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"You can't build to hide poverty"

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## “You can’t build to hide poverty”: The representation of Helsingborg in the theatre performance *Trädgårdsgatan*

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Early on, Plato stated in *The Republic* (1991) that there was not one city, but at least two, “one of the rich and the other of the poor, and these are at war with each other” (Bloom & Plato 1991, 100). This is true for Helsingborg, a city in the south of Sweden, situated by the Öresund strait just across Helsingør in Denmark. One of the most common and persistent narratives to describe the city is the division between a rich north and a poor south.

Helsingborg has a population of almost 150,000 people and is one of the ten largest cities in Sweden. It is culturally rich, with a municipal theatre, a symphony orchestra, and Dunkers Kulturhus, a large institution dedicated to a manifold of cultural expressions. All these institutions are located in the north. The southern part of the city, where the working class used to live in the 20th century, is now home for many of the immigrants who have settled in the city. This district has had socio-economic challenges but is also described as vibrant and multicultural.

In February 2021 the theatre performance *Trädgårdsgatan* premiered at Helsingborgs stadsteater, with text by me and directed by Linda Ritzén. It was the second instalment in a series of performances departing from actual locations in Helsingborg to address narratives of socio-economic division embedded in the city. The play takes place between 1965 and 2020 and portrays three generations of

women living in Helsingborg: a grandmother, a mother, and a daughter. Even though the storyline and characters are fictitious, the play relates to actual locations in the city, first and foremost to the apartment on Trädgårdsgatan that has been inhabited by the family for generations.

Each city carries a manifold of stories, but some have to a greater degree become attached to a place, as in the case with Helsingborg as a divided city. Trädgårdsgatan is the street that run through the two parts. In the book *Narrating space/Spatializing Narrative* (2016) the literature theorist Marie-Laure Ryan and the two geographers Kenneth Foote and Maoz Azaryahu write:

Embedded in and evocative of stories of different kinds, street names are deeply imbued with narrativity. Even though they rarely comprise complete narratives by themselves. As signifiers of location, they are woven into a myriad of ephemeral personal stories about daily experiences. [...] real street names and the urban locations they denote provide a sense of specificity and palpability to a set of diffuse urban experiences and to the stories through which they are conveyed and shared. In a similar vein, when used as titles of literary works, real place names associate fictional stories with the reputations and cultural meanings of actual places. (158-159)

The Swedish ethnologist Elisabeth Högdahl has written a book entitled *På andra sidan Trädgårdsgatan* (2007) where she describes the street as the invisible border between the north and south. She creates a historical overview from the beginning to the 20th century until present day and notes that there is now a desire to transgress and move away from the narrative of a divided city, shared not only between the citizens but also by politicians, officials, and business owners. Högdahl concludes that through this the street has not only become a border people encounter in everyday life, but it also assists in imagining what Helsingborg could become in the future.

The municipality has a vision for Helsingborg that departs from the notion that all citizens share a common future even if they have different lives, needs, dreams and stories. To harbour all these differences Helsingborg must become a “creative, united, global and balanced city – pulsing with life – for both people and businesses” (Helsingborg 2020). To do this they aim to create a smarter, more caring, and sustainable city where offices, commercial business and apartments create a mixed environment for the citizens: The city has adopted a strategy of gentrification where large construction projects are hoped to solve the socio-economic challenges the city is confronted with and finally unite the different parts of the city.

What interested us as artists when doing the theatre performance at Helsingborg stadsteater is the ongoing efforts by the municipality to replace the old unwanted narrative with a new one and thus become another city.

In this article, I will discuss how different notions of space could be seen in the performance text and how actual events in the city affect the fictional characters in the play. I will reflect on the discursive approach as well as on the internalisation of narratives. Finally, I will address the role of theatre institutions as an actor in society.

## **Narratives in between the documentary and the fictive**

In performing arts, documentary and verbatim material have been presented on stage for almost hundred

years. In contemporary theatre, it has become a way to invite new voices, to get authentic reports from eyewitnesses and to discuss topics that specifically relate to the outside world. The material is often collected from life stories and lived experiences, and a recurring feature is a manifold of perspectives of the themes that are addressed. This is achieved by how the different stories are contextualised and presented dramaturgically.

In the theatre performance *Trädgårdsgatan* the focus is somewhat different. Most obviously, the characters and storylines are fictional. The idea was never to find and present authentic life stories from Helsingborg, but rather to portray how the conditions and attitudes towards work have changed during the last fifty years in Sweden. The work with the performance started from the notion that there has been a gradual shift from the sixties until today, when societal institutions, such as the Swedish Unemployment Service, are being defunded and much of the industry has been sold or outsourced to other countries. To be able to represent this change, the city had to be presented as a factual location in the narrative, so that the characters could respond credibly to the societal changes that take place there.

In *Storyworlds across media* (2014) Marie-Laure Ryan claims that “narratives are not only inscribed on spatial objects, but they are also situated within real-world space, and their relations to their environment go far beyond mimetic representation”. (n.p)

This approach relates to the vanguards of documentary theatre in the beginning of the 20th century who commented on the injustices in the social fabric through stories of working-class struggles. Erwin Piscator, one of the pioneer directors in the 1930s, did not have the intention “to use the stage to frame the real but rather to invoke the real as a frame for what happened on stage, embedding the play within a historical totality that included events outside of the theatre” (Youker 2018, n.p). Piscator used newsreels and radio broadcasts to refer to the world outside and to simultaneously create new interconnections through the way these references were linked in the performance. Through this, theatre can “stake a claim for the particular, concrete person against the politically generalised, in the way that documentary material is confronted with subjective experiences, the social and the individual are combined, and information about subjective perception is expanded” (Carvalho & Malzacher 2008, 9).

In *Trädgårdsgatan*, external artifacts or media are not used, not even actual persons, instead the documentary material is derived from the associations and connotations the actual places evoke, as well as from the real-world events that affect the lives of the fictitious characters.

## Narrativity and space

In their book Ryan, Foote & Azaryahu explain that space has traditionally been seen as merely a backdrop to the plot because narrative is considered a temporal art. However, they now recognise an increasing interest among their peers in the combination of narrativity and space and the intersections between the two. Here narrativity should be understood as the “object of representation” and space as “the medium in which narrative is realised” (Ryan, Foote & Azaryahu 2016, 10)

According to the authors, two metaphors stand out when trying to understand the abstract notion of space: One is space as a container and the other is space as a network. The container model constitutes space as an environment where boundaries are imposed on the subject, which is then experienced either as a place of security or as an entrapment. But it also expresses a sense of place. The network metaphor is a system of relations that allows movement and is often used when speaking of cities when reflecting on the dynamic relation in for example neighbourhoods, workspaces, parks, recreational areas, or public spaces.

In the performance these concepts play out in different ways for each of the characters. For the mother, the apartment on Trädgårdsgatan is a place where she feels secure and rooted.

Mother: It's my childhood there. It's my life there. Ever since I was born. It's my life too. That flat, it's mine too. You can't just let the flat go. Everything in it. It's my childhood. It's my whole life. All the times that are in there. That is in that flat.

Grandmother: It's only a flat. It's only somewhere to live.

Mother: Not for me. For me, it's my whole life. The street outside. The church yard, just up the road. Where I played and smoked cigarettes. Everything is contained in those walls.

However, the apartment is also a confinement to the other characters for different reasons: It is too expensive for the grandmother, and for the daughter it will demand too much responsibility, impede her recovery from depression fatigue, but more importantly, it will also mean that something terrible has happened to her mother.

Mother: The flat that was grandma's. I want you to have it.

Daughter: What am I going to do with it?

Mother: Don't you want it?

Daughter: I have my own flat where I live.

Mother: I grew up here. And you did too, the church yard out there. Smoked in the entrance hall then came grandma, your grandma, and you were always here with her, sat here with her when you were younger, so that's your life too, it was also here and then your dad, we were down there and all the memories that are still here, all your life. The life that is here. Here in this flat. The time that's in here. So, I want you to have it if something should happen to me.

Daughter: You said that you weren't going to die. Nothing will happen. Everything is going to be just like it is, just like it has always been. I don't want you to. I have no energy to find a job anymore, and then you tell me that you might die too.

The network nodes in the city make promises for the future for the characters. The Tretorn factory, the local newspaper, the Swedish Public Employment Service and the Zoega's café are places where the women work and allow them to provide for themselves.

However, events related to these places also affect their lives in profound ways. The merger between the two newspapers Sydsvenskan and Helsingborgs Dagblad forces the mother to leave her position writing about culture and instead write in the family section.

Mother: I try to adapt. To learn new things to fit in. To get to keep the job I have. I started writing about culture and now I write in the family section and, unlike you, I'm glad that I was able to keep my job when they merged the newspapers. It's the same for me. I have also fought. My life hasn't been easy either.

The political decision to get rid of the Swedish Public Employment Service impedes on the daughter's recovery from depression fatigue, as she was supposed to do work training there to rehabilitate.

Daughter: I haven't had a job since I was put on sick leave from the social security agency and when I got a work placement at the Employment Service then everything went to shit. [...] Do you want to know how it feels? It doesn't feel good. This is how it feels. NOT GOOD.

And when the rubber boot factory is moved from Helsingborg to another country as part of the emerging globalisation in the late seventies the grandmother loses her job, which also later forces her to leave the apartment on Trädgårdsgatan.

Grandmother: They said that the factory was doing well, but that's not the case anymore. I don't know who to believe. Who to trust? What's going to happen to Helsingborg if they move the factory? The factory, the boots, and the raincoats. It's the heart of Helsingborg. Will everyone just move away from here and not be able to work anywhere?

In the play these two notions of space interconnect and relate to issues of a cultural and economic class. The apartment is at the same time a connection to childhood and to another historic era. When this changes, it also changes how the characters experience the place. The societal nodes, relating mostly to workplaces in the performance, are changing due to the globalisation and political decisions and this affects the women's ability to provide for themselves.

## Narrative and discourse

According to the psychologist Jackie Abell in the book *Lines of narrative* (2000), stories can be understood from both a cognitive and a discursive perspective, and these different approaches use the narrative for different reasons. (Andrews et al 2000, 180). The cognitive approach is a tool to understand how individuals structure information about the social world. The intentions and beliefs of each character, shown in the examples above, are what the actors explore and embody when rehearsing and performing. The focus of the discursive aspects of a narrative is the negotiation of how these social actions are to be accomplished. It deals with the social interaction between the social actors.

Through this understanding of narrative as discursive, theatre could be used as an arena to address society from more than just each character's perspective. The performance *Trädgårdsgatan* could be seen as a statement of how the Swedish welfare state is crumbling and how women have been affected by societal

changes during the last fifty years. The performance shows three generations of women who are struggling with their everyday lives to make ends meet. They are in pain after monotonous work in the factory and are experiencing mental health issues.

Jeffrey C. Alexander, professor of sociology, uses theatre as a metaphor in his book *The Drama of Social life* (2003), when analysing the political sphere and its implications on social life. He claims that “if theories about theatrical and social dramas are mutually reflective, they are also substantively intertwined” (141).

When Märta Stenevi, the Minister of Equality in the Swedish government, were asked to reflect on the performance in Helsingborgs Dagblad, she was reminded how the socio-economic division in Helsingborg affected her own childhood:

My early school years were divided by Trädgårdsgatan. Half South and half Hittarp. Inclusion and exclusion. In the city I had schoolmates who came to my house after school because they knew that in our family there was always hot food when it was time for dinner and that they were always welcome – we always had enough and more. A few years later, at the other end of Helsingborg, I had schoolmates who starved themselves sick to be thin enough to fit in. (Stenevi, March 13, 2021)

She also speaks of how the play portrays the real women she met in her youth.

You could find the mothers and daughters in the play at Helsingborgs Stadsteater at my mother’s work at the health centre in Söder (southern district), where she worked for almost twenty years. At BVC (*Barnvårdscentralen*, children’s health centre) she met women with their little daughters, and then again sixteen years later, when the daughters themselves became mothers. There were also the women whose husbands accompanied them to the doctor’s appointment and to which she secretly prescribed birth control pills so they could avoid another pregnancy, even if their men wanted to have more children. (2021)

Alexander suggests that drama should be viewed as a model to help societies and its inhabitants to sustain collective and personal meaning and help obtain justice. Through Stenevi’s reflections on the theatre performance, another story also emerges. On the one hand she reflects on the outcome of the divided city for its inhabitants, but on the other it becomes a coming-of-age story of political engagement. She writes:

I became politically involved because I want us to break a pattern. I think it’s possible to build a society based on social and gender equality. I don’t want more women’s lives shattered in financial vulnerability, oppression, and impossible demands. I know it’s possible to do more and better for women and girls, and for all kids, then to divide the city in half. (2021)

In her vision for the future, she would create a society built on “openness and inclusion, invest in our commons and give each child a future they can long for” (Stenevi, 2021). Jeffrey C Alexander states that drama helps project powerful

narratives in which the different protagonists and antagonists are fighting between good and evil and by doing this, the dramatic form could be understood as permeating all modern social life. Stenevi uses the narrative of Helsingborg as a point of departure to project herself as the protagonist in a political drama to achieve what she believes to be a more just society.

## Representation through performing arts

The example above shows how stories, through the embodiment of a person's lived experience, could be used to re-negotiate narratives and envision another future. However, this is not always an easy task. Mark Freeman, professor of psychology, discusses how internalised narratives can cause a sense of how one's life will stagnate in the future, and he also adds that this is not only relating to individuals, but also adapts to societal phenomena. (Andrew et al. 2000, 90).

In *Trädgårdsgatan*, the characters are born twenty years apart, and thus experience the city's efforts to overcome the socio-economic divide differently.

Daughter: There's no difference anymore. It's the same thing. North and south. It's the same thing. They have built it all up.

Grandmother: South is certainly not north.

Daughter: No, that's what I'm saying. South is not north. North and south are the same things. They certainly look the same. Everything looks the same. Helsingborg looks like Helsingborg. There is no difference. It looks exactly the same wherever you go. It looks the same. Just like the sea. It also looks the same. It looks exactly the same. Depressing.

Helsingborg's strategy of gentrification, where the north and south are to be merged, just adds to the daughter's mental health issues. The grandmother also recognises these strategies, and for her the whole project is futile from the start.

Grandmother: You can't build to hide poverty.

Daughter: What?

Grandmother: You can't hide poverty. You can't hide it simply by putting up buildings. No matter how much you try. They're building at Knutpunkten now. Or have they finished there? And down by the water. They're building all the time. But it doesn't help. People are still poor. Poor and broken. It doesn't help.

Daughter: No, just as you say. C'est la vie.

Grandmother: No matter how much they try to build. You can't hide the shit that's under the fingernails.



For the two women, the city can't escape its past because they themselves cannot envision a path forward – not for themselves and not for the city. It is different for the mother. When she dies of cancer in the play, she has chosen to have her ashes spread in the north part of the city instead of being buried at the churchyard right next to Trädgårdsgatan. This becomes a manifestation of the upward cultural and social mobility she has achieved and thus a strong statement of her struggle to get away from her old life. The grandmother is rather upset to learn that she is betraying her working-class background by choosing to have her eternal rest in the “wrong” part of the city.

Grandmother: On the north side? I believe that's what she wanted.

Daughter: What?

Grandmother: The south.

Daughter: Where?

Grandmother: The churchyard. That she wanted to be laid to rest in the church yard. So that she could lay there and look at the flat and the street and feel like she was at home.

Mark Freeman writes that “just as the future must be rewritten in order to break the stronghold of narrative foreclosure, so too must the past. The first, very difficult step in doing so is [...] to become more aware of the storylines one has internalised” (Andrews et al. 90). According to Freeman, to achieve this there needs to be the act of desocialisation. This means to identify and become aware of the construction of self as a social agent and carrier of culture.

Shaping experiences into stories in performing arts allows for examining and reflecting on the same events from different points of views. Through this, lived experiences, fictive stories, documentary material and actual locations could all be used as artistic material to either amplify or resist the different dominant cultural narratives. With cross-cutting storylines, it is possible to explore a manifold of attitudes towards the outside world simultaneously by different social actors. As in the case with the performance *Trädgårdsgatan*, it affords the possibility to show how the narratives have been internalised and the implications it brings with it.

## Conclusion

Marie-Laure Ryan makes a distinction in the book *Storyworlds across media* (2004) between 'being a narrative' and 'having narrativity' (9), the first entails an underlying narrative structure, and the latter could be understood as events that could be turned into a script. In addition to life itself, pictures, music, or dance can have narrativity without being narratives in a literal sense. She remarks that even though language seems to be best suited for storytelling, there are openings for other media and art forms to be incorporated in the narratives. This also includes the city and its streets.

“The spatial textuality of street names highlights the distinction between ‘being a narrative’ [...] and possessing narrativity [...] the spatial configuration of street names in the city lacks a sequential structure, and therefore is devoid of

storyline. Nonetheless, [...] a storyline becomes an option whenever a chronological or thematic sequential structure is introduced into a spatial arrangement of coexistent elements in the form of routes and paths that direct movement in space. (Ryan, Foote & Azaryahu 2016, 159).

The use of actual places and events borrowed from the geography and history of Helsingborg situate and direct the fictive narrative in *Trädgårdsgatan*.

When creating the performance, we in the artistic team talked about how we wanted to present voices and stories that are seldom heard in the theatre; working class women who discuss their hopes and shortcomings without having to relate to their men or their other family. At the same time, it was also obvious that Helsingborgs stadsteater as an institution needed to be incorporated in the story. We felt that the starting point had to be to address their location on the north side of town, situated near the water and the small boat harbour. As mentioned earlier, the mother wants her ashes spread in the water instead of being buried in the churchyard in the south part of town, but it is also important that it is *by the theatre*. For her this closeness symbolises the social movement from working-class to the cultural middle-class. This social mobility, however, doesn't impress her daughter:

Daughter: You wanted to write about life, about the times in which we live, important stuff, but instead you write about culture on the culture pages. [...] You don't understand what it is to have a real job like at the social security agency or the constant fear of losing it.

On their web page, Helsingborgs stadsteater claim they want to sustain and develop their relevance as a social actor. Now they have launched *Monument*, a theatre project which will premiere during the inauguration of the new urban development project H22 in Helsingborg in June 2022. This project, led by the Swedish director Lisa Färnström and with me as a playwright, will further contribute to the discussion on who will have the right to define what Helsingborg will become in the future.

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