr, Be and Elle understood they must shut off so that the boy can have his few hours of peace before waking up and deciding to either run away or confess his accident. Although the play doesn't necessarily confront a taboo topic, I'm interested in the method of Göthe's exploration into the young boy's dilemma: The use of non-realistic characters – essentially dream figments. Reality gives us only one way to work out a situation, and that's by making a choice and moving forward. The back-and-forth process of making a decision takes place in one's head, and I wonder if a realistic play could adequately show that dilemma. The character could have a monologue, perhaps. The figments, on the other hand, allow for a multitude of options to be played out on stage, with none of them being the choice actually made. It's a visual of the mind's inner workings.

Karin Helander's introduction to the Swedish TYA anthology describes Göthe's view of the theatre, saying that children need to be provided with tragedies of their own – an audience of children wants to see their own experience depicted onstage. What I have found to be indicative of Swedish TYA thus far, is the lack of pandering to the youth experience, and *One Night in February* is no exception. The youth experience is depicted by Göthe as being filled with sensations of betrayal, isolation and vulnerability. What strikes me about this script is the acknowledgment of children experiencing powerful sensations similar to adults. An adult can commit adultery and lay awake wondering how to tell his or her spouse, but is it a less intense crisis for an apologetic and guilty child to

worry over confessing an accident to a parent? Breaking a flask and committing adultery are on two different planes of existence for an adult, but for the young boy, the breaking of the flask is the perfect reason to run away from home and never see his father again. For him, the accident on the ski slopes is the ultimate form of betrayal. Göthe depicted this child's issue as valid and relevant.

### The Dreamed Life of Nora Schahrazade

Mia Törnqvist's script is of particular interest for me due to the structure and content. In addition, Helander's introduction to the Swedish anthology refers to the play as a "fantasy." *The Dreamed Life of Nora Schahrazade* deals with the loss of a child merely hours old. The mother and father are visited then by a young girl who is both "an imaginary character and very real, a mixture of Pippi Longstocking and an angel. She cannot distinguish between reality and fantasy," (Helander 8). The story travels through the grieving process of Mom and Dad, and how a mysterious girl helps, or possibly disrupts, that process.

Essentially, Mom and Dad play a game of pretend as a means to deal with the loss of their child. This behavior definitely helped them avoid their grief, but for how long will the dream continue? I see Mom and Dad avoiding the issue of Nora's death. It is through pretending and the use of fantasy that they deal with what is painful in their lives. This leads me to question what message this might give to children figuring out the grieving process. I see an absence of confrontation and acceptance of the truth in *Dreamed Life...*

Is it best to just pretend the death never happened; or, for that matter, to pretend that *nothing* bad ever happens?

Swedish TYA often involves the point of view of children, and the incorporation of fantasy blurred with (or perhaps rooted in) reality. I believe *Dreamed Life...* to be a portrayal of an adult situation (the loss of a child) through the eyes of an imaginative of child. When I consider Suzanne Osten's beliefs about her young audience at Unga Klara, and Staffan Göthe's depiction of a true dilemma for a young boy, I see emphasis on the youth perspective of life's honest experiences, even the painful ones. This leads me to believe a child's point of view is most prominent in this script. Perhaps this play is an attempt for children to understand adults, versus the typical practice of adults attempting to understand children. Perhaps Törnqvist is showing children that adults create coping mechanisms to deal with powerful issues just as they do, and that for the most part, those mechanisms provide relief.

The dialogue within this script is at times extremely basic, and the ways in which Törnqvist describes various looks and tones by Mom and Dad make me think of a child narrator. There is no character labeled as a narrator, but it's as if I was reading a script written by a child imitating what he or she has witnessed at home. To put this complicated play in *my* simplest terms, I envision a young girl sitting in her room with her dolls, moving each around according to the actions she has witnessed at home. She attempts to put the same words she hears into their mouths, but due to her young mind,

the words are simpler and straightforward. What the audience sees on stage are the dolls that the young girl is enacting. An example of this concept is the script's use of generic character names like Mom, Dad and Gentleman, while throughout the script all the adults refer to each other by their proper names of Evelyn, Ralph and Leonard. A child telling a story might likely use phrases like, "And then mom said this," and "So, dad said that." Rarely have I heard children refer to parents by proper name. This possible intent of childlike narration connects to the prominent use of the youth perspective in Swedish TYA practices.

I see elements of non-realism through this childlike narration in the script, as well as the quick splicing of scenes. There is disjointedness in both character's lines and scene changes. The opening scene has Dad behaving in an absurd fashion as Mom goes into labor: "What should I do? A little massage maybe?" (Törnqvist 75). Further, he phones the taxi service exclaiming that his wife is dying. Even more absurd is the doctor's words to Mom and Dad after he incubates their baby Nora: "Your little daughter is dead." An adult's typical response might begin with, "I'm sorry to inform you," and then offer support to the parents. This scene abruptly shifts to Dad in his cigar shop immediately becoming acquainted with the fantasy character of Girl who tells him how sorry she is his baby died.

From looking at *One Night in February* and *The Dreamed Life of Nora Schahrazade*, I see a similarity in the portrayal of the human condition through the youth perspective.

The method of approach is the use of non-realistic techniques. I set out to examine how Swedish TYA uses elements various elements of non-realism, and how it approaches taboo topics – I now wonder if the two explorations intertwine. A boy's disjointed thoughts are made visual to an audience as they explore his various options; while a mother and father, with the help of a mysterious girl, create an imaginary life for their deceased child as a means by which to cope with the loss. Both scripts seem to use a non-realistic approach as a *means* of examining and exploring taboo topics.

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

The Swedish TYA system has exposed me to a deeper respect for the youth experience, as well as introduced me to scripts that show innovative ways of looking at what it means to be a child in today's society. Children's theatre in Sweden developed into what it is today through years of societal upheaval in financial support of theatre and artist training, and an increased awareness by those artists of the importance of children and childhood. Beginning with King Gustav III's reign, there has been an increased presence of pride within the theatre whether it's by playhouses only producing Swedish-themed scripts by Swedish writers, or the blossoming of children's theatres within popular established companies, or the development of supplementary school programs designed to produce the most well-rounded theatre artists to continue the progressive trends.

The philosophies and writings of August Strindberg opened the door for Sweden to explore new terrain in the theatre. His use of metaphor in both staging and literature, along with his heavy use of mystical dramatic elements, seemed to almost foreshadow what Swedish TYA would entail years later. His Naturalistic period of the late 1880s and early 1890s gave way to Expressionism from 1898 onward, with the psychology of characters remaining at center. As Cardullo and Knopf point out, Strindberg's blast of Expressionism did so much to free the stage from the time- and space-bound assumptions of Naturalism. His writings paralleled the discoveries made at the same time in the fields of psychoanalysis in that they did not depend on the classical unities but instead on the



individual, subjective mind (128). Appearance and reality did not coexist in his scripts, resulting in a staggered structure of dreamlike quality. Similar elements are evident in *One Night in February* and *The Dreamed Life of Nora Schahrazade*. Though written and produced decades later, the cultural implications of Strindberg's theories and practices plays out in the Swedish TYA culture of today. This lack of coexisting between reality and appearance occurring in certain Swedish scripts pushes me to question why the dream state is so much more interesting to me than reality. When I look at the work of August Strindberg and those of Swedish TYA artists, I am struck by the similarities in literary style and substance. Reality is constantly blurring with dreams, which makes me question what makes living in reality so difficult.

Suzanne Osten and her team at Unga Klara strive to produce works that challenge the mind, incorporate subjective qualities, and place the point of view in multiple sets of eyes. I envision Unga Klara as a home for a young person's emotional release, as well as a venue for experimental approaches to TYA scripts. The attention artists at Unga Klara give to various scripts leads me to believe there are not huge differences between adult theatre and the theatre deemed appropriate for children. Good and innovative theatre is good and innovative theatre.

The team at Unga Klara appears to make strong attempts to depict honesty and a sense of understanding for young minds, while at the same time, create works that speak to all ages. I see this in their works like *Medea's Children* and *Irina's New Life*, where

audiences are given the opportunity to witness life from the vantage points of struggling children and a mentally disadvantaged woman. I believe it is the use of different viewpoints that enables audiences to ask questions about what they are seeing. The use of a child's perspective can be something unfamiliar to an adult, which in turn can produce many questions about what they are seeing. A play containing multiple questions, only to have multiple answers in return, is a theatrical element I believe TYA should contain. There is a feeling of finality when the end of the play wraps everything in a nice bow, but that's not necessarily reflective of a child's perspective. The imagination is a powerful tool that seems to gather dust as people grow older, and perhaps it is the youth imagination that can help keep stories fresh and full of possibilities.

The education system in Sweden takes great strides in ensuring only qualified educators are placed in arts education capacities by requiring that pre-service teachers participate in multi-faceted training procedures before entering the classroom. What's interesting to note is that in the Florida (USA) certification process, one can be hired and teach in a classroom *before* completing the competency coursework. While I see the benefits of the Swedish model, I believe it to be slightly restrictive. I don't agree that a rigorous training program is the only means by which to judge a teacher's capabilities. I believe that being in a classroom while concurrently training in educational strategies is the best method for creating strong educators. Training programs can lay out a multitude of scenarios and situations, but it is experiencing those situations firsthand that enables a teacher to truly become a leader.

For students in Sweden, there is a mandatory requirement for arts education that extends beyond the typical American practice of requiring only visual art and/or music. In Central Florida alone, it is difficult to find any theatrical coursework in institutions lower than the high school level where courses are generally referred to as Drama I through Drama IV; music and visual art are certainly the most popular art forms in American elementary schools. In addition to artistic outlets within the school system, many Swedish theatres encompass a large dedication to youth productions, possibly providing much opportunity for in-school touring theatre productions as well as field trips to the playhouses themselves. Much like core-curriculum subjects, I see this incorporation of arts into routine education as enabling children to develop skills in questioning social norms and thinking independently.

However, while arts incorporation is popular in Swedish compulsory schools, I find it quite contradictory to not award an official graduating diploma to a pupil choosing to study theatre in the upper secondary system. It's as if children are being told to love and appreciate theatre, but not if they want to enter college with proper credit. However, I see a silver lining for teens interested pursuing theatre beyond the compulsory level: supplementary education institutions. These supplementary schools are funded by private individuals and organizations, which makes me believe it is they who will most likely produce the first professional contract for the graduate. The college credit will not be earned, but budding young artists will have made impressions with industry

professionals. Regardless of my beliefs about the upper secondary level of education and the arts, I see the required arts incorporation in all Swedish schools is a progressive step forward in validating the worldwide need of artistic influence on young people.

My exploration into the cultural and social factors related to Swedish TYA has proved enlightening. I felt challenged by scripts, impressed by practices, intrigued by content, and educated the history. From looking at Swedish youth through a TYA lens, this exploration has made me think of ways in which I can incorporate into my own work some of the beliefs and practices held by Swedish artists. In order to improve upon a school's lack of artistic outlets and opportunities, it is my belief that arts teachers are the ones who can make a significant impact. As a current drama instructor, I find myself being the advocate for more field trips to the theatre, and a more cross-curricular approach in all grade levels. Although the Swedish model of TYA might not fit more conservative cultures of the United States, I feel my employment at a private institution gives me more freedom in subject matter and the means by which I teach.

My new endeavor as I leave this project lies in shifting the views I hold about young people. As an emerging artist and educator working with young people every day in a dramatic setting, I am inspired by Suzanne Osten and her straightforward speech about children. I believe it is important to confront the opinions you may have of children so that you may push yourself through them to create better results in the end. For example, throughout my first term as an educator, I underestimated my students' understanding of

character development and story structure, and found myself brushing over these concepts. More than one child stopped me on multiple occasions by interrupting with, “Why would my character do that?” and “Don’t you think my character would like the storm? Why am I scared?” Perhaps if I begin to treat them as serious participants, I will discover that children *will* understand the themes and ideas presented to them. I intend to build respect towards my students’ life experiences by acknowledging that their voices are relevant perspectives in the work we do as a class. Their experiences are no less valid or relevant – a sentiment heavily fostered by Swedes. There is great power in understanding various perspectives, especially that of a young person. A child’s imagination, opinion, catharsis, and well-being are at the crux of Swedish theatrical practice, and it is my intent to cultivate those childhood sensations in my own work.

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