

From Theatre Neighbors to Stages Without Borders

An evaluation of a cooperative performing arts platform between Sweden and Finland 2011-2013 and it's future

This is a five page summery translated from Riitta Seppälä's full 40-page report

Cooperation between Sweden and Finland has a long history based on a foundation of shared history, language and a multiplicity of contacts. Artistic exchanges among the theatres of the Nordic countries, and especially along the strong lines of communication between the Finland-Swedish theatre community and theatre in Sweden, have for decades inspired the performing arts in Finland, but since the 1970's, theatrical contacts between the two countries have diminished. When Riksteatern (The Swedish National Touring Theatre) began in 2004 to tour in Finland and later, in 2008, when reciprocal tours by Finnish productions were added, voices called for a deeper and more varied theatrical cooperation between the two countries. Birgitta Englin, CEO at Riksteatern from 2005, initiated a broadening and deepening of these contacts and the Finnish theatres responded enthusiastically. The goals of this broader cooperation were given expression on October 22nd 2009 in a declaration of intent signed by Riksteatern, the bilingual Uusi Teatteri (New Finnish Theatre) based in Sweden and the eight theatres in Finland who were part of the touring network that had been receiving Swedish productions.

The Swedish partner, Riksteatern, is a civic organization boasting 40,000 members organized in theatre associations across the whole of Sweden, and at the same time, a producing theatre under state auspices whose productions sell over a million tickets per year. Riksteatern has a far-reaching network across the whole of the nation's theatre community and is an important force in cultural politics. There is no institution comparable to Riksteatern in Finland, instead several Finnish theatres needed to commit on a broad front to this Swedish-Finnish cooperation.

The particulars of cooperation from the Finnish side were negotiated during the autumn of 2010 and concurrently the question of how the bilateral collaboration would be organized was discussed. The study, called *Theatre Neighbors* (Teatergrannar-Teatterinaapurit) resulted in the formation of a collaborative platform called *Stages Without Borders*.

Responsibility for coordinating the activities of this organization was from 2011-2013 shared between Riksteatern and Hanaholmen, a Finland based cultural centre for Sweden and Finland. A large number of theatres and institutions, both Swedish and Finnish, committed to the project and signed a new declaration of intent on the 25th of November, 2011.

When in the project's three years came to an end in 2014, Hanaholmen relinquished responsibility for coordinating Finnish efforts, but retained responsibility for seminars and, alongside Esbo City Theatre and the Swedish Embassy in Helsinki, continued to support touring in Finland. Simultaneously a change in leadership at Riksteatern led to a re-evaluation of Riksteatern's continued responsibility and support for Stages Without Borders.

At the writing of this report, the spring of 2014, Hanaholmen and Riksteatern continue to collaborate in efforts to develop a working strategy for Swedish-Finnish cooperation in the performing arts, even if the economic base is smaller than it was. Riksteatern continues to administrate the platform's website, the common desk on Google drive and visibility through information channels and social media such as Facebook.

Cultural political underpinnings and project goals

While Sweden's and Finland's common history served as a foundation for the project, the present cultural political situation provided the impetus for the formation of *Stages Without Borders*. The initiators looked at challenges facing cultural institutions in the Nordic countries and in the world at large; concerns about the global economy, increasingly rapid demographic change, technical innovations and new methods of exploitation in the performing arts. The declaration of intent adopted 2011 contained national, regional, international and language oriented goals for both countries, referring to no less than six documents presenting visions for the organization's future activities. These included a law introduced in Sweden in 2009 granting support for national minorities and minority languages which included both Finnish and the Sami language. In response to these challenges, several areas for development were delineated:

Interactive performance and co-creativity: Focusing on youth participation in creative processes and increasing interest among young people for language and culture.

Artistic exchange: Extending the lifespan of productions and expanding the work market through bilateral exchange and touring initiatives.

Technique and innovation: To support research into virtual arenas and to develop synergies between virtual and real life cultural performance spaces.

Leadership and continued education: To renew and develop leadership skills through bilateral initiatives and Nordic networks.

Interactive performance, artistic collaboration and cultural exchange

Riksteatern began touring performances Finland in 2004 and in 2008 expanded the cooperation to include tours of Finnish productions in Sweden. Bilateral touring has and will continue to be one of the main activities of *Stages Without Borders*. For Finland, this increased the opportunity to see high quality productions in the Swedish language, even in areas without Swedish speaking populations or Swedish language theatres. Tours of Finnish companies in Sweden serve to strengthen the cultural identity and language competence of tens of thousands of Swedish citizens with Finnish roots, and give the Swedish audience an opportunity to acquaint themselves with Finnish performing arts. These tours have been well received in both countries.

Seminars and discussions in collaboration with the Swedish Embassy in Helsinki and Finland House (The Finnish Cultural Centre) in Stockholm have deepened the audience's experiences.

One of the most important results of Stages Without Borders has been an increase in the number of Finnish productions brought to Sweden and an increase in collaboration and co-production. Pages 9 & 10 of the full report describe a number of touring shows and collaborations illustrating the frequency and variety of this cultural exchange. Co-productions such as the adaptation of Susanna Alakoski's *Hope Jail is Treating You Well*, *The Son of the Sun* on Sami artist Nils-Aslak Valkeapää or *The Last Morning Star* featured collaborations between national and regional theatres from Finland, Sweden and Norway, overstepping any number of geographical and linguistic borders. Stages Without Borders was in the background for all of these initiatives, even when Minna Canth's production *Silvi*, a collaboration between seven theatres, opened in Berlin on June 17, 2014.

The proliferation of guest productions did not rest entirely with Riksteatern. Other platform members like Finland House brought several small companies from Finland to perform in and around Stockholm. Uusi Teatteri brought children's theatre companies to play on its stage and to tour. The Royal Dramatic Theatre (Dramaten) has been an active network member and strengthened its ties to Finland. Even Turteatern in Kärntorp, a south Stockholm suburb, has created theatrical ties with Finland. In May, 2012 the *Finimini festival* at Turteatern presented four productions from independent companies as well as readings of four contemporary Finnish plays in translation.

Tours in Finland by Swedish productions are enabled through a network of receiving theatres and rely largely on the efforts of Esbo City Theatre and Åbo Swedish Theatre to keep the network floating. Costs to the receiving theatres have been reduced through financing by diverse educational and cultural funding organizations, both governmental and private. The Swedish embassy in Helsinki is an important partner, who in the first years helped to secure funding and sponsors from Sweden. Cuts to cultural export and international exchange threaten the continued survival of this network.

A similar circuit of receiving theatres is forming in Sweden in the form of a pilot project 2013-2015 called "Cooperation for Finnish Guest Performances". It is hoped that the continuity of guest performances from Finland will lead to long term audience development strategies and improve capacity for those working to serve the country's Finnish speaking minority.

Both Finland and Sweden strive to support new dramatic writing in their own countries. Stages Without Borders has central goals related to the spread of new dramatic writing between the two countries. Touring productions primarily feature contemporary plays and as a result, plays and playwrights from both countries are now more known on the other side of the sea. While dramaturges at the Swedish language theatres in Finland have always followed the repertoires of Sweden's theatres, and have been able to import interesting plays to Finland, Finnish dramatic writing has remained in the shadows in all Nordic countries. Stages Without Borders has focused on this challenge through FINNDrama. At least twice every season, readings of new Finnish plays, translated with translation subsidies granted by TINFO and presented by Riksteatern or other network partners such as Turteatern, Dramaten, Uusi Teatteri are presented in Stockholm and then taken on tour. Page 14 of the full report lists over a dozen plays that have been translated and staged in readings in Sweden through FINNDrama.

Collaboration for technical innovation and application in theatre

The Centre for Practice and Research in Theatre (T7) is a unit for research in communication, media and theatre at Tammerfors University. T7 works extensively with schools and private industry to advance technical innovation for artistic and production use in theatre. In 2009, T7 noticed that Riksteatern was involved in similar work in accessibility, subtitling, interpreting and the use of visual imaging. T7 joined Stages Without Borders and began immediately to expand their international work through collaboration with The Royal Technical College of Sweden, The Stockholm Academy of Dramatic Arts, Aalto University (primarily the departments of film and stage design) and the Finnish Theatre Academy.

Here are some areas for cooperation:

Riksteatern's database, *Scenrum*, with floor plans and technical data of every performance space in Sweden; from village halls and gymnasiums to fully operative theatres, has been broadened to contain information about Finnish performance spaces. Spaces in both countries are now also described in Finnish.

Improving sound and light systems to make them lighter to transport, more versatile and energy effective (environmentally friendly) through the use of LED, laser and plasma imaging techniques. There is great interest in Finnish – Swedish collaboration here.

Developing effective and less intrusive ways to make performances more accessible across language barriers. These included technical experimentation with smart phone, ipod or pad applications for subtitling and sign language interpretation. These were developed by Riksteatern and Dogood and tested in several of the tours Stages Without Borders organized in Finland and Sweden.

Artistic experimentation with multi-language performances such as *When Winter Stars Shine* Here a four-part collaboration performed in five spoken and two signed languages.

Technology serves theatre in many diverse ways such as ticketing, planning, audience development, communication, social media, stage design, sound and lighting, visual imagery. Developers and experts in small countries like Finland and Sweden need to work together to hold a position in the vanguard of innovation and the development of new tools for communication and expression. Stages Without Borders has created a platform for this to happen.

T7 and Riksteatern joined to create a seminar and concert called *Shared Joy is Double Joy* where fiber optics were used to create a shared stage for performers in two different localities, one in Stockholm and the other in Åland. With this technique, live performance can be experienced on small islands and remote places. Seminars arranged by Stages Without Borders in Jönköping, Sweden and in Copenhagen, Denmark have addressed a broadening of the platform for technical innovation to include all the Nordic countries.

Continued education and leadership

Interest in bilateral cooperation has also increased amongst the CEO's and artistic directors of theatres in Finland and Sweden. The National Association of Regional

Theatres in Sweden, The Union of Finnish Theatre Chiefs and Riksteatern gathered 28 theatre directors in Umeå, fifteen from Finland and thirteen from Sweden for the first such bilateral meeting. Many areas for collaborative effort were discussed. One such subject was the need for an academic education for leaders of theatre institutions. It was suggested that leadership development become a part of future meetings organized by Stages Without Borders.

Administration and economy

Stages Without Borders isn't a bilateral project limited to a specific number of years, but a platform for cooperation between the theatre communities of two countries and a forum for many kinds of projects. The goal is to be a long lasting partner for cooperation and development across borders.

In the role of initiator and with its own extensive national organization and widespread activities as well as excellent contacts throughout the Nordic countries, Riksteatern was responsible for developing the platform's content and distributing resources.

Engaged members Finland's theatre community asked Hanaholmen, The Cultural Center for Sweden and Finland to act as coordinator in Finland. Hanaholmen's CEO, Gunvor Kronman, took upon herself the administration, and built a national steering committee with representatives of branch organizations and the network of touring and receiving theatres.

Applications were made to the ministries of culture from both countries for Stages Without Borders. It was a disappointment to the Swedish partners that only the Finnish government gave money, but Riksteatern's strong determination to develop the Swedish-Finnish relationship did not let economic setbacks interfere with their forging ahead with the program. Riksteatern has instead used its own funds to build the platform, augmenting these with funding applications for individual projects that have met with varying degrees of success.

Hanaholmen was granted funding for three years from the department of education and culture for their engagement with Stages Without Borders, while partners TINFO and The Theatre Centre received funds for the development of theatre exchange between Finland and Sweden. TINFO funded the translations of Finnish plays that were presented in readings in FINNDrama.

Conclusions and suggestions

During the first three years of its existence, Stages Without Borders has increased the visibility of Finnish theatre in Sweden and within the professional Swedish theatre, knowledge concerning theatre life in Finland. The same might be said about Sweden in Finland. Specific efforts are necessary to overcome linguistic barriers when reaching out to Finnish-speaking theatre professionals, if they are to follow what is happening professionally in Sweden. Stages Without Borders has increased knowledge and awareness about Swedish theatre in Finland and at the same time improved internal relationships within Finland's theatre community.

Even though Stages Without Borders does strengthen the cultural equality of minority populations in both countries, the platform's major contribution lies in another direction. The platform is important because it provides a network for collaboration that

serves to develop professional competence in many areas. It is an important instrument for crossing geographical and professional dividing lines. It allows artistic and technical innovation to bring new impulses to a bilateral arena and opens a window through which colleagues are able to see their neighbor's art and to find like-minded partners for collaborative efforts.

It is naturally not a goal that Riksteatern alone should support active engagement with Finland's theatre community, but instead that the organizations that have been involved in these exchanges up to now, would continue their involvement during the next phase of platform activity. There should be a clear intent to broaden the network and increase Swedish engagement in the platform, eventually finding a partner that could share responsibility with Riksteatern for the coordination of activities.

It will be a challenge to see how the network can be organized in Finland. Though understandable, it seems a shame that Hanaholmen chose to discontinue its role as coordinator in Finland. Hanaholmen has done a wonderful job and will continue even in the future to be a collaborative partner, something that the theatre community in Finland is no doubt thankful for.

The natural choice as coordinator among Finnish branch organizations would have to be TINFO. They have the expertise and the credentials as a highly regarded partner to the whole Finnish-speaking and Swedish-speaking theatre community in Finland. The nucleus of TINFO's activities is the dissemination of information and international cooperation. TINFO works actively to support international mobility, partnership and collaboration in the performing arts. Stages Without Borders fits perfectly into TINFO's mission strategy.

Stages Without Borders needs, both in Sweden and Finland, a home harbor to ensure continuity in the Swedish-Finnish cooperation. Stages Without Borders as a network and a platform for cooperation has the potential to develop theatre life on both sides of the Baltic Sea.