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In Dialogue with Society

Democratic Engagement through Theatre

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2025

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Dahlqvist, J. (2025). *In Dialogue with Society: Democratic Engagement through Theatre*. [Doctoral Thesis (artistic), Malmö Theatre Academy]. Jena Press.

Total number of authors:

1

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In Dialogue with Society

Democratic Engagement through Theatre

JÖRGEN DAHLQVIST

In Dialogue with Society

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Published by Jena Press 2025
Malmö Theatre Academy

ISBN: 978-91-88409-42-3 Jörgen Dahlqvist Dissertation
ISBN: 978-91-88409-43-0 Jörgen Dahlqvist Dissertation [Electronic]
ISSN: 1653-8617, Doctoral Studies and Research
in Fine and Performing Arts, No 34.

Language review: Victoria Larsson
Graphic design: Jan Petterson
Cover Photo: Hans Malm for Dramaten
Photos: Rune Dahlqvist, Jörgen Dahlqvist, Embassy of Sweden Washington D.C.
Typography: Horseferry, Tisa Pro, Dahlia

ABSTRACT

This research project explores how theatre can contribute to democratic engagement. The starting point was artistic probes investigating aspects of democracy: participation, deliberation and inclusion. The probes resulted in three productions presented at theatre institutions in Sweden.

In *Skapa Demokrati* (Creating Democracy), participation was promoted by encouraging the audience members to create a democracy together. The performance thus allowed participants to experience a democratic process by actively engaging in the making of a constitution. In *Öva Demokrati* (Practicing Democracy), deliberation was in focus. The performance allowed the audience to deliberate on suggestions for strengthening Swedish democracy. Through methods inspired by political science, the audience was invited to speak and listen to arguments for the different proposals. In the performance, they were also presented with a variety of ways of voting to illustrate how different electoral systems can encourage engagement and give minorities a chance to be heard. In *Monument*, different strategies were used to promote inclusion. The project started with the idea that monuments say something about society. The monuments were used as vehicles to include voices from the residents of Helsingborg. The artwork presented these different experiences through a multi-perspective script. Other outreach activities also helped enable inclusion. Narrative analysis for theatre was used to reflect on these probes, allowing for a deeper understanding of how performances were conceptualised and structured, and how they made meaning for the audience. Lastly, the performance *Ibsendekonstruktion II: Brand* was written and staged to reflect on how the research has changed the artistic practice.

The research has resulted in strategies for inclusion and a novel theatre format, the conversational theatre, which encourages participation and deliberation. These outcomes provide the theatre with methods to be in dialogue with society.

KEYWORDS

Democratic Engagement, Participation, Deliberation, Inclusion, Conversational Theatre

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I have collaborated closely with several people who have influenced the artistic outcome: Fredrik Haller, Lisa Färnström, Siri Jennefelt, Yvonne Ericsson and the staff at DVA. Thank you.

Thanks to Helena Hammarskiöld. Thanks to Folke Tersman, Ludvig Beckman, Karim Jebari, Gustaf Arrhenius and Staffan Julén at the Institute for Future Studies.

Thanks to actors Julia Marko-Nord and Victor Iván for their efforts in making the performances *Skapa Demokrati* and *Öva Demokrati*.

Thanks to Linda Ritzén, Nina Jeppsson, Nils Dernevik, Gustav Berg, Elin Norin, Ellen Norlund, Carina Ehrenholm, Birgitta Rydberg, Robert Olofsson, Kajsa Ericsson and all the others who gave voice to *Monument*.

Thanks to Dennis Claesson at Helsingborgs Stadsteater for producing *Monument*.

Thanks to Lydia Ahlsen, Markus Berg, Mira af Ugglas, Pascale Arias Basualto, Adam Kais, Adam Dahlström, Matilda Esselius, Nathaniel Hagos, Erik Lundholm, Dodona Imeri and Filip Mrdjen Milosevic for your contribution in *Ibsendekonstruktion II: Brand*.

Thanks to the staff at Malmö Theatre Academy for your work with *Ibsendekonstruktion II: Brand*.

Thanks to Victoria Larsson for language revision.

Thanks to Jan Petterson for graphic design.

Thanks to Linda Ritzén, Fredrik Haller, Kent Olofsson, Sven Bjerstedt and Sima Nurali Wolgast for proofreading and comments.

Thanks to the supervisors Sofie Lebech, Esa Kirkkopelto and Mick Wilson.

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became a treasure for the group



I. Premises



Chapter 8: A Day

Chapter 1. Background

My first memory related to societal injustice is from when I was nine years old. My family had left rural northern Sweden to travel across the globe to Vietnam to work on the Bai Bang project. The project was Sweden's largest development project to date (e.g Jerve et al., 1999). Bai Bang is the name of an industrial area in Phong Chau, in what was then an isolated village a hundred kilometres north of Hanoi in the Phú Thọ province. The project was a political project, where Sweden, during the ongoing war with the US, chose to support Vietnam by creating a paper industry to reduce illiteracy in the country. My father worked as a planning engineer at the site, and our family lived there between 1977 and 1978, a few years after the war with the US had ended.

One of the perks for me as a child was that my father had a week's holiday every three months when we had the opportunity to travel around Asia. During one of these holidays, we went by train from Vietnam via China to Hong Kong. One experience from that trip has stuck with me ever since. We were at a ferry station in Hong Kong, waiting for a boat to take us somewhere. I was thirsty and asked for money to buy a soda from a vending machine. When I got to the

machine, an elderly man was feeding money into it. I waited but soon realised that something was wrong. He did not have enough money for his soda, and no matter how hard he tried, the machine would not release the drink, nor the money he had put in it. When he attempted to get his money back by pushing all the buttons, nothing happened, the machine had swallowed his coins. Watching his frustration made me feel sad. Determined to help, I went back to my mum and dad and asked them for some money to give to the man so he could get his soda. My parents did not understand my request to help a stranger and told me that I would not get any money.

Although the details are hazy, I was only nine years old, and this memory has likely been reconstructed over time, I can still vividly recall the feeling I was left with: the world is unfair. Reflecting on the incident as an adult, I naturally wonder why I did not give the man some of my own money. As a child, conditioned by my background and upbringing, that thought did not occur to me. I was not accustomed to witnessing such poverty and did not know how to respond at that moment. In Sweden in the 1970s, the state ensured that people would not have to live in that kind of poverty. That experience, though seemingly small, has stayed with me ever since, not because the event itself was extraordinary, but because it became an embodied experience that has shaped my understanding of the world. As an adult I still have the sense that the world is unjust.

My artistic practice starts from an interest in society and the will to understand societal phenomena. Before entering this research project, I devoted some ten years toward understanding the societal narratives around migration and xenophobia that were taking up more space in Sweden. My ambition was to understand where and why such narratives emerge. I have been exploring how spoken theatre, intermedia theatre performances, composed theatre and interdisciplinary collaborations can help with conceptual, aesthetic and thematic considerations to address the pressing societal and political matters.

In this chapter I will outline how my practice has developed to give a context to my artistic journey. In recent years, I started realising that migration and other societal challenges have profoundly affected the trust in society. In Europe and in other parts of the world, these challenges have led to democracy being questioned and thus opened for repressive policies. This is also true in Sweden.

Although Swedish democracy is strong, it faces challenges. Back in 2016, in a report ordered by the Swedish government, researchers presented their observations on the challenges that Sweden are facing: globalisation, digitalisation, changing demographics, and the climate crisis (SOU 2015:96, 2016). The report states that these major upheavals will change the ecology of democratic institutions in Sweden: political parties, media, and civil society organisations risk becoming weakened. Too many people are at risk of being excluded from democratic systems, and this will have an impact on Swedish society. For me, these societal challenges have led to the urge to develop and articulate new methods, formats, and knowledge. This is what this doctoral project aimed to accomplish.

With this introduction I want to present how I came to be concerned with the future of democracy, but it is also an invitation to get to know my artistic practice. It demonstrates how I am trying to understand and represent a changing world, through new ways of expressing myself. My work is part of the contemporary theatre field, and I will outline the conversation I have with other artists and artworks: from the Greek playwrights to contemporary artists who inspire me, and have similar aesthetics, or whose work resonates with my own. This is also how I see theory, as an interlocutor that helps me expand my practice, develop methods and contribute with novel ways of understanding the possibilities of theatre.

A POLITICAL OR SOCIETAL APPROACH?

In *Politics & Theatre* (2009), theatre scholar Joe Kelleher uses a photo from a protest rally in Brazil, where an indigenous person, protesting the cutting down of rainforest and stealing of land, is confronted by the police. For Kelleher, this photo illustrates how politics is a way of seeing and interpreting the world that permeates many, if not all, aspects of life. It involves individual actions, the political situation where the event takes place, the situation of the indigenous people within a country, the social and media context in which the events are presented, and how this relates to other events and power plays on a global level as well as Kelleher's position as an observer and interpreter in a country far away from the event.

The 'political' thus involves power relations at the local, national and global levels, as well as in individual and societal spheres. Also, it is historically and culturally situated. In *Politics and Theatre in Twentieth-Century Europe* (2013) political scientist Margot Morgan

points out how theatre proved to be a political tool for both states and their dissenters in many countries around the world in the 20th century. In the book, she focuses on a European perspective, discussing four different playwrights who all turned to theatre for the opportunities it offered for political education, public engagement and social change. One of the theatremakers she discusses in her book is Bertolt Brecht, who used theatre as a place for civic education and political organisation. She explains how he tried to expose the mechanisms of capitalism and educate his audiences about both the current state of exploitation and alienation through his plays and productions.

Many of the contemporary playwrights and theatremakers that I have been inspired by, or feel a kinship with, can be seen as successors to this approach. The German playwright and director Falk Richter is one example. He states that his texts come from the same tradition as Brecht and Elfriede Jelinek because they focus more on text than action (Starck, 2018). However, even though his productions seem to describe contemporary events with the aim to reveal and question implicit and explicit power relations, Richter does not refer to what he is doing as political art but rather as investigations of the social. In an interview, he declares, “I am not a political artist, but as an artist I am interested in the social situation both on a private and a political level. What are people worried about today? What are their relationships like? What fears are they struggling with?” (Starck, 2018, my translation). I recognise his questions and concerns from my own practice. I do not label myself a political theatremaker. I have used theatre to learn more about the challenges facing society. To find ways in which theatre can provide knowledge to better understand the conditions of our lives. Kelleher writes about how hospitality can be political; to invite and entertain a stranger who we know nothing about (Kelleher, 2009, pp. 65–66). My project has to do with these encounters with others.

EXPLORING REALITY

In 2012, there was a lively debate about the challenges of migration in the Swedish public sphere, and I was looking for ways to explore and stage the narratives about migration that I heard in that discussion. At this time there was also political unrest with people setting cars on fire in Stockholm, riots in the streets of European cities, such as Hamburg, due to socio-economic inequalities and civil rights. In

addition, right-wing parties were on the rise in several countries, including Sweden. To understand how the changes in society were affected by these discussions and narratives, I initiated a series of performances based on the Canadian journalist Doug Saunders' book *Arrival City* (2010). In the book, Saunders argues that we are now living in a time of the last great migration of people from rural to urban areas. These migrants gather on the outskirts of cities around the world. He emphasises that the fate of these cities is a key to the future prosperity of countries: we should therefore pay much more attention to them. They are not only the sites of potential conflict and violence but also the places where the next middle class is formed, and where the dreams, movements and governments of the next generation are created. By studying and understanding the evolution of these cities, it is possible to prevent future conflicts but also to find ways to create more inclusive societies.

The first performance in the series, *Arrival Cities: Malmö*, premiered at Inkonst in Malmö in 2013 and highlighted various precarious situations that a migrant might encounter when arriving in a new country. In the performance, the combination of live performance and technological mediation was central to the staging (Dahlqvist & Olofsson, 2023a). Through the performance, it became possible to show how narratives in society were constructed around an alleged political powerlessness and how this was used as an argument to close borders for people seeking refuge from war and poverty. The performance addressed social and political discourses, with the intention to show that art can help reveal the effects of these narratives on society. In their book *Dramaturgy and Performance* (2016), theatre scholars Cathy Turner and Synne Behrndt discuss how theatre "finds a new relationship to representation - one in which stories can be told, while the manner of telling, the tellers, and even the stories themselves can be suspect, ambiguous and multiple" (Turner & Behrndt, 2016, p. 191). Turner and Behrndt argue that while this may seem to be a return to a Brechtian tradition, it is more a case of theatre entering a new field of research. They argue that contemporary theatremakers are exploring different ways in which 'reality' can be reproduced. While such dramaturgies may be based on conventional structures, they are extended to open up a new understanding of how stories can be told and interpreted, which is done by make-believe in relation to the reality that surrounds us. Rather than presenting a story to an audience, the

aim seems to be to make the audience recognise a story and how it is told.

This was also the case with *Arrival Cities: Malmö*. The performance included transcribed conversations from an incident where right-wing politicians were out on the streets, trying to beat down political opponents. It also included text that illustrated how the political discourse obscured an increasingly instrumental view of migration. The performance presented the causal chains between political discourse, political violence and unrest in the suburbs, but first and foremost, the precariousness of migrants.

The second performance in the series was called *Arrival Cities: Växjö*. It premiered in 2013 in Araby¹ in Växjö. In *Composing the Performance* (2018), Kent Olofsson discusses how compositional strategies provide an alternative approach to making theatre. This approach can be labelled as ‘composed theatre’, a term coined by David Roesner and Mattias Rebstock (2012). The German composer and director Heiner Goebbels is an example of this. He works in the intersection between music and theatre. I saw quite a few of his productions between 2010 and 2013, among them a guest performance of the staged concert *Songs of War I Have Seen* (2007) in Copenhagen. The score blends Matthew Locke’s 17th-century music with contemporary music. The female musicians combine period and modern instruments, coupled with texts from the diaries of Gertrude Stein from France during World War II France. Some musicians read these texts, while others added to the music as a musical structure for the staging.

For me, this approach became an alternative way of discussing urgent political matters as it opened up an interdisciplinary approach to theatre. Combining different ways of presenting the text with an emotional and affective presence from the music was possible. *Arrival Cities: Växjö* was a collaboration between the theatre collective Teatr Weimar, the Musica Vitae chamber orchestra and Vokalharmonin, a group of vocalists and their conductor. It revolved around attacks on refugee centres throughout Sweden and their consequences for society and for the affected individuals. Here

1 Araby was classified as a particularly vulnerable area by the Swedish police at that time. In such areas, the societal situation makes it difficult or almost impossible for the police to fulfil their mission. In many cases, there has been a normalisation of violence and disruption, which means that neither the police nor the residents reflect on the situation in the area (Polisen, 2025).

the text blended an ‘I’ perspective and a ‘they’ perspective to show how stories were used and constructed. The performance closed with a personal appeal not to close the borders to those seeking asylum from war and violence.

STAGING LIFESTORIES

The third instalment in the series, *Arrival Cities: Hanoi* (2014), combined music, documentary film, choreographed material and life stories to create a narrative about migration to and from Hanoi. *Arrival Cities: Hanoi* premiered in Malmö and has since travelled to Austria, Vietnam, Germany and Belgium. The performance was part of the research project *Music in Movement*² funded by the Swedish Research Council. The performance was a collaboration between myself, the Swedish-Vietnamese group The Six Tones³, and composer Kent Olofsson. It explored how migration has social and individual consequences (Östersjö & Nguyễn, 2016; Östersjö & Nguyễn, 2017; Dahlqvist & Olofsson, 2017; Nguyễn & Östersjö, 2019; Nguyễn & Östersjö, 2020). The stories of migration became embodied through the life experiences and the storytelling of the performers.

In “Political Narratives and the Study of Lives” (2016), narratologist Molly Andrews argues that life stories can act as a lens to address “the complexity of political experience and meaning-making” (Andrews, 2016, p. 276). Life stories, as opposed to measurable facts, help to understand the experiences that shape a person and how this influences how they perceive the world. Andrews argues that:

The whole of ourselves is bound up in the stories we construct about our past, present and futures, for these stories constitute the fundamental linkage across lives. In this sense, our lives are the past we tell ourselves: through our stories, we indicate who we have been, who we are and who we wish to become. (Andrews, 2016, p. 78)

From this understanding, stories take on a fundamental function in people’s lives. The narratologist Marie-Laure Ryan argues that stories are instruments that enable people to “deal with time, destiny, and mortality: to create and project identities; and to situate them-

2 *Music in Movement* was led by Stefan Östersjö and was a study of the musician’s artistic practice in the interface between choreography and composition.

3 The Six Tones are Nguyễn Thanh Thủy (who plays đàn tranh) and Ngô Trà My (who plays đàn bầu), two Vietnamese performers, and the Swedish guitarist Stefan Östersjö (also playing many other stringed instruments).

selves as embodied individuals in a world populated by similarly embodied subjects” (Ryan, 2004, p. 2). Life stories help us understand and deal with the world, which also makes it into interesting material for theatremakers to explore.

In *Arrival Cities: Hanoi*, the artistic starting point came from an interview with Vietnamese costume designer Luu Ngoc Nam, who told the story of how he came to Hanoi to study Southern-style Tuong Theatre and how, after the war, he had to give up acting to become a costume designer. Further interviews were conducted with vendors working on the streets of Hanoi. These street vendors had moved from the Vietnamese countryside to find work in Hanoi and support their families. They sent all their earnings back to their home villages to pay for their children’s schooling so that they would have a better life in the future. As we talked to the street vendors, one of the members of the Six Tones started to cry, and it later turned out that she had been living under similar circumstances. It became obvious that it was important to include the personal experiences of the musicians/performers to add aspects of the experiences the interviewees shared. This was done by asking the performers to respond to implicit questions when telling their life stories: What is your first memory of Hanoi? What was the first sound you remember? What do you remember from your first meeting with the others in the group? Why were you crying when we met the women at the Red River? It was clearly stated from the beginning that the performers were free not to answer the questions if they felt that they were too personal or too painful.

The staging of the performance was inspired by *Black Tie* (2011) by the German collective Rimini Protokoll. The performance discusses the adoption industry from South Korea. On stage, the music journalist Miriam Yung Min Stein talks about her experiences in the adoption industry based on her own story as being adopted from South Korea by a German family. Stein’s personal experiences and life story become a journey through Korean history and a depiction of different aspects of belonging. By linking the personal experiences of adoption to the emerging business of decoding and categorising people’s genetic composition, the performance also raises questions about identity formation. Rimini Protokoll uses ‘everyday experts’ (e.g. Carvalho, Dreyse & Malzacher, 2008), people with specific experiences of the theme of the performance, to illustrate different perspectives of the theme they are addressing.

As a result of using this method, the stories in *Arrival Cities: Hanoi* became embodied through the experiences of the performers. It also became possible to include events and situations from the documentary fieldwork. The embodiment transgressed the actual storytelling, blurring what it means to tell stories, to play music, and to be present as 'self' on stage (Nguyễn & Östersjö, 2019). The performance combined personal experiences of migration with stories centred around homesickness, the sadness of giving up on dreams and the struggle for a life far from home.

LOOKING FOR A NEW PATH FORWARD

In 2015, Sweden experienced a massive influx of refugees from Syria, which dramatically shifted the country's political climate. Initially, the migrants were met with solidarity. Volunteers organised supplies and shelter for those arriving. However, it was not long before the Swedish Prime Minister decided to introduce border controls between Sweden and Denmark. This decision marked a turning point for me as an artist. The political situation evoked a powerful memory of the vending machine in Hong Kong. Once again, I was witnessing people struggling, but now the stakes were much higher. It was no longer about quenching one's thirst but about seeking refuge from war and violence. I realised that neither fiction alone nor my own appeals from stage would be enough to address such a pressing political crisis. Writing plays about people fleeing their home countries to an increasingly closed-off Europe suddenly felt deeply problematic. It seemed as though I was aestheticising the suffering of others. Yet, abandoning theatre as a means of engaging with urgent challenges was not an option either. Rather, it felt more important than ever to explore new formats and develop alternative perspectives to confront what was unfolding around me.

To me, the documentary approach I developed through *Arrival Cities: Hanoi* became a possible way forward to find new ways to discuss political events. In the performance, I was able to combine documentary interviews and, at the same time, contextualise these life stories through fictional methods. This approach is related to the methods of Erwin Piscator, one of the pioneers of documentary theatre in the early 20th century. Piscator did not intend "to use the stage to frame the real, but rather to invoke the real as a frame for what was happening on stage, embedding the play in a historical whole that included events outside the theatre" (Youker, 2018, n.p.).

He used a combination of fiction and documentary material to explore reality.

A contemporary theatremaker who uses fiction as a material to question reality is the Swiss director, Milo Rau. He investigates claims to truth made both in art and politics and, at the same time, stimulates the capacity for a historical perspective on political events by recreating them. An example of this is his reenactment of the Pussy Riot trial in Moscow. His recent works include *Antigone in the Amazonas*, which premiered in 2023. It is a performance that deals with the conflict that Joe Kelleher describes in his book mentioned earlier: how the Brazilian state prioritises private property over traditional land rights in Brazil's rainforest. In the performance, Milo Rau has Brazilian and European actors playing alongside activists from the Brazilian Landless Workers' Movement. The performance is based on the myth of Antigone. Kay Sara, an Amazonian indigenous woman, takes on the role of the play's protagonist. The survivors of a massacre committed by the Brazilian military police against the Landless Workers' movement in 1996 are given the function of a Greek chorus. On location in Brazil, with the activists and the vulnerable minority population, Milo Rau realises how the function of the choir implicitly describes a political and economic utopia; as a collective movement that organises itself around an idea of how society can be organised (Rau/NTGent & MST, 2023). Although Milo Rau's practice differs from mine, there are similarities in the way he poses questions on theatre's potential for social transformation: "How can the desire for free modes of production, for collective and contemporary authorship, for an ensemble theatre that not only discusses a globalised world, but reflects it and influences it, be brought into a set of rules?" (The NTGent-team, 2018). For Rau, the Ghent manifesto has been an attempt to answer this question.

For me, it meant a way of working that involved blending documentary and fictional material in search of narratives and discourses that could help me understand how to overcome the aestheticisation of the politically and socially vulnerable. The ambition was to invite other perspectives to take place in my work, to make room for other voices, and to take a step back myself. To participate in a conversation rather than just promote my own ideals and thoughts in society.

THE SHINING CITY ON THE HILL

In October 2019, my colleague Fredrik Haller and I went to McAllen, Texas, to do documentary fieldwork. The ambition was to learn more about migrant experiences and the discourse concerning migration in the US. McAllen harbours one of the biggest detention centres in Texas for Mexican refugees, and the city has also been mentioned in media reports concerning the separation of migrant families. When the former vice president Mike Pence drew attention to the 'border crises' and advocated a tougher stance on migration in the US, he visited the detention centre in McAllen to use it as a backdrop. The city is situated right next to the Rio Grande, which constitutes most of the border between Texas on the American side and Mexico. Crossing the river is a common way for Mexican and South American migrants to enter the US. The river is heavily guarded by border patrol, but thousands of migrants still make it to the US every year. And just as on the Mediterranean Sea in Europe, it is a dangerous passage: there have been small children drowning while trying to cross the border.

The US has historically depicted itself as a prosperous and shining 'city on a hill' nation. The country is to be seen as a beacon of hope for newcomers. Obama has even credited migration to be the origin of the American dream:

It was right here, in the waters around us, where the American experiment began. As the earliest settlers arrived on the shores of Boston and Salem and Plymouth, they dreamed of building a City upon a Hill. And the world watched, waiting to see if this improbable idea called America would succeed. (Obama, 2006)

However, during Trump's first presidency this metaphor disappeared from view. A tough stance on migration was crucial during his time in the White House and something he constantly tried to act upon. Building a wall along the Mexican border was something he promised when running for president in the US election in 2016, and something he returned to during his presidency. In an article in *the New York Times*, it was reported that he, in private, talked about:

Fortifying a border wall with a water-filled trench, stocked with snakes or alligators, prompting aides to seek a cost estimate. He wanted the wall electrified, with spikes on top that could pierce

human flesh. After publicly suggesting that soldiers shoot migrants if they threw rocks, the president backed off when his staff told him that was illegal. But later in a meeting, aides recalled, he suggested that they shoot migrants in the legs to slow them down. That's not allowed either, they told him. (Shear & Hirschfeld, October 1, 2019)

When learning that this could not be done, Donald Trump reportedly shouted, "You are making me look like an idiot!" and added, "I ran on this. It is my issue" (Shear & Hirschfeld, October 1, 2019) Trump's nationalistic agenda has also challenged the country's self-identified position as a leader of the free world.

In McAllen, the questions relating to migration were very much present during the fieldwork. During the stay, Fredrik and I went on a guided boat tour on the Rio Grande. It was a convenient ride; they were selling alcoholic beverages and snacks on the boat. The captain was the guide, and he started by showing us and the other passengers the Mexican families who were having a day off, celebrating the weekend by dancing, barbecuing, and hanging out in the parks near the river. At first everyone on the boat paid attention, but after a while this changed. The passengers on the boat were more relaxed, sitting casually, drinking beer, looking around at the surroundings, or just chit-chatting with each other. After a while, the captain pointed out the police towers on the American side that were there to discover migrants trying to pass the river. He then explained that the border patrol also uses drones to monitor the river and showed us the places on the river where it was shallow enough for Mexicans to get across to the US. It was quite a surreal experience.

After half an hour, the boat passed a Mexican family who were swimming in the river. And suddenly four or five of the passengers stood up and started to wave and holler hello to the people in the water. A woman, with a beer in one hand, started to throw kisses in the air to the family, and the Mexicans waved back, cheerfully. There is no way to know what the woman was thinking, but one way to interpret it would be seeing her as utterly naive or blatantly colonial: an American woman on a tour boat, informed about the dangers of migration, drinking beer and throwing kisses to a Mexican family. What was interesting about the incident was that it seemed to contradict the discourse on how Americans viewed their Mexican neighbours. This woman did not seem to think of her Mexican neighbours

as rapists and drug smugglers, which is how Trump often depicted Mexicans, but she didn't seem to think of them as peers either.

Molly Andrews claims that personal narratives are constructed in a wider social context; they both reproduce and are reproduced by dominant cultural meta-narratives (Andrews et al., 2000, p. 78). These metanarratives can be accepted or rejected, and this can only be done by becoming more aware of internalised narratives. By understanding the Trump administration's discourse on migration as a societal metanarrative, the woman's actions translate into a renegotiation of this narrative, regardless of her intentions. It is possible to interpret her behaviour as an act of resistance, not against the Mexicans, but rather against the other passengers on the boat. This understanding also helps explain what the captain of the boat trip did when he presented the Mexican families near the border as ordinary people. He blurred the notion of how we should look at the Other in relation to the dominant narrative. This latter interpretation, true or not, allowed for a more artistically interesting understanding of the woman's behaviour, namely as an act of resistance to the dominant political discourse.

This documentary material has not been staged yet, mainly because I have not yet wrapped my head around how to transform these experiences into a theatre performance, without diminishing the possibilities of presenting different interpretations of the acts of resistance.

BLIND SPOTS

In personal notes made after returning from the US, I was describing how I was waiting for the boat that would take me on the tour of Rio Grande. There was also a cowboy from Montana waiting for the same boat.

Before the boat ride [Fredrik and I] were part of this community, speaking to a cowboy from Montana, who visited some friends in Texas with his wife. They were curious why we were there (us being Swedes seemed quite exotic) and they were very helpful when we asked them how to find a rodeo show. (Dahlqvist & Haller, personal note, March 3, 2020)

I remember that I found it equally exciting to meet him and his wife. To me, a cowboy is almost an archaic figure because of all the films I

have seen growing up. It is also evident in the same notes that I was unsure how the group of tourists and the captain of the boat would react to me starting to film, but it turned out that my concerns were unfounded. For the people on the boat, the police surveillance and the relationship with Mexico were nothing out of the ordinary.

However, in the entries, it is also apparent that I viewed the woman throwing kisses, not as a person in the first place, but rather as a representative of the America I wanted to capture on film.

For me the gesture of kissing was interesting because I immediately realised how it would look on film. The woman was also dressed so significantly different from the rest of the persons we had seen in Texas (maybe except for the cowboy from Montana), she really stood out in the crowd. (Dahlqvist & Haller, personal note, March 3, 2020)

Reflecting on it in retrospect, it is evident that my own gaze was problematic during that field trip. I was clearly exoticizing what I saw. By being able to reflect afterwards on the trip and what I had experienced, I uncovered some of my own blind spots.

A CALL FOR ENGAGEMENT

In the projects I have described above, I used theatre to understand and address the consequences of migration. I have also outlined how different formats and genres are able to discuss, reflect and reveal different aspects of discourse and narratives concerning migration. All these different projects, references, inspirations, shortcomings, and blind spots have also informed the work in this thesis. As mentioned, the challenges of migration have resulted in democracy being questioned in many parts of the world. This is also true in Sweden. Civil Rights Defenders is a politically and religiously independent organisation that defends people's civil and political rights. In December 2023, they released a report in which they assessed Swedish democracy based on the policies pursued by the current Swedish government (Civil Rights Defenders, 2023). In the report it states that over the past two years, a large number of proposals have been presented, especially in the areas of criminal and migration policy, which are in conflict with fundamental rights and freedom. Furthermore, there is a lack of a clear counter-narrative within the political opposition, which means that alternative solutions are rarely considered in the public debate. In addition, they noted increased politi-

cal control of authorities, restrictions of freedom of association and free speech. The societal discourse has shifted, and this new political rhetoric is sending worrying signals, with critical voices in civil society being politicised and threatened, while vulnerable groups are singled out as scapegoats by political leaders. In the long term, this may risk restricting individual freedom and the human rights that are the foundation of a democracy. This is a development that risks weakening Sweden's democracy and may be the first step in the process of autocratisation. Nevertheless, according to Civil Rights Defenders, there are things we can do as citizens. We can, for example, learn more about democracy and talk about it with people around us. This promotes democratic dialogue and raises awareness about what we should be attentive to. We must realise that the question of democracy in Sweden is fundamental and concerns us all, and we must understand that the challenges we are facing are too important to be carried by individual citizens.

While the future may look bleak for democracy, the research team at The Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, an independent research institute based at the Department of Political Science at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden, says it is not hopeless: "Rather than suggesting that these countries are doomed, this is a call to action. History shows that if pro-democracy forces work together, autocratisation can be prevented or reversed" (Lührmann et al., 2019, p. 4). This call for engagement has been the source of inspiration for this research project.

Chapter 2. Research

As I have outlined above, a consequence of migration and other major societal changes is that democracy worldwide is increasingly under attack. It has allowed anti-democratic parties, such as the National Front in France, AfD in Germany, FPÖ in Austria and populist political figures such as Nigel Farage in the UK and Donald Trump in the US, to gain political influence. Singling out migration as the cause of problems in society, which is being done in Sweden and elsewhere, has allowed politicians to propose restrictions on democratic institutions and impose repressive policies. Although Swedish democracy is strong, it is vulnerable and should not be taken for granted.

PURPOSE AND AIMS

This project is based on the notion that democracy is challenged in Sweden. However, this trend can be reversed. Here, theatre has a role to play. Theatre has always been able to present and include a variety of perspectives through the nature of the dramatic text as well as through participation and documentary strategies. At the same time, technological mediation has allowed for novel ways of approaching and portraying societal challenges. Thus, by engaging in a dialogue with society, it is possible to help counter this agenda.

**This project aims to explore and better understand:
How to develop methods and strategies for theatre that
promote democratic inclusion, participation and deliberation**

To respond to this question, I have explored how performances can be conceptualised and structured to engage an audience in deliberation and participation. I have also investigated how to develop strategies to include more voices and perspectives in the artistic process and the performances. It has been done through methods for an open and exploratory artistic process.

In chapters 3–5, I will unpack the performances generated through the probing via narrative analysis. In chapters 6 and 7, I will discuss how participation and deliberation can be promoted through conversation as well as strategies for inclusion. Furthermore, I will elaborate on how theatre can be in dialogue with society in chapter

8. In chapter 9, I will reflect on how the research has changed my artistic practice by examining the staging of a dramatic text.

DEFINING DEMOCRACY

The V-Dem Institute produces the largest global dataset on democracy “with over 31 million data points for 202 countries from 1789 to 202, involving over 4,200 scholars and other country experts” (Nord et al., 2024, p. 9). Their approach to conceptualising and measuring democracy distinguishes between multiple core principles of democracy: electoral, liberal, majoritarian, consensual, participatory, deliberative and egalitarian (Nord et al., 2024, p. 9). On their homepage they define these principles (V-Dem, 2025). The first definition, electoral democracy, is what people might first think of when thinking about democracy. It focuses on the right to vote and requires free and fair elections with universal and equal suffrage.

The second definition, liberal democracy, is an overarching concept whereby the notion of democracy is not merely based on whether all citizens are allowed to vote or not. There are also other criteria that must be met to fulfil the definition: there must be judicial and legislative limits on executive authority, protection of fundamental rights and freedoms. This means that the rule of law and human rights are respected and that the minority in a country enjoys the same rights as the ruling majority.

The other definitions can be said to be aspects of the electoral and liberal definitions. The majoritarian principle means that the will of the majority should be implemented in political decisions. The consensus principle of democracy emphasises the importance of political minorities being able to make their voices heard, and the value of representing groups with different interests. The participatory principle of democracy emphasises that citizens should have the opportunity to actively participate in all political processes, including in areas outside the electoral process. This principle emphasises the direct governance of citizens wherever possible. Deliberative democracy focuses on the process whereby political decisions are motivated by public reasoning with a focus on the common good. In a deliberative democracy, there should be a respectful dialogue between informed and competent citizens, who are open to listening to the arguments of others. The egalitarian principle of democracy reflects the extent to which all social groups have equal opportunities to participate in the political arena. It is based on the idea that

democracy is a system of government 'by the people' in which citizens can participate in a variety of ways, for example: by making informed decisions through voting, by expressing opinions, participating in demonstrations, being candidates running for office, or using other means to influence decision-making. In this project I will focus on the last three principles - the participatory, deliberative and egalitarian principles - but in the conversations with the audience the other principles might come up.

METHODS FOR AN OPEN AND EXPLORATORY PROCESS

The research process has been based on two different types of inquiries. On the one hand, the research question that I have defined above, which concern knowledge formation, and on the other hand, a more open-ended exploration that have guided the artistic practice. To me, the latter relates to what writer and scholar Mark Fleishman, with reference to the philosopher Henri Bergson, calls a process of 'creative evolution':

It is not progressive, building towards a finality; nor is it mechanistic in the sense that it knows what it is searching for before it begins searching. It begins with energy (an impulse, an idea, an intuition, a hunch) that is then channelled, durationally, through repetition, in variable and indeterminable directions; a series of unexpected and often accidental explosions that in turn lead to further explosions (Fleishman, 2012, p. 34)

This implies that the process is not necessarily goal-orientated, but instead a starting point, a position to begin to approach a theme or a subject. Also, if the outcome is not decided beforehand, methods for an open and exploratory process allow for a deeper engagement with embodied practices to explore subjective, situated and tacit knowledge. My artistic practice has always been exploratory in nature. In this process, however, it has been particularly important to have an open-ended artistic process since the aim was to explore and develop new methods and strategies in an area, I have not previously worked in.

This approach to research can be found in other fields as well. The ethnologist Robert Willim writes in "Probing Mundania" (2023) how his research, which is situated in a field between art, cultural analy-

sis, and ethnology, often finds itself in an interplay between the methodological, the irregular and the arbitrary. For Willim, it is sometimes difficult to separate the research process from external activities, this is especially the case when systematic research should also be creative or methodologically innovative. When he develops his projects, exploratory and reflective approaches are at the foreground, and the method makes it possible to use previous experiences and projects in the current work to initiate new questions, concepts, and projects. It is a matter of engaging with the material in different ways and using a variety of methods and approaches to engage the theme being investigated. Willim describes this as a tension between 'probing', which is the practical investigation, and 'spawning', which intends to expand the material and questions.

For me, exploring the philosophical and practical challenges of democracy has taken different forms at different stages of the process. Much of the work has been about keeping the artistic inquiry open, not settling on results too early to see where the process will lead. This has led to a fruitful movement between, on the one hand, exploring and immersing oneself in a material, a method, a question or a theory, and, on the other hand, trying to expand the findings and translate them into new formats and strategies to develop both my own way of working and theatre as an art form.

In this project, three artistic probes and the performances that are the outcome, have been my research material. The probing involve approaching the material in a way, where the end result is not given or defined. The performances are the defined artworks coming out of these probes, to be presented to an audience. After the performances, the probing can be resumed, and the premises and the elements can be changed to further explore the format or strategy.

The first probe, *Skapa Demokrati* (Creating Democracy), explored participation in democratic processes. By allowing the audience to co-create a democracy, participants were invited to talk and negotiate the values of democracy. What are the central ideals of democracy? How should one interpret the implication and scope of various rights and freedoms? Who should be part of a democracy; the citizens who are legally bound to the decisions or those who are affected by them? The second probe, *Öva Demokrati* (Practising Democracy), focused on deliberative aspects of democracy. Can theatre provide an arena to help make citizens more informed and better equipped to participate in Swedish democracy? The third probe, *Monument*,

changed the focus of the inquiry. The probe honed in on the possibility for theatre to invite and include a variety of voices. Through an inclusive collection of material, the possibilities of the artistic process to interact with different stakeholders in society were explored. Furthermore, the project also explored how societal narratives can be shaped through a blending of fictional and documentary representation of the collected material.

Skapa Demokrati and *Öva Demokrati* were produced by The Royal Dramatic Theatre (Dramaten from now on) in Stockholm and *Monument* at Helsingborgs Stadsteater, two major theatre institutions in Sweden. Furthermore, *Skapa Demokrati* and *Öva Demokrati* have been presented elsewhere, both in Sweden and internationally. In these cases, the scripts and arrangements have been modified to better understand how they communicate with the audience.

ANALYSING THE ARTISTIC WORK

The challenge of simultaneously being an artist and a researcher is to describe how a work is created while at the same time analysing how it generates meaning and interacts with an audience or within a social context. It is a position where I am both inside and outside the artistic process and the artwork. In other words, as a playwright, director and theatremaker, I have used various creative tools to understand the discourses emerging around me while also examining how the performances I have presented relate to the dominant agendas in society. Different approaches have been used in the various phases of the artistic process to capture these perspectives. As a researcher there is a need for a more robust methodology, which I will present below.

The book is structured into four parts, Part I being this one. In Part II, I will describe the artistic considerations of the process, the way in which the finished performances are constructed, and how the performance might be experienced by the audience. To do so I will use narrative analysis and apply concepts from narrative theory. Narratologist Cathrine Riessman (2005) argues that by analysing a story, whether written or spoken, it is possible to understand how storylines are selected, structured, brought together, and given meaning for a particular audience. I will apply this analysis on the performance as a way to distance myself from the output of my artistic endeavours, focusing on the performances and the script and what it does in the theatre space, and how it makes meaning to

the audience. Marie-Laure Ryan claims that because narrative is independent of media, it is possible, citing Claude Bremond, to understand stories as an overarching structure that can include different kinds of narrative forms:

[Story] is independent of the techniques that bear it along. It may be transposed from one to another medium without losing its essential properties: the subject of a story may serve as argument for a ballet, that of a novel can be transposed to stage or screen, one can recount in words a film to someone who has not seen it. These are words we read, images we see, gestures we decipher, but through them, it is a story that we follow; and it can be the same story. (Ryan, 2004, p. 1)

Ryan states that a novel is a genre, while a narrative is a concept that helps us analyse and understand the story, defined as a spatio-temporal construction using language as a medium. There are different modes of narration as well as other ways to evoke narrative scripts. She writes: "Those narratologists who define narrative as 'telling somebody that something happened' exclude all instances of mimetic narrativity" (Ryan, 2004, p. 13). In narrative theory, the distinction between telling and showing captures two different modes of presenting events in a narrative. In the showing mode, the narrative evokes in readers the impression that they are experiencing the events of the story or that they somehow witness them, while in the telling mode, the narrative evokes in readers the impression that they are told about the events (Klauck & Köppe, 2014). A consequence of this way of understanding stories as not having a designated medium is that it opens new ways of understanding the theatre script and the performance as a narrative in the theatre space. Hence the diegetic and the mimetic modes could be understood as different approaches to tell the same story.

Furthermore, story and narrative are often used interchangeably, but here it seems like a good idea to make a distinction between the two. Perhaps the easiest way to do this is to think of narrative as the order of events within a story; even if the order changes, the story remains the same. If you change the order of events. You end up with a new narrative script of the same story.

Returning to Riessman, she writes that there are different approaches to interpreting narrative, and that they focus on distinct aspects (Riessman, 2005, pp. 2–5). Thematic analysis emphasises the content

of stories, i.e., what is said rather how it is said. Structural analysis prioritises the form and structure of storytelling, examining how specific narrative devices are used to make a convincing narrative. Interaction analysis focuses on interpreting the dialogical process between the narrator and the listener, examining how meaning is co-constructed through their exchange. Performative analysis builds upon the interactional approach. Here the focus is on the performative nature of storytelling, and how meaning is actively made in the space.

I have adapted these analytical tools for theatre to account for the conceptualisation, structuring, and staging of a performance. Using all four analytical methods simultaneously has been essential to me, because each approach addresses a distinct yet interconnected aspect of narrative and performance. Thematic analysis examines the what, providing the substance of the story; structural analysis focuses on the how, uncovering the mechanisms of storytelling. Interactional and performative analyses bring in the dynamic dimensions of who (performer and audience) and where (the space and the performance). Together, these methods provide a framework for understanding, not just how the performances are constructed, but also their societal impact and the ways they resonate with audiences.

In addition to this, I have written memos throughout the process, a method I found in *Constructing Grounded Theory* (2014) by Kathy Charmaz. It is a method that resembles a process diary but is more than that. Charmaz writes, “Memos serve a variety of purposes, although I emphasise their central role in constructing theoretical categories” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 162). To me, these memos have served as a means of personal reflection on specific concepts, notions or approaches to my research practice. Through this, I have returned to the lines of thought and developed them. I have collected quotes and references to various works. Later in the process, these memos became material assembled into larger clusters of ideas and concepts to create a framework for the research project. These memos have been a creative method, a way of understanding theoretical concepts, and later, a method to analyse the completed works. Here, the memo writing has allowed for more profound reflections on the artistic process and the collected material.

In Part III, there is a discussion on what has been accomplished through this research project. In his article “Artistic Research as

Institutional Practice” (2015), artistic researcher Esa Kirkkopelto argues that one way to recognise and assess the outcome of artistic research is through its transformative potential. Artistic research can be understood as a search for the conditions for change in the practices, societies and contexts which the research deals with. In this part I will outline how the performances engage with their audiences, and how they represent democratic processes through the various performances and how formats and strategies enable theatre to connect with society. This discussion will involve theories from political theory and audience participation, but also from research on how theatre can enter into dialogue with the audience and society.

In Part IV. I will conclude the results of this study and discuss how it has changed me as an artist. Here I will also reflect on how this research project have influenced the staging of an adaptation of Henrik Ibsen’s play *Brand*. Lastly, in the epilogue, I will return to the childhood memory presented in the beginning of this book and reflect on some of the societal challenges in the world today.

COLLABORATION

Theatre is a collaborative art form where performances are created together with others. This does not necessarily mean that it is a democratic process. People have different roles and these roles carry different expectations and responsibilities: the person who is artistically responsible to the theatre institution, the person who leads the group and the person who is considered to be the interpreter of the artistic and creative material of others are governed by a hierarchical order. The performances in this project are the fruits of a collective labour, although the form of collaboration has differed between the probes. *Skapa Demokrati* and *Öva Demokrati* were commissioned by Helena Hammarskiöld, who was the artistic leader of Dramaten&, and developed by myself and Fredrik Haller. We were collaborating on the initial research, the development of the concept and the creation of the performance.

Director Lisa Färnström had the initial idea for *Monument*, and I was then asked to be the project’s playwright. However, early on, she explained that she would like to explore the writing process, so we settled on a collective process to explore her wish. Our roles overlapped since most of the conceptual work involved developing the script.

ETHICS AND COMPLICITY

Artistic research aims to reflect on process, work and the role of the audience. This may result in different ethical considerations when moving between modes of reflection. In practice, this means that the artist/researcher has a responsibility to the people involved in the process, on and off stage, and to the audience who will experience and participate in the performances, while the approach of the artwork determines which ethical considerations must be made. I will return to these concerns when it is relevant while discussing the respective projects.

One question, however, has followed me throughout this project: my own bias regarding democracy as a form of governance. As I have outlined, democracy is not one thing. This means that I, the artistic team and the audience may, in reality, have different views on what democracy is without being against the form of governance as such. My view of how a society should be organised is very much dependent on the fact that I am Swedish. In the example from my childhood that opened this thesis, it is apparent how, even at the age of nine, I already had an expectation of a good state which takes care of its citizens. When the state was not there to help, I turned to my parents and asked them to step in. Sharing my own resources was not an option. I grew up in a society where social democracy pretty much ruled the country throughout the 20th century. It is said that Sweden in the early 1980s was the most equal society that ever existed. For me, and many in my generation, the Swedish welfare system is a given, and trust in democratic institutions is strong.

This also affects my understanding of Swedish democracy. It becomes evident in interactions with other cultures, and also in a Swedish context. For better or worse, I am part of the Swedish majority society and have enjoyed all the benefits it has brought throughout my childhood. I recognise that Sweden is an unjust society. Studies show that access to societal institutions is different for citizens born outside Sweden, than for ethnic Swedes. Being a non-white citizen in Sweden increases the likelihood of being excluded by the majority society (e.g Wolgast & Wolgast, 2022). For a person living in Sweden to be recognised as Swedish, they must be white (Adolfsson 2024). This definition not only affects how people are socially categorised, but also the access to society.

In this project, these are circumstances that I have had to deal with, and above all, to find ways to make my own perspectives and

blind spots transparent. My ambition is to identify the situations where my own bias gets in the way of recognising other people's perspectives, while also reflecting on how to highlight this blindness to position.

THE SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT

In this thesis, I discuss the probing and process of making three performances. These will be presented chronologically to recognise how one probe informs the next and contextualise the artistic choices as they unfold. I will elaborate on how the performances relate to different democratic aspects and how this enables a dialogue with society. There is also a personal reflection on how this project has changed my artistic practice. In addition to this thesis, four digital books with scripts have been produced in the research project. Lastly, there is a Research Catalogue website⁴ with documentation from the performances.

While the project contains several different dimensions, I have chosen to focus on the conceptual work involved in developing the productions, how they contribute to democracy and how theatre can be in dialogue with society. There are other aspects that I would have liked to delve more deeply into but that I have chosen not to include in this final report on the project. I will, for example, briefly mention how space, sound and video contribute to the audience experience in the theatre performance, but I will not elaborate on how aesthetics can contribute to audience engagement. Another aspect is the technological mediation in *Monument*. What is the role of the audiowalk format and augmented reality technology in democratising urban space? This is an interesting question that I have chosen to exclude from this presentation. I have also, for a long time, had a focus on how a narrative understanding can contribute to methods for theatre. This also includes the blending of fiction and reality. I touch on this discussion in the analysis of the artistic probes, but my hope is that I will have the opportunity to develop this understanding further in future research.

RESEARCH OVERVIEW

There are many and diverse books dealing with the societal and political functions of theatre. Yet, when I categorise them, I need to

4 <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/2598689/2598690>

recognise some specific approaches. There is a strand of research that discusses the political potential of theatre (Goodman, L. & De Gay, 2000; Kelleher, 2009; Morgan, 2013). There are books that make an overview of theatre groups and projects situated at the intersection of art, politics and activism (Malzacher, 2023; Sidiropoulou, 2022; van Vuuren, 2021). There is also a field that discusses the social possibilities and challenges of theatre and performing arts (Bishop, 2006; Bishop, 2012; Hildebrandt et al., 2019; Jackson, 2011; White 2013). These books have contributed to a theoretical understanding of my research.

This research project is carried out within the context of artistic research in theatre. The outcome of my thesis is practical rather than theoretical, i.e. my research seeks to develop new approaches, methods and strategies to making theatre. First and foremost, my research should be understood as a continuation of the research in Kent Olofsson's book *Composing the performance* (2018). In his dissertation, there are in-depth studies of some of the performances I mention in the introduction to this book. In addition, he describes other performances that I have been involved in, that deal with themes such as human trafficking, capitalism, the refugee crisis and consumption. Over the last years, the two of us have been writing book chapters and joint research articles on topics such as collaborative work (Dahlqvist & Olofsson, 2017), strategies for creative agency (Dahlqvist & Olofsson, 2024) and how political discourse can be transformed into embodied narratives (Dahlqvist & Olofsson, 2023). All these methods are developed further in this project.

Although the format and approaches differ from John Hanse's work on developing a new approach to learning plays, there are also similarities. In his thesis *En ny generation lärostycken* (2022), he describes how he has sought to develop a theatre that not only addresses but also counters repressive politics. Hanses' starting point is that theatre is a didactic process in which learning involves, not only those who participate in the works, but also the artists who initiate and participate in the artistic process. Art should investigate and problematise: what do we need to learn to change the world? And for those of us who work with theatre, what role can art play in this? (Hanse, 2022, p. 55). These are questions that resonate with the work of this project. Hanse also shares many starting points with the productions in my project. It is about blending real and fictional situations to allow more freedom to think and discuss, using the artistic work

as a starting point (Hanse, 2022, p. 85). For Hanse, this also affects the role the audience plays in the learning plays, as they are being directed by the actors to take part in the re-enactments. As my practice differs, the answers will not be the same, but I hope that it will contribute to a discussion on inclusion, participation and socially engaged theatre.

Hanse describes how he uses interviews, investigations and authentic film clips as research material, but how the documentary material is then reinterpreted by the artists. This way of looking at text and written material relates both to the work with *Monument*, but also to various aspects of the research carried out by playwrights Vanja Hamidi Isacson and Tale Naess (2020). In Isacson's dissertation, *Flerspråkighetens Potential i Dramatiska Verk* (2022), she explores how a diversity of texts, sources, voices, languages and styles contribute to creating dramatic plays in which several voices and languages can coexist. Her political project is to challenge norms around which languages can and cannot be heard. Naess, on the other hand, asks herself: Does performing art offer us a place where we can act politically? An arena where we can freely express ourselves? And if so, what kind of place is this and what role can it play in the public sphere? Her answer is that art cannot do this alone:

We have to get organized. To create alliances with others. Other artists, scientists, activists and intellectuals – because the space we have been given inside this consumer society is so limited. (Naess, 2020)

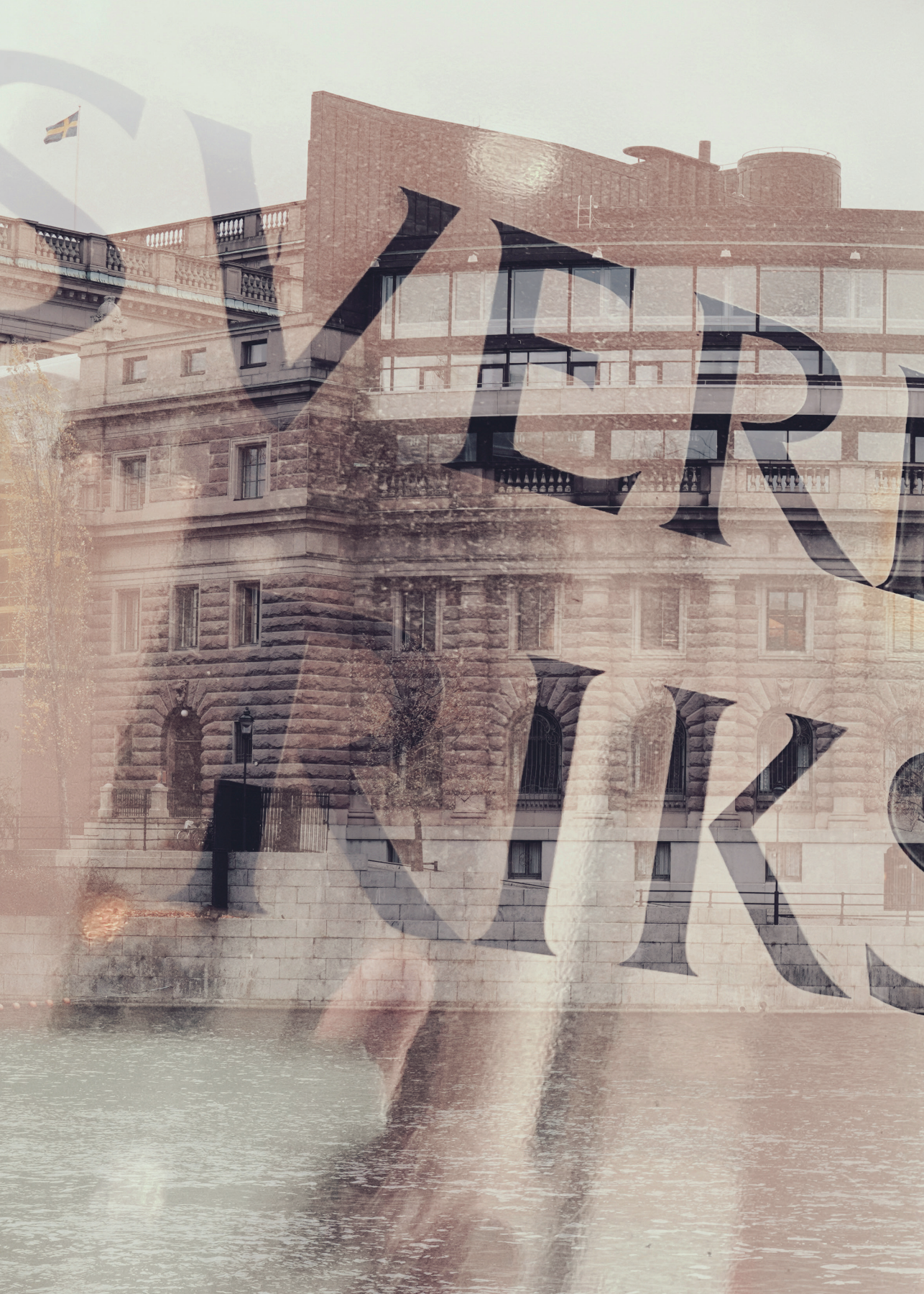
This is also something I arrive at in this thesis, the need for alliances to bring about change. I believe that to deal with the major challenges of our time, such as the climate crisis, migration, globalisation and digitalisation, it is crucial to collaborate with other stakeholders.

In my thesis there is an implicit narrative understanding of theatre. This relates to the research by Annika Nyman. In her thesis *Handlingarnas sken* (2023) she develops a narrative approach to dramatic writing. Nyman uses concepts from Marie-Laure Ryan to describe how relationships between characters relate to each other, to the world they are in, and how this leads to change. Variants of these different approaches to writing are implicit in my understanding of its practice.

I will return to these perspectives and try to elaborate on how my practice differs, but also how my research might add new perspectives to their research.

In her thesis *Mixed Media in Public Space* (2023), choreographer Marika Hedemyr discusses how art can strengthen the relationship with public space through audio and video walks and mixed media. Her research is at the intersection of artistic research and design: by making designs where technology engages the body, choreography is linked to interaction design. Her research projects have a direct bearing to this research project. My project is related to the same questions as Hedemyr but focuses on the question of how to extend the inclusion of perspectives.

There are of course other researchers and research projects that I relate to in my research more implicitly, such as *Tvivel - replikernas poetik* (2016) by Christina Ouzounidis, *Omförhandlingar, Kropp, replik, etik* (2018) by Petra Fransson, *Skådespelaren i handling* (2007) by Kent Sjöström, *Action reconsidered* (2008) by Erik Rynell, *Are you ready for a Wet Live-In* (2017) by Janna Holmstaedt, *The Choreography of Gender in Traditional Vietnamese Music* (2019) by Nguyễn Thanh Thuy, *Thinking with Performance* (2019) by Sofie Lebech. Furthermore, the research by my PhD colleagues: *How little is enough?* (2024) by Steinunn Knúts Önnudóttir and *Crafting Material Bodies - exploring co-creative costume processes* (2025) by Charlotte Østergaard. These artistic research projects are important contributions to the field and have provided methods and perspectives on the approach to theory. Their research has shaped me as an artist/artistic researcher and influenced the outcome of this project.





II. Probes



Chapter 3. Skapa Demokrati

In this chapter I will present the first probe in the research project. It explored how theatre can contribute to participation in democratic processes, and how an understanding of narrative meaning-making provides audiences with methods to engage with others. The probe resulted in a performance that premiered at Dramaten in September 2021. *Skapa Demokrati* (Creating Democracy) was a performance by my colleague Fredrik Haller and myself, where the audience was invited to create a democracy. The production was presented on ten occasions at Dramaten, where the actors Julia Marko-Nord and Victor Iván led a conversation with a paying audience. Iterations of the play have later been performed with audiences in different contexts. It has been presented at a research seminar in Sweden, at workshops in Norway and at the Swedish Embassy in Washington D.C. Further, the production has been presented to younger audiences, for fifth graders at a school in the suburbs of the US capital, as well as for students at Georgetown University. It has also been performed for young people aged 10–17 in a Kulturskola⁵ in central Sweden. On the latter occasions, either myself or myself and Fredrik took on the role of moderators.

5 Kulturskolan is a school that is for children and young people who are interested in art, culture, music and dance.

The probe was related to certain developments in Sweden in recent years. The report *Låt fler forma framtiden!* (2016), commissioned by the Swedish government and led by the liberal politician Olle Wästberg, states that Swedish democracy is deeply rooted among citizens. This is evident from the fact that many citizens vote in general elections, 84,21% in the general election 2022 (Valmyndigheten, 2025), and that confidence in democratic institutions is high: In 2022, 74% of the Swedish population states that they are satisfied/very satisfied with the democracy in Sweden according to the SOM-Institute (Sandelin, 2022, p. 7). At the same time, the world is changing, which places demands on democracy. A particular challenge is for democracy to enable everyone to make their voice heard. The report on democracy emphasises the need to find new ways of communication between the state and its citizens. Economic inequality, ethnic discrimination as well as educational segregation have created a situation where those most in need of societal support find it hardest to access political representation. New ways of accessing politics are needed for these groups.

The theory of participatory democracy emphasises that people are not only individuals but also social beings, and for citizens to be able to live in community with others, society must be based on equality, trust and common ground. This sense of community is guaranteed by giving citizens the opportunity to define and redefine what is right and good in society. If people become more actively involved in the governance of their own society by debating democratic challenges in depth, this will increase the democratic legitimacy of political decisions. This approach benefits the spread of democratic values and attitudes among citizens while evolving the stakeholders within the political landscape: "The more forms of participation that emerge outside the representative bodies, the greater the demands on the capacity of parties to develop their distinctiveness and fulfil their specific roles in oversight, accountability, and public debate" (SOU 2000:1, 2000, p. 29, my translation). This dynamic encourages competition among different political groups that benefits all parties. For this to be effective, civil society's involvement is essential. In this context, theatre institutions can play a role by providing a platform for these conversations.

THE PROBING PROCESS

Skapa Demokrati was a collaboration between Dramaten, Malmö Theatre Academy and the Institute for Futures Studies. The latter carries out interdisciplinary research on questions regarding how the future society will be characterised. The assignment from Dramaten stipulated that the performance, in some way, should stage and communicate the institute's research. Together we decided to focus on democracy. The starting point was a research program where philosophers and political scientists had reflected on the limits of democratic governance as well as the values on which democracy is based.

The probing lasted just over a year and a half and the process was guided by personal conversations with the philosophers Folke Tersman, Karim Jebari and Gustaf Arrhenius, the political scientist Ludvig Beckman and the artistic researcher Staffan Julén, to learn more about democracy in general and about their research in particular. These conversations provided insights from their field of expertise; knowledge that was crucial for the concept and their argumentation, and explanations that have been used when conceptualising the performance.

While engaging in these conversations, the concept was developed by Fredrik and I. The focus was to create a performance where the participants could immerse themselves in issues related to democracy. Initially, this was just a vague notion, but quite early in the process a version of the concept was tested, with an invited audience group. The test was important, as it involved relevant questions concerning the interaction between the actors and the audience. For example, how much information do the audience need to understand the concept of the performance?

Later tests gave the actors information on how much they needed to be in control of the conversation to allow a discussion to take place amongst the audience. We worked with a couple of actors from Dramaten, who were later replaced due to other engagements or for logistical reasons of the theatre and the long probing process. Julia Marko-Nord and Victor Iván came in quite late in the process, mere months before the premiere of the performance. Much of the time was then spent trying to familiarise them with the general ideas of democracy. This meant that the probing was simultaneously about understanding the participatory approach of theatre

but also to understand how to communicate the philosophical and practical challenges of democracy.

Taking into consideration that the production was to be performed at Dramaten, and that an audience would be paying full price to see it, it felt important that the audience would perceive it as a performance, and not just a workshop organised by, and for, the artistic team to experiment on a new format. To achieve this, performative elements, such as video projections, light and sound design were added to the performance.

PERFORMANCES ON DEMOCRACY IN A SWEDISH CONTEXT

There were not many examples of performances that directly addressed democratic issues at the time of the probing. The same is true now. When mapping the field, I found just two performances that explicitly dealt with democracy in Swedish theatres. The first, *Cabaret Demokrati* (2023) premiered in 2023 at Regionteatern Blekinge-Kronoberg. This production was a collaboration with Riksteatern that later helped tour the performance in Sweden. On the theatre's homepage the director Anna Pettersson is quoted saying:

Throughout the years, especially in the harshest of times, we have used entertainment to cope with reality. Perhaps humour, absurdities and silliness are a condition for us to be prepared to accept the brutal paradoxes we find ourselves in. The idea of democracy in Sweden is being put to the test right now, and we are using the perspective of the jester to explore our present. (Regionteatern Blekinge-Kronoberg, 2023)

In the performance the foundations of democracy were explored through song and dance numbers, with three actors moving between UN conventions and everyday participation.

The second performance, *Det handlar om demokrati* (*It is about democracy*, my translation) is an applied theatre production by a group called Tage Granit that premiered in 2024. The performance has since been co-produced by Riksteatern for a tour throughout Sweden. Riksteatern is an institution specifically dedicated to touring productions in Sweden, and their repertoire includes themes that relate to “the struggles for a dignified life, socio-economic class issues, criticism of consumption and civilisation” (Riksteatern 2023).

In the interview the artistic leader Dritero Kasapi emphasises that the notion of democracy is crucial for Riksteatern. In the performance the democratic aspects are a backdrop for the discussion of urgent social issues such as the various factors that can lead to gang criminality and involuntary placement.

Although these two performances are a few years apart I think they should be seen as a response from the theatre institutions to the developments in Sweden, rather than a more in-depth exploration of how theatre can contribute to the social sphere. A similar trend could be seen around 2018 when many theatres addressed the dismantling of the Swedish welfare system (Dahlqvist & Olofsson, 2023b), a theme that has not been addressed since to my knowledge.

The performances mentioned above also differ from *Skapa Demokrati* in how they were staged. Both were spoken theatre pieces where actors enacted societal and political considerations related to democracy. The inspiration for *Skapa Demokrati* was instead related to Augusto Boal's theatre methods (Boal, 2019) and Brecht's learning plays (Brecht et al., 2003). Boal's approach turns the audience into active participants in the theatre experience by empowering them to take action and to find alternative solutions to concrete political and moral problems in the performance. Brecht's learning plays stage various political dilemmas to be explored practically by amateurs and students. By participating in a learning play, either as a performer or as a spectator, the audience becomes engaged in political practice by being confronted with a moral dilemma in which every decision taken leads to the loss of life and the sacrifice of a highly valued principle.

In John Hanses' thesis (2022), he developed an example of how learning plays can be used in the modern day to engage a theatre audience and political actors, and social agents, to learn how to respond to political events. In the performances *Våld & Pedagogik* (2016) and *Kropp & Straff* (2019) the audiences were asked to re-enact a Nazi attack on a left-wing demonstration, and practise how to resist torture in the event of a fascist takeover. The actors engaged the audience members, by helping them act out some of the narratives, and thereby becoming an active part of the story. His performances, as well as the experiences of working with them, are examples of ways of thinking, acting, meeting and learning through theatre.

In Boal's participatory theatre as well as in Brecht's and Hanse's learning plays, the performances are based on social issues that

have emerged from everyday political life. In the case with Brecht and Hanse they are embedded in a specific ideology that makes the moral and political dilemmas tangible. In a liberal state, however, democracy is not first and foremost an ideology, but a form of governance that enables people with different views on the solutions to meet and come to agreements on specific issues. Therefore, in the process of making *Skapa Demokrati* it was essential to find ways to embrace different opinions and perspectives from the audience, as well as to invite speculation on how societies should be organised and governed.

ENTERING THE SPACE

Skapa Demokrati differed from the rest of the repertoire at Dramaten during the 21/22 season in that the performance was not based on a fictional drama but instead explored a participatory format. Early on, together with the producer, it was decided that it would be performed in a space that had not previously been used for theatre productions. The suggested space had earlier been used for different purposes, such as the box office and bar during Dramaten's international theatre festival. Therefore, it was possible to optimise the use of the room in a way that would best benefit the performance. The venue consists of two beautiful rooms separated by an arch. In the inner room there is the old bar area, with a long bar. In the performance, only the outer room was used, to which the audience arrived when they entered through the doors from the foyer. In this room, twenty chairs were placed in a circle. There were lamps placed along the walls in each corner of the room, providing a pleasant general light. Two video screens hung on either side of the room, and in front of them were projectors on podiums. The title of the performance as well as the image that was used in advertising the performance was projected onto the screens when the audience arrived.

When the audience entered the venue, they were met by two actors and a technician. The actors welcomed the audience to immediately establish an intimate and friendly atmosphere among the group. This was reinforced with ambient music. Once everyone was seated, the performance began, then the music stopped and a spotlight framed the two actors to provide focus.

The performance began with an actor describing the challenges to democracy:

Research shows that democracy is under threat. Large parts of the world and countries have gone from being democracies to becoming more authoritarian. You are probably aware of this. Examples are Brazil, Syria, Thailand, Serbia, Venezuela and Hungary. Certain democratic rights no longer exist in these countries. Even fundamental rights and freedoms, such as freedom of speech or the right to demonstrate, have been limited. It has not happened through outright coups where military forces have been taking over these countries by force. Instead, it is the combination of strong leaders and citizens who have started to doubt democracy. As a result, these states are beginning to waver from being democracies to becoming more authoritarian. (Dahlqvist & Haller, 2025a)

The introduction used contemporary research (Wikforss & Wikforss, 2021) as a reference, to introduce the audience to the current political landscape. The actors explained what was going to happen during the performance: that they were going to create a democracy together with the audience for an hour and a half, discussing the fundamental principles of democracy together, followed by the possibility to vote on how to organise this governance.

The actor then gave a short historical overview explaining the origins of democracy in Athens, and how it was manifested through Greek direct democracy (Tersman & Tännsjö, 2020):

The first democracy was born in ancient Greece 2500 years ago. In Greek democracy, the citizens gathered at a place not far from the Acropolis and the Parthenon temple. There was a raised ledge and below a lawn where a few thousand citizens could be accommodated. There, they gathered about forty times a year to debate how the city should be governed and then voted by a show of hands. And what they decided through this vote became law. (Dahlqvist & Haller, 2025a)

Greek democracy was a direct-representative democracy: all men entitled to vote met in person in one place to decide the future of Athens. The role of the state went beyond simply providing protection for its citizens. The aim was to secure a good life that could be lived in accordance with virtue. A characteristic of their democracy was that they took turns to govern and be governed. Ideally, the citizens also took turns in holding the governing offices.

WHAT IS A CONSTITUTION?

Modern democracies, such as Sweden, are defined as liberal democracies. They often have a constitution, or a fundamental law, that defines them. In *Making Constitutions* (2013) Gabriel L. Negretto explains that the written constitutions emerge out of “an explicit, temporally limited process of deliberation, bargaining and voting that takes place in an ordinary congress operating under special procedures or in a constituent assembly” (Negretto, 2013, p. 5). He adds that the reason why constitutions are important is because they are variables for understanding and explaining the stability and quality of democracy, the management of economic policies and the process of political change. A constitution defines four aspects of a democracy. First, the aims and objectives of democracy; political ideals. Second, the constitution defines the rights of the citizens, i.e., the areas outside the political sphere. Third, the constitution regulates the distribution of power and electoral rules. And lastly, it discusses how and when the constitution can be changed.

The second paragraph of the Swedish Instrument of Government is an example of constitution, or a basic law:

All public power in Sweden proceeds from the people. Swedish democracy is founded on the free formation of opinion and on universal and equal suffrage. It is realised through a representative and parliamentary form of government and through local self-government.

Public power is exercised under the law.

Public power shall be exercised with respect for the equal worth of all and the liberty and dignity of the individual.

The personal, economic and cultural welfare of the individual shall be fundamental aims of public activity. In particular, the public institutions shall secure the right to employment, housing and education, and shall promote social care and social security, as well as favourable conditions for good health.

The public institutions shall promote sustainable development leading to a good environment for present and future generations.

The public institutions shall promote the ideals of democracy as guidelines in all sectors of society and shall protect the private and family lives of the individual.

The public institutions shall work to promote the opportunity for all to attain participation and equality in society, and for the rights

of the child to be safeguarded. The public institutions shall combat discrimination of persons on grounds of gender, colour, national or ethnic origin, linguistic or religious affiliation, functional disability, sexual orientation, age, or other circumstance affecting the individual.

The opportunities of the Sami people, and ethnic, linguistic, and religious minorities to preserve and develop a cultural and social life of their own shall be promoted. (Sveriges Riksdag, 2021)

In *Skapa Demokrati*, the example provided a direct link to the surrounding society and helped to place the performance in a reality-based context. It also gave the audience an example of the wording and content of a constitution.

In *Skapa Demokrati*, engaging the audience in writing a constitution had two dramaturgical functions, first it helped to structure the performance and guide them towards a common goal, and second, it became a creative tool to invite the audience to talk about what is important in society today concerning democracy.

INVITING THE AUDIENCE INTO THE PERFORMANCE

Before entering the work of making a constitution, the audience was asked if they wanted to participate in the performance:

What we are going to do in this performance is to create a democracy by making a constitution and defining these different aspects. [...] We will do that by having a conversation about the content and the fundamentals of democracy and then voting on them. In other words, you will participate in a dialogue with us. First, however, we must vote to see if you want to participate. Who wants to take part in this? Raise your hands! (Dahlqvist & Haller, 2025a)

Through this act, the audience was invited to participate in the performance. When, and if, the audience said yes, the performance was now in their hands. If they agreed to the rules presented, they were also accountable to each other and for the content of the performance. To proceed, a system of voting was needed. The actors suggested that they could use the ideas from the first Greek democracy:

We need a principle for how we make decisions. I propose that we start with the following rules:

Everyone has the right to come up with proposals
Everyone has one vote
The majority decides.
(Dahlqvist & Haller, 2025a)

One again there was a vote to agree to these rules. After the audience had agreed to the electoral rules, they then had to come up with suggestions on what they thought should be included in the new democracy.

So, what will be essential for our new democracy? Suggestions?
(Dahlqvist & Haller, 2025a)

The role of the actors was now to invite different ideas without judging them, so that there would be a constructive and supportive atmosphere within the group.

There were three main strands to the audience's suggestions. First, many of the proposals echoed the Swedish constitution:

Freedom of religion
Freedom of opinion
Freedom of speech
Everyone should have the right to seek asylum

Second, there were also idealistic and ideological proposals that can be recognised from the contemporary political debate in Swedish society, such as hospitality for immigrants and the legalisation of narcotic substances.

Here are examples of these proposals:

Give nature legal rights
Allow the use of certain animal products as long as it is in a dignified way for the animals
Be against social media

Finally, there were some suggestions that were more imaginative and, in some cases, also related to the fictional situation in which the audience found itself:

To promote interesting discussion

To give double votes for the young people in our group on issues related to climate change

Initially, these suggestions were not discussed or questioned by the actors to lower the threshold for participation. It was important that everyone felt confident to speak and engage in the discussion. After ten proposals or so, the actors started asking for precise wording to specify the different proposals. Through this a discussion between the participants emerged on how to phrase the proposals, but also how to interpret the suggestions: Is freedom of press a part of freedom of expression? Or are they two different things? The latter also initiated a deeper and more in-depth dialogue about the limits of rights. If there is freedom of expression, there seems to be a need to also define the limits to this freedom. How do we restrict hate speech and forbid racial slurs in this new democracy? Do we need to? The restrictions were advocated from people with personal experiences of discrimination. On one occasion, the audience engaged in an animated discussion about what should apply to their particular group and the discussion ended up with the conclusion that total freedom of expression itself is not always a good thing, and that some form of restriction is necessary. However, perhaps it did not need to be included in the constitution, it might be better regulated through the code of law rather than the constitution

VOTING ON PROPOSALS

After fifteen minutes, the actors invited the group to start voting on the proposals that had come up. Although the principle was clear – everyone has the right to come up with proposals, each person has one vote and the majority decides – practical problems soon came up: What happens if there is a tie? If there is no majority? And what is a majority? Is it more than half of those voting, or does it have to be two-thirds of those present?

To resolve the latter question, one member of the audience suggested using the lottery to decide.

Audience: If it is 50–50 then I think we should have a lottery.

Moderator: Ok, that's your proposal. In that case, it is a proposal that we should decide by lottery.

(Lindau, 2021, October 24)

Another proposal was to introduce a rule that everyone must vote regardless of whether they have an opinion on the issue or not.

Audience: I think everyone should vote, even if people choose not to vote then it should be considered a vote. I think everyone should vote.

Actor 1: Then that's another proposal, that everyone is obliged to vote.

(Lindau, 2021, October 24)

When the audience started voting on the various proposals, the discussions focused on how to solve challenges that emerged: for instance, should voting be compulsory, as it is in some countries, or should the audience have the right to be absent when a decision is taken? As the voting process was a democratic negotiation it was important to ensure that all decisions were made correctly and that everyone took their democratic responsibility in the space.

DIFFERENCES IN THE PERCEPTION OF DEMOCRACY

The conversations expose a perception of democracy. It became apparent in all the performances at Dramaten that the Swedish audience has a strong faith in democracy as a form of governance, as well as in the institutions that are supposed to guarantee welfare.

As mentioned above, many proposals mirrored the welfare system of Swedish society.

A tax system

A pension system

Separation of religion and state

Access to financial support

It was quite fascinating to me that when an audience was invited to imagine a new democracy, there was a need for a tax system. The proposals did not differ that much between generations either, regardless of the gender and age of the audience, the proposals in the different performances were relatively similar. The same was true of the performance in Oslo.

However, when the performance was presented at the Swedish Embassy in Washington D.C., the discussions were completely dif-

ferent. The audience was largely made up of faculty and staff from the liberal Georgetown University. Among this audience there were concerns regarding the ability of the democratic system to make everyone heard.

If the vote comes within 60–40, we invite into an open conversation
We continue to keep the conversation open until we have a 60
percent margin
Anytime we vote we must listen to the minority
If there is a minority, they have the right to present a counter
proposal
Everyone has the chance to speak on each proposal prior to the vote

Before the audience even began to make suggestions about ideals and rights and freedoms, a lengthy discussion was held about how democracy should be created to best safeguard the minority's right to be listened to. Although a basic rule of the performance was that everyone had the right to make suggestions, it was also important that everyone's views were considered. Similar proposals came up when we did another performance, now for undergraduates at Georgetown University. The view of what democracy was supposed to accomplish also differed. In the Swedish performance, the audience felt that democratic ideals should ensure that society meets the needs of the collective, while in the American context, democracy was there to make the individuals thrive.

WHO IS 'EVERYONE'?

After an hour, the technician was asked to raise his hand and ask if he could participate. In all performances, this request initiated a debate amongst the audience. The only way to solve the issue was to let the majority decide. Although many wanted an inclusive democracy, everyone realised that an outsider could change what had been agreed upon. An animated discussion ensued. The group seemed to think that the dynamics of democratic work would change if new people were allowed to participate in democracy. After putting so much effort in trying to sort out all the difficulties of defining the ideals and freedoms, one new person could overturn all that has been achieved.

In the end, the issue of inclusion became technical. Some audience members felt that the technician had been in the same room

since the beginning of the performance and should therefore be allowed to participate in the voting. Others said it was a question of fairness and power. One participant, who was not happy with the idea of including more people, suggested that if the new person was going to be included, he might as well call his friends and ask them to come and vote for his proposals. Twenty of his friends would help influence the outcome in his favour. On some occasions, the technician was asked what he could contribute to the new democracy. It was important to know what values the new person could bring to the democratic process. Another solution was to leave the question to the technician: "Why do you want to be involved?". When the discussions on how to formulate those proposals had become particularly long-winded and complex, the question was instead jokingly resigned: "Do you really want to be part of this democracy?" Regardless of the discussion, most performances ended with decisions on participation being postponed, or with the outsider being excluded.

The conversation started from the question of who should have the right to participate in which decision in a democracy. The philosopher Gustaf Arrhenius writes that a decision made by a democratic decision-making method by a certain group of people is not enough for the decision to be democratic or satisfactory from a democratic perspective; the group must also be the right one. But what makes a group the right one? (Arrhenius 2018, p. 90). The two most common answers to this boundary problem are 'the all affected principle' and 'the all subjected principle'. According to the former, a person should have the right to participate in a democratic decision if he or she is affected by the decision. According to the latter, a person should have the right to participate in a democratic decision if they are the subject of the decision.

Arrhenius points out that this boundary problem has real political implications. In the case of 'the all subjected principle', it has to do with who is legally bound by a law. If someone spends holidays in a country she is legally bound by the laws of that country, does that mean she should have some influence on that country's elections under 'the all subjected principle?' Arrhenius states that how we might answer this question will affect how we consider citizenship. If all Swedes should have influence over laws that they must obey due to their citizenship, how and when should a person count as a Swede?

'The all affected principle' states that those affected should have a democratic influence on decision-making. Arrhenius takes the exam-

ple of the Barsebäck Nuclear Power plant. Should people living in Copenhagen be involved in deciding whether the now closed Barsebäck nuclear power plant should be reopened? If an accident occurs, Danes will surely be affected by an accident at the plant. The challenge with this principle is how to define the limits of inclusion. Climate change affects the whole world, so why should not everyone have a vote on who governs each country?

In the performance the audience assumed, without it being stated, that the decisions being made only applied to those who were part of the audience within the circle. When the technician asked if he could join, it started a conflict over which of the two principles should apply. Should he have the right to participate because he will be bound by the decisions and therefore should have a say in what is decided, as he might argue, or is he outside this jurisdiction like Denmark in the case with Barsebäck, and have to oblige with whatever is decided?

The tension that this event caused allowed the performance to be translatable to the social sphere. Through shifting from one principle to the next, the values in the actual political sphere were highlighted. When the group decided that the new persons could not be part of the emerging democracy, it became possible to see parallels with policies that want to exclude immigrants and minorities from political power. This was especially true in the performance in which hospitality had been proposed and discussed earlier. As the boundary principles changed, the audience were given the opportunity to reflect on their political values around inclusion.

It also became clear that the performance did not work if the audience suspected that there was a dramaturgical structure that guided the timing of when the different elements were introduced. At one performance, an audience member said that they felt manipulated as they suspected that the performance was 'rigged' when the technician asked to join. It was difficult for the audience to trust when they suspected that the uncertainty they felt was not something that was deliberately imposed on them, but rather a consequence of them working together to decide a common future. Only by recognising that their uncertainty about where the performance was heading was not a construct, but part of the nature of the performance, could they immerse themselves fully.

ARRIVING AT A RESULT

Skapa Demokrati has been performed in Sweden, Norway and the United States, and on none of these occasions has the audience arrived at a constitution. Each session has collapsed into the same detailed discussions about how to formulate the proposals and how to organise the electoral process.

After eighty minutes, the actors declared that time was up:

Now there are only ten minutes left of the performance. Let us look at the constitution we have so far. Are you satisfied or are there things you want to change? Can we approve this constitution? Yes? No?

The audience was asked if they were prepared to accept all the proposals to come to finalise the constitution for the performance, however, the devil was clearly in the details, because no one accepted this solution. The audience did not want to accept all the proposals without thoroughly discussing each of them. Even if it was a fictional activity, the collective effort had become so important that no one wanted to take a shortcut just to get it done.

To conclude the experience, the actors asked the audience if they could read a text about democracy written by the artistic team, i.e., Fredrik and I. The audience agreed to this.

I believe in making my voice heard. I believe in letting my voice take place on the world stage and my actions take place on the world stage. I believe in the difficulty of talking to each other and speaking for or against each other. I believe in what we have created together today, in the action and the conversation. I believe in dialogue. In the meeting with others. I believe in that which requires us to extend beyond ourselves to reach that which cannot be grasped. I believe in what is between us, in what turns our gaze away from ourselves to our common efforts. This makes us a community through meeting others. I believe there is a meeting beyond all isolated islands of similar views. I believe we have the power to change and are not powerless. Even if it sometimes does not feel like it, we do have the power to change. Not everything, not at the same time, but in small steps. I do not know what awaits us, I cannot know, but I think I know a way forward. At the same time, I know that others live in the same uncertainty but are just as sure as I am on a path forward. I now under-

stand that it is possible to talk to others, and that it is possible to speak for or against each other. I know there are meeting opportunities beyond all closed islands of similar views. I believe in visiting the opinions of others, in the bodies of others, and in the experiences of others. I believe in letting others visit our minds and learn from our experiences. I believe in the gathering. Together. I believe in togetherness. I believe in gathering, in the square, everyone, in front of the cliff and below the temple. I have stood by the cliff, below the temple, and raised my hand, not to manifest myself, but to manifest the desire and effort of the collective to move forward. We have raised our hands not to manifest ourselves but to manifest the desire and efforts of the collective to move forward. We have shown through words and deeds today that it is possible to talk to others and speak for or against each other. We have created a new togetherness, open to all forms of opportunities and mistakes, where we can learn what it is like to live together. If we believe in dialogue, we can also believe in democracy. (Dahlqvist & Haller, 2025a)

The text provided a poetic framework to the experience, by emphasising the importance of the meeting, the conversation and the act of voting.

DEMOCRACY AS AN EXISTENTIAL CONDITION

To understand what takes place in the end, I will interpret the event through the lens of the philosopher Hannah Arendt's description of the social and existential understanding of politics. Arendt claims in *The Human Condition* (1958) that theatre is the political art par excellence, it is the only art form whose only object is man's relation to others and to the world (Arendt, 1958, p. 188). For her, the idea that a single strong man can have power and the right to create laws is based on the delusion that we can create institutions or laws as we do a piece of furniture. It is a mistrust of the human capacity to act. In her reasoning, speech and action are central, as they expose social agents:

In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world, while their physical identities appear without any activity of their own in the unique shape of the body and sound of the voice. (Arendt, 1958, p. 179)

Arendt claims that it is through action and speech us humans enter the world stage and expose ourselves as political beings. When we talk to others, she writes, we learn that others see the world in different ways than we do, and if we listen, we learn that we can be wrong. Even if we think we are right, it is good to have it challenged by others, so that we avoid the risk of our arguments remaining superficial and simplistic. It is also possible that none of the arguments put forward are the whole truth, in which case it is important to have an open conversation so that we can learn from each other's arguments.

I believe this emphasis on the relational aspects of the meeting with others also has a connection to the understanding of narratives. According to Marie-Laure Ryan there are different ways of understanding a narrative: cognitive, aesthetic, technical, sociological and existential (Ryan 2004, p. 2). The sociological understanding of narrative focuses on how stories are used within social spheres. Here, storytelling is understood as a socially situated practice, i.e., how people interact when they negotiate being part of a community. It focuses on how people connect and organise events into meaningful patterns through personal, cultural and societal by the sharing of stories and beliefs. In this case, it is about what a democracy should be and what elements are important to one in the vision of what a society is. In *Skapa Demokrati*, social interaction was central. The audience was engaged in a conversation with others. In the performance, the audience was presented with an opportunity to step out onto the world stage, to quote Arendt, and to discuss and negotiate with others. It was important that the threshold for participation was minimised, so that the audience felt comfortable to make their voices heard. The performance invited a negotiation of words and concepts, thereby showing that formulating ideals and laws is a complex endeavour.

The challenge, returning to Arendt, is that whatever the content of the narrative that follows, whether it takes place in the private or public sphere, its full meaning can only be understood in retrospect. The narrator will know better what the story was about than the participants. Any account by the agents themselves, even if they could describe their intentions, goals and motives, can never match the story in meaning and truthfulness. The story is hidden from the actor herself, at least as long as she is in the action. Although stories are the result of action, it is not the actor but the storyteller who per-

ceives and 'makes' the story (Arendt, 1958, p. 192). Arendt describes an existential experience: human beings are born into a life that they try to live in a meaningful way:

If it were true that fatality is the inalienable mark of historical processes, then it would indeed be equally true that everything done in history is doomed. And to a certain extent this is true. If left to themselves, human affairs can only follow the law of mortality, which is the most certain and the only reliable law of a life spent between birth and death. (Arendt, 1958, p. 246)

It is the ability to act that interrupts the course of daily life leading towards death by enabling humans to begin anew. This capacity, Arendt states, is inherent in action as a reminder that people, even if they must die, are not born to die but to begin. However, it is only in the face of death that it becomes possible to look back on life and assess how it was lived.

This is also a challenge for democracy as a form of governance. The absence of a blueprint for dealing with an unknown future is both a strength and a weakness of democracy. The strength lies in the fact that the future is not a given and that it is possible to shape society at every moment, but if citizens lack trust in their leaders and fellow citizens, this freedom will instead become frightening.

I believe this understanding can be translated to this performance. Marie-Laure Ryan distinguishes between a receptive and a participatory mode of narration (Ryan, 2004, p. 14). In the first, the events are presented and the recipient imagines himself as an external witness to the events. In the latter, the plot is not predetermined and the audience is made an actor in the story, thus helping to shape the plot. It was also how *Skapa Demokrati* structured its narrative. In traditional theatre performances, the audience finds themselves in the receptive mode, witnessing how characters struggle to deal with the existential conditions of life. In *Skapa Demokrati*, everything was up for voting. There was no single person taking responsibility for the performance, it was a collective effort. The audience was not given a story to guide them through the performance, instead they were given the option to act in relation to each other for the sake of democracy and then the performance emerged. The audience experienced an existential limbo, there was no progress, other than trying to agree on things that had been proposed.

However, when the last text was read, I believe it gave an explanation as well as meaning to the experience of the audience. There is no other future than the one we can imagine together. The closing text puts this into words, explaining why this is important, and how it is the very essence of democracy. The text helped to resolve the existential uncertainty caused by the performance. This connects to another understanding of narrative. Ryan claims that one of the central features of existential narratives is to create a temporal dimension for change and thus place that story of this world in the flow of history. The narrative must also allow a network of goals, intentions, and relations to be reconstructed and interpreted to give coherence to the events and turn them into a narrative (Ryan, 2004, pp 8–9). In *Skapa Demokrati*, two different ways of understanding narratives were combined. First, a sociological understanding that promoted the interaction of the group. The addition of the poetic text at the end of the performance helped the audience to construct an existential narrative as it made it possible to reconstruct and interpret goals, intentions and relationships in the performance and thus to give meaning to all that happened. The audience came to see that there was a purpose to the conversations and the social context.

EXPERIENCING THE THREAT TO DEMOCRACY

Even though the audience failed to finalise the constitution, they gained something else: a sense of the fragility of democracy. As one audience member phrased it when being interviewed for the Swedish Radio after the premiere:

I think people sense that [democracy] is fragile. And I think we need to recognise that it is fragile. To actually care and cherish to maintain it. It is easy to sit and vote on who should be allowed to participate, for example. And everyone thinks that of course everyone should be included. Yes, but how do we do that? Of course, it is easier if fewer people decide. But then it has already gone downhill. (Lindau, 2021, October 24)

The structure of *Skapa Demokrati* provided different types of understanding of democratic processes. At the beginning, the audience voted on whether they wanted to be part of the process of creating a new democracy by working together on a constitution. The work involved specifying different proposals, negotiating meanings and

then voting on them. The voting process quickly became complicated with a series of amendments that tried to define in detail various exceptions to the overall framework. Changing principles on who is covered and affected by the decisions taken further added to the complexity. All of this amounted to a new understanding of the challenges of democracy.

CONCLUSION

Skapa Demokrati allowed the audience to discuss and experience the fundamental functions of liberal democracy. The dramaturgy of the performance was simple: The actors situated the audience by introducing the threats to democracy. The audience then learnt about Greek direct democracy. By describing a constitution, the performance provided a specific context to which the audience could relate. The performance's focus on dialogue and interactivity was introduced gradually, first by asking the audience to participate in the process of shaping a new democracy, then by making proposals, and finally, by allowing everyone to discuss these proposals.

The actors' task was to moderate the conversation between the audience members. In this role, there were opportunities to influence the dramaturgy of the performance: they could give the audience a sense of the consequences of not having precise rules on how to vote. It was also possible to dwell on interesting reflections on certain rights, such as the relationship between freedom of expression and hate speech. Should people be allowed to say what they want in this new democracy, and if not, how do we regulate this?

After an hour, the underlying principle was replaced, and the question then turned to who should be included in the democratic community. This problem occurred because the concept of 'everyone' was not defined from the outset. The audience assumed that it was the limited group in the circle, and when they realised that others might be added, the decisions and ideas that had been presented and decided on could then be rejected or changed. This made it possible for the audience to reflect on the nature of inclusion in democracy.

By using narrative understanding as a creative tool, it became possible to combine a sociological understanding that favours group interaction with an ending that transformed the performance into an existential account of the joint efforts of a community, which gave significance to the actions the audience experienced. Despite

the existentialist limbo in which the audience members found themselves in during the negotiations with others, the features of the existential narrative gave meaning to this experience.

Although the dramaturgy established the beginning, middle and end, the performance's content depended on the proposals made by the audience. The performance enacted self-government where the audience members together defined the aim and purpose of the group. Democracy thus became a method of organising the discussion in the theatre space. The audience had to engage in real conversations with people who think differently than them to experience its full meaning.

Chapter 4. Öva Demokrati

In this chapter I will present how theatre can contribute to deliberation in democratic processes. In the second probe, there was an intention to create a more distinct framework for the audience's dialogue about democracy. This resulted in the performance *Öva Demokrati*, which premiered at Dramaten in November 2022. It was a performance in which the audience discussed proposals for how democracy in Sweden could be developed. The performance was presented ten times at Dramaten, where the actors Julia Marko-Nord and Victor Iván once again were responsible for moderating the conversations between the audience members. An iteration of the performance has later been performed via the Zoom software at a democracy conference where Julia and Victor were the hosts, and where Fredrik Haller and I led the conversations with the conference participants in breakout rooms.

The staging in *Öva Demokrati* differed from the staging in *Skapa Demokrati*. First, both rooms of Dramatenbaren were used. In the inner room, a small presentation auditorium was created with video projections, microphones and a loudspeaker system. Second, two separate and distinct spaces, with a conference setting, were made available to facilitate small group discussions. When entering the space, the audience was invited to the auditorium. When the audience was seated, the house lights were switched off and the actors began to perform a text. Projected behind them were images of Stockholm, as well as pictures of politicians taken from news programmes, and statistics on how people view democracy in Sweden.

The goal was to create a performance that gave a feeling of taking part in a more 'traditional' theatre performance, while at the same time allowing for a conversation about democratic issues amongst the audience. The performance thus moved between two different approaches to the audience.

In his article "Defining Political Performance with Foucault and Habermas" (2003), scholar Jon Erickson describes the relationship between theatricality and the political in theatre performances. In the argument, Erickson distinguishes between 'dramatic realism' and 'theatrical realism'. The former, 'dramatic realism', is about the audience being immersed in the fiction and the play's attempt to represent reality, while 'theatrical realism' is concerned with the opposite, exposing the apparatus of theatre and unmasking repre-

sensation to reveal its ideological nature (Erickson, 2003, p. 160). Erickson argues that the difference between the two opposing approaches is not watertight, they can slip into each other and are even codependent on each other's existence. Because the framework of theatre is fictional, there cannot be a complete theatrical realism, and no matter how well the drama immerses the audience, there will still be connections to the external world.

Erickson states that 'political' in contemporary critical texts of theatre is more about resistance to hegemonic discourse and less about collective action. It also connects to my practice, as presented at the beginning of this dissertation, where the focus has been to expose, or resist, discourses in society that I have found to be untrue or problematic. In this research study, however, I have instead explored a dialogical approach. It required opening the apparatus of the theatre to enact the making of democracy. In *Skapa Demokrati* there was no, or very little, fiction in the performance, everything in the theatre space was referred to and connected to the real political sphere. The audience was told from the beginning what to expect and, as I discussed earlier, there was not 'a story' for the audience to experience or take part in. If the audience would not have wanted to participate, there simply would not have been any performance.

A consequence of this was that some performances felt unsatisfactory, from an artistic point of view, as Haller and myself had a sense that the audience, and the theatre institution, expected more from 'theatre'. When starting to work on *Öva Demokrati* there was a desire to explore how to provide a more explicit fictional framework to not become entirely dependent on the audience's willingness to take part in the performance. To me, the concepts of 'dramatic realism' and 'theatrical realism', as defined by Erickson, are not two opposites, but rather a scale on which one can move from one to the other. My practice often exists between two forms of theatre: one where actors represent the narrative 'as if' being in a dramatic situation, and another that emphasises storytelling in the present moment. For me, this relates to the narrative understanding of how different theatre formats communicate with their audiences, as I discussed earlier. This distinction can be traced back not only to narrative theory but also to the ideas of the Greek philosophers. Stephen Halliwell, Professor of Greek, states that the concept of mimesis has a complex origin. It was first used by Plato as a description of those who practise mimetic activity, i.e., the persons who were

engaged in visual arts, poetry, and theatre. Aristotle then made a fundamental distinction where mimesis referred to representational art forms and diegesis to epic storytelling. Aristotle identified two major features of the mimetic mode that set it apart from diegetic narration: the first feature was whether a narrator recounts events or whether the playwright stages a dramatic situation, allowing characters to act and speak independently. Socrates had a different definition, for him, the difference between mimesis and diegesis was not about showing or telling, but rather between two different modes of telling: “telling in the voice of an authorial narrator versus telling in the voices of the agents” (Halliwell, 2013). In my practice, the interpretation of a mimetic and diegetic storytelling becomes artistic methods in communicating with an audience. It allows me to decide whether an actor should perform a text as ‘her-self’ or perform it ‘as if’ a character. In *Skapa Demokrati*, the actors acted ‘as themselves’ for almost the entire performance. Julia and Victor told the audience that they were working at Dramaten and that they were going to moderate a conversation amongst the audience. However, when the very last text of the performance was presented, it served as a way of returning to ‘dramatic realism’. Now Julia and Victor became actors performing a dramatic text that presented an account, written by Fredrik and I, of the possibility of man becoming a political being through the encounter with others. In the work on *Öva Demokrati*, the intention was to further emphasise this dramatic approach.

SITUATING THE AUDIENCE IN THE PERFORMANCE

To enhance the dramatic realism, as defined above by Erickson, the text was based on one of the world’s most famous monologues, Hamlet’s ‘To be or not to be’, by William Shakespeare:

Hamlet: To be or not to be—that is the question:
Whether ’tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And, by opposing, end them.
(Shakespeare, (2024 [1599], p. 46)

Although the play *Hamlet* is not about democracy as such, it offers a perspective on issues such as the legitimacy of power, justice and responsibility. It is possible to understand Hamlet's monologue as a discussion about the ability to act both individually and politically. Hamlet finds himself in a system of political turmoil. Hamlet's father has defeated the Norwegian heir to the throne, Fortinbras, who nevertheless continues to challenge the peace. To avoid war, old King Hamlet is killed and his brother, Claudius, takes over the throne and marries the widowed queen, Gertrude, to bring political stability to the country. It is therefore important that Hamlet does not upset the political order: his love for Ophelia is not recognised by the adult world and he is forbidden to go to Wittenberg to study. However, Hamlet learns of the new king's guilt through his father's ghost and then becomes part of this political game himself. Claudius' actions are interpreted as a form of political coup. Hamlet reacts by rationalising the court life into good and evil, mistaking his own situation for an absolute truth given by nature and starts insisting that others see the world as he does. This makes Hamlet's situation increasingly untenable. So, what is the solution? Should he end his life or do something about it? He uses the audience as a confidant to whom he entrusts his problems. In the end, he realises that he cannot know if life is worse than death and decides instead to avenge his father's death. His uncertainty and hesitation are transformed into a moral and political agency.

The same rhetorical figure can be found in the actors' opening text of *Öva Demokrati*.

I believe in democracy and in participation.

Political participation. I believe in that.

In political participation. And in democracy.

(Dahlqvist & Haller, 2025b)

However, even if democracy is strong, there are troubling signs:

How are we going to shape our common future? What is going to happen to it? The research says: we are facing a climate crisis. We are facing the consequences of digitalisation and globalisation.

(Dahlqvist & Haller, 2025b)

And not only that. Citizens are getting further and further away from the political system.

The political parties are losing members. It is a slow decay. People do not want to get involved in party politics.[...] How will the parties be able to represent us citizens if they do not have enough members? (Dahlqvist & Haller, 2025b)

These are major societal challenges that will reshape our entire society. All these negative trends in society affect the actors on a very personal level:

I do not want to live in such a society. Where people cannot make their voice heard. I do not want to live in such a society. Where people cannot shape their future. Where Sweden would follow the same path as other countries and democracy should be weakened. Brazil, Hungary and Russia. [...] I am afraid that my children will have to experience such a society. (Dahlqvist & Haller, 2025b)

Finally, the actors realised it was possible to change this development, and the solutions to the problems cannot be postponed. But then the question is what to do about it. Just give up? Or fight for change?

I think that building a community should be experimental and be created through an ongoing conversation. There is no predetermined safe path. Since we cannot know much about the future, the solutions must focus on the problems we see now. (Dahlqvist & Haller, 2025b)

Change is possible but solutions cannot be postponed. There is a possible way out of this political and personal turmoil: working together to strengthen democracy. In the performance the actors asked the audience to help them discuss the different proposals. Now the video projections, lighting and sound design disappeared and the room was fully lit to focus entirely on the audience.

LET THE PEOPLE SPEAK

The staging in *Öva Demokrati* was inspired by ‘deliberative polling’, a concept created by political scientist James S. Fishkin. In his book *When the People Speak* (2011), He argues that informed citizens are necessary for political decision-making, yet at the same time, he recognises that citizens have very little incentive to invest their time and effort in acquiring information or coming to an informed judgement. Fishkin claims that deliberative polling promotes two fundamental democratic values: political equality and deliberation. His method is simple and straightforward: a representative sample of the population, based on gender, race, education and socio-economic background, is selected. At first, the participants present their views on the issue by completing an opinion poll. Then they are invited to meet for a few days to learn more about the issue under discussion. To do so they are provided with various forms of information gathered through panel discussions, group discussions and seminars with invited experts. The participants have access to unbiased background material and can discuss the issues in small groups with trained moderators. After these seminars and meetings, a new opinion poll is conducted. The changes in opinion that result is assumed to represent the public, had they had the opportunity to become more informed on the issues.

Deliberative polling often produces statistically significant changes in opinion. The results can be used to inform the design of referendums at municipal, regional or national level, but also to inform policy-making. An example is the national Citizens’ Council on Climate Change, which consisted of a random sample of citizens reflecting the population of Sweden (Medborgarråd om klimatet, 2024). The initiative was part of a research programme at Uppsala University on how to achieve a just climate transition for Sweden, which aimed to enrich and nuance the public and political debate on climate issues. For over a year, selected citizens met to learn about research on climate change, discuss solutions and come up with proposals on how Sweden could reduce climate emissions in accordance with the Paris Agreement. The results of this study have been shared with politicians in the Swedish Parliament.

In *Öva Demokrati* this model was implemented in the performance. The deliberation polling session started with the actors presenting seven different solutions on how to improve democracy:

MORE REFERENDUMS

Would more referendums be a way to develop and improve Swedish democracy?

DIGITAL CITIZEN FORUMS

Could we develop democracy by creating digital places where politicians and citizens could be in dialogue with each other also between elections?

DEMOCRATIC DUTY

Could we develop democracy by allowing all citizens to perform a compulsory and recurring democratic community service?

ALLOW YOUNG PEOPLE TO VOTE FROM 16 YEARS OF AGE

Could a younger voting age be the way of allowing young people to take a greater place in the democracy? Maybe it could be a way to increase the willingness to vote among young people?

SOCIAL QUOTAS IN THE PARLIAMENT

Would social quotas in the parliament be a way of creating greater representativeness and increased confidence in democracy?

GLOBAL GOVERNANCE

Could a solution be that Swedes work for a global governance in order for it to become possible to implement the large and comprehensive reforms required for a sustainable future?

DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE OF EXPERTS

Would a solution to address the major challenges we are facing be to vote for experts rather than political parties?

The audience was asked to vote on which of the ideas would be the best way to strengthen the democracy in Sweden.

Here are the results of the polling from the performance on November 18, 2021:

1.	More referendums	2
2.	Digital citizen forums	3
3.	Democratic duty	2
4.	Change the age for voting	5
5.	Social quotas in the parliament	1
6.	Global governance	2
7.	Democratic governance of experts	3

In this specific performance the first polling showed that the audience favoured the proposals that would give young people from the age of 16 the opportunity to vote in the national elections.

DELIBERATIVE CONVERSATIONS IN THEATRE

In the second act, the audience was invited to discuss the proposals in small groups for forty minutes. The audience was divided into two groups and they followed an actor to a separate location. The audience was encouraged to share their thoughts on each of the proposals, but also to advocate specific proposals to the other audience members. Negotiating with other people about the development of society is central to some elements of political philosophy. For the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, deliberation is the core of political theory. For him, the essence of democracy is that citizens engage in rational debate, to find the best solutions for the common good through deliberative dialogue. He states:

I do not see deliberative politics as an aloof ideal against which so-called reality must be measured, but as an existential presupposition of any democracy worthy of the name. (Habermas 2023, p. 63)

Habermas argues that ‘communicative action’ is the way to achieve democratic understanding between different groups of people. He defines this as a medium based on language where speakers and listeners “out of the context of their preinterpreted lifeworld, refer simultaneously to things in the objective, social and subjective worlds in order to negotiate common definitions of the situation” (Habermas, 1984, p. 95). Rather than democracy being about aggregating people’s opinions through voting, deliberation offers the possibility that people’s beliefs might change when they encounter better arguments. Habermas’s focus is on situations where speakers do not share a consensus, as he argues that agreeing regardless of background is

at the heart of deliberative approaches to democratic decision-making, this means that economic, social, political and cultural power must be equalised between those discussing the arguments. For Habermas, it is not about believing that political discourse can be resolved without conflict: to argue is to disagree. It is important to realise that we can learn from each other (Habermas 2023, p. 63). It is important to emphasise that *Öva Demokrati* was not an enactment of Habermas theories, it was a theatre performance with the intention to get the audience to practice deliberation. This said, in the performance the arguments about the different proposals were the very foundation of the performance. The group discussions started with the proposals that received the least votes in the survey. It was important to give time and space to these to ensure that all voices were heard. To further contribute to this, the actors were instructed to argue and highlight the most marginalised perspective for each proposal. Hence, the actors were helping the audience to sharpen the arguments by initially arguing in favour of the different proposals and then allowing the audience to question and challenge each other's views. Many of the proposals were perceived as abstract, and few of the audience members had any strong opinions beforehand, but through meeting others they were given the opportunity to argue, for example, whether the voting age should be changed or not. Are 16-year-olds cognitively developed enough to understand issues concerning the future of society, or will they be influenced by their parents? In the performance, the questions themselves were not as important as getting the audience to discuss them.

However, simply speaking is not enough to improve democracy. The political scientist Andrew Dobson (2014) argues that it is striking how Habermas' theories of communicative action are not explicitly devoted to listening, as they instead emphasise the articulation of arguments (Dobson 2014, p. 111). Dobson argues that listening and speaking should be equally important features of deliberative theory and practice. He states that there are two reasons why deliberative democracy could benefit from paying more attention to listening. In a situation where views are measured in terms of the merits of the 'better argument', it seems obvious that it is important to listen carefully to the arguments being made. For participants to be able to weigh the arguments they must also listen carefully to their opponents. In addition, Dobson writes, deliberative democracy aims to include views in an equitable way, and this means listening to voices

that may not have been heard before. He suggests that listening should therefore be seen as a fundamental element of the democratic process. In this way, deliberative democracy can be better adapted to address democratic challenges.

In *Öva Demokrati*, there was enough space to both speak and listen. By gathering the audience in smaller groups, everyone could fit around the same table. For forty minutes they sat and discussed seven proposals only. The actor's job was to highlight the suggestions made by the audience, and to ensure that everyone was given time both to speak and to listen to each other's opinions. They made sure that the discussion was about each other's suggestions, i.e. that the audience listened to each participant and responded to what they had heard. The conversations were often intimate, and in cases where someone tried to dominate the conversation, it was possible to give the floor to someone else, and to emphasise the principle of listening.

MAJORITY RULE

The third part of the performance was about deciding which proposal to include in the citizens' proposal. The audience was asked to return to the auditorium once again to vote on which proposals they thought would be the best solution for democracy in Sweden.

The results, from the same performance as above, are presented in the second column:

1.	More referendums	2	3
2.	Digital citizen forums	3	4
3.	Democratic duty	2	6
4.	Change the age for voting	5	6
5.	Social quotas in the parliament	1	0
6.	Global governance	2	0
7.	Democratic governance of experts	3	1

As can be noted, the proposal for a democratic duty has now attracted an audience. The audience has changed its view on this proposal after learning more about what it could mean in practice. Interest in the last three proposals declined or disappeared after the deliberation.

After this consultation, another way of understanding the electoral system was introduced. Returning to Gustaf Arrhenius, as mentioned earlier, he states that democracy can be understood both as a decision-making model and as a normative ideal. The latter is the ultimate goal towards which we as citizens strive, such as a just society (Arrhenius, 2018, p. 96). This ideal includes all the considerations that justify policies, institutions and actions. If, on the other hand, democracy is understood as a method of decision-making, it should encompass all the strategies used to achieve the goals set by this ideal.

According to Arrhenius, many people think of democracy as a system of decision-making in which the majority rules society; however, if one considers the normative ideal in relation to the electoral principles, one may also consider how power should be distributed in the most just way. Arrhenius discusses how it is then possible to understand the boundary problems of a democracy where democracy is regarded as a normative ideal in relation to 'the all affected principle'. He argues that if one starts from 'the all affected principle', then the people who are affected by decisions should also be allowed to participate in making them (Arrhenius, 2018, p. 102). However, he notes, how to analyse influence over a decision is a tricky issue. How much power you should have on an issue depends on to what degree your interests are at stake if you apply the all affected principle. In actual democracy, issues are dealt with at different levels: municipalities, provinces, regions, states, the EU and so on, but that does not mean that one person has the correct influence over a decision. Arrhenius argues that you have influence on a decision if there is a possible situation where you are decisive, i.e. where your vote will determine the outcome. He goes on to discuss how to consider what type and degree of influence should be given to an individual depending on how she is relevantly affected. There are different ways to solve this, perhaps with weighted voting, sometimes a veto. Sometimes it could just be the right to participate in deliberations of being granted the right to make proposals. At other times a combination of the three might be necessary.

In the performance, this reasoning was implemented. A second vote was conducted to give the audience another chance to vote on the proposals where the votes had differential weights. Each person now had five votes to allocate according to their engagement with the topics discussed. If they thought a proposal was important, they

could cast all five votes for that proposal, but if they considered all of them equally good or bad, they could distribute their five votes by casting one vote for whichever of the five proposals they wanted.

The third column presents the result of this vote:

1.	More referendums	2	3	14
2.	Digital citizen forums	3	4	16
3.	Democratic duty	2	6	35
4.	Change the age for voting	5	6	33
5.	Social quotas in the parliament	1	0	2
6.	Global governance	2	0	0
7.	Democratic governance of experts	3	1	1

As evident above, using a different voting system changed the outcome. Now democratic duty got the most votes.

After this voting exercise the performance further explored the idea of majority rule. Even if a society is democratic, it does not necessarily mean that everyone will feel included in its decision-making. One example of this is the plight of the Swedish Conservatives in the sixties. Because the Social Democrats won every election, centre-right voters were not allowed to govern society. The question: What happens to the structure of a society if people constantly feel that their opinions do not count?

This question is even more relevant today, as people do not feel heard, and are further removed from decision-making. Parties on both the right and the left are questioning the legitimacy of their voters not being listened to. In addition, there are people who do not feel represented by today's parties, and who are increasingly removed from decision-making. In a personal conversation (October 7, 2021), Arrhenius presented the idea of using the lottery as a system to make elections fairer. By distributing the tickets proportionally according to the decisions and then letting chance decide, a proposal put forward by a minority will then also have a chance of being elected. This model was introduced in the performance.

The results of the first vote (in the second column) were used to distribute the different options in a lottery tombola. So, there were three options on the first proposal, four on the second, and so on. After this, an audience member was asked to draw the lottery number. In the performance used as an example, proposal number 4 was drawn, i.e., to change the voting age. Now the audience was asked to

think about which system they preferred. Would they let the minority have its say, or was it more important for the majority to decide?

They were asked to vote on this.

1.	More referendums	2	3	14	
2.	Digital citizen forums	3	4	16	
3.	Democratic duty	2	6	35	12
4.	Change the age for voting	5	6	33	8
5.	Social quotas in the parliament	1	0	2	
6.	Global governance	2	0	0	
7.	Democratic governance of experts	3	1	1	

In this performance, the audience decided that they would let the majority win, but in other performances, participants let the minority have a voice over the majority.

MAKING A COMMITMENT

The performance focused on developing methods for citizens to discuss proposals on how democracy can be improved. This effort coincided with a proposal presented in a newspaper just a week before the premiere of *Öva Demokrati*. Amanda Lind, then Minister for Democracy in the Swedish government, along with colleagues of hers wrote an op-ed (Lind et al, 2022, November 3, 2021) in which they suggested introducing a possibility for citizens to send proposals to the Swedish Parliament, which would then be discussed and decided upon. In the performance, their idea of citizens' proposal was used for the closing act of the performances.

CITIZENS' PROPOSAL TO DEVELOP DEMOCRACY

We propose that the Government should introduce Democratic Duty as a way of strengthening democracy in Sweden.

MOTIVATION:

Research and reports, with the aim of analysing the need for and preparing proposals for measures to increase and broaden the involvement of representative democracy, have made several proposals for a series of measures to strengthen the individual's opportunities for participation in and influence political decision-making. We have discussed these proposals and come up with one that best meets the challenges that democracy faces. We believe that the government should work to make

this proposal law. We also believe that the introduction of this proposal will lead to more people feeling that they can be involved in shaping their future, and that politics will thereby have a greater opportunity to address the great challenges of today. In addition, we have also understood that the public discourse itself is a solution to the challenges of democracy. Together we have tried to understand, and to find solutions to societal problems and argued for solutions to these in front of each other. We have also understood that it is possible to practice democratic processes: to enter the world stage and to speak for, or against each other there, and to contribute with one's knowledge and experiences to, along with others, allow a diversity of thoughts and arguments to form a common future. Although this motion may not come to a decision, we hope that our joint efforts will have an effect by contributing to a common ground for meeting the challenges that democracy will face in the future.

PROPOSAL FOR A PARLIAMENTARY RESOLUTION

Item 1. The Parliament supports the decision stated in this motion and announces this to the Government after approval.

PROPOSAL CATEGORY: CITIZEN PROPOSAL

Assigned: Responsible Minister with responsibility for democracy and human rights.

EVENTS

Created: Today's Date.

Submitted:

AUTHORS OF THE PROPOSAL

The ensemble and the audience participants at the performance
Öva Demokrati, The Royal Dramatic Theatre. Stockholm
(Dahlqvist & Haller, 2025b)

Even if the audience were to disagree with all the proposals, there was something about the democratic process presented in the performance that made it special. It was one thing to attend a performance and another to consider submitting proposals to the government, even if it was fiction.

A MODEL FOR DEMOCRATIC TRAINING

Öva Demokrati could potentially provide a model for discussing democracy issues in contexts other than theatre. After the premiere, the performance was part of a conference to mark the 100th anniversary of the first parliamentary elections where both women and men could vote in Sweden. For the Swedish government, this initiative was an opportunity to address the challenges facing democracy today. The conference was organised by the Kommittén Demokratin 100 år (the Committee for Democracy 100 Years, my translation), which was tasked with planning, coordinating and implementing a set of initiatives and activities for a strong democracy at national, regional and local level. The starting point for the committee's work was based on the objectives of the Swedish Government to develop and strengthen democracy both in the short and the long term. This involved making democracy more participatory, inclusive and resilient. The ambition was that the committee's efforts and activities would help make people better informed to be able to actively participate in democracy, as well as to encourage and inspire democratic participation and to strengthen support for the fundamental principles of democracy (Sveriges Regering, 2018). *Öva Demokrati* was invited to be presented during a conference on democracy organised by the committee.

The event was attended by authorities, representatives from civil society, universities and colleges, as well as regions, municipalities and political officials, all working on democracy issues at different levels of society.

One of the wishes of the Committee was for the content to be adapted to incorporate a proposal they would present in their final report to the government. This was a proposal that they themselves suspected might be controversial: an 'agency for democracy' in Sweden. This new institution would have the mission to:

Increase knowledge about democracy, provide support for methods to increase participation and involvement in democracy, contribute to the coordination of democracy initiatives by authorities and other actors, and analyse and produce updates on the state of Swedish democracy (SOU 2022:28, 2022, p. 97, my translation)

The reason was that it would replace functions currently carried out by other authorities at municipal and regional level.

At the performance, which was organised through the Zoom

software due to the pandemic, there were participants from both the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs along with representatives from civil society. It turned out the representatives from the committee were right when asking us to include the proposal, many of the participants were sceptical about the idea for the reasons mentioned above.

Another request, which unfortunately never led to more than an initial meeting, was to adapt the performance to use it as a tool for the Swedish Institute's and Sida⁶'s training for social actors and NGOs in South Asia and in the Mena region. The idea was that the performance would tour Swedish embassies around the world as a pedagogical tool to discuss how democracy could be developed in various countries. Even if this never ended up happening, Fredrik and I were thrilled that democratic and political institutions recognised the potential of the format and thought it could be used as a method for deliberative conversations concerning actual policy proposals and democratic leadership training.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have demonstrated how theatre can be used for deliberation. *Öva Demokrati* started with describing how the challenges of democracy would affect the actors on an individual level. This text was inspired by Hamlet's monologue 'To be or not to be'. This opening provided a dramatic framework, bridging the dramatic realism with the deliberation that followed. Deliberative polling was used as a model to engage the audience in conversation of seven different proposals on how to improve the democracy. The audience was divided into two small groups to discuss the predefined proposals. These discussions were led by the actors, who actively argued for the more marginalised proposals in order to ensure that all perspectives were heard. The process of democratic dialogue required that participants listen to others' arguments and were open to changing their minds if they encountered better arguments. The goal was to bring out the best arguments for each of the proposals.

In the final part of the performance, the audience was asked to vote on the different proposals. The voting process was composed of a number of steps and designed to demonstrate different ways of

6 The Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency

making decisions in a democratic process. The different voting systems changed the audience's opinions, for example, support for the proposal on democratic duty increased after the discussions, illustrating how the deliberative conversations can influence public opinion. In another voting session, the audience was given five votes each, which they could distribute amongst the proposals they considered most important. The idea was to give the audience the opportunity to express their degree of engagement with the different proposals. To further explore the role of the majority and the minority in democratic decision-making, a lottery was organised based on the results of the vote to highlight how democratic processes need to find the balance between empowering the majority and allowing minorities to influence decision-making. In some performances, the audience chose to let the majority decide, while at other times they preferred to give the minority a voice.

Finally, the citizens' proposals became a way of giving the audience a hands-on experience reflecting real democratic processes. The proposal served as a framework for the conversations and gave the audience an example on how citizens might influence society between elections.

Through the two probes I learnt how the performances can provide audiences with tools to deliberate on democratic issues and also illustrate that changes in public opinion can be achieved through dialogue. The performances encouraged audiences to see themselves as active participants in democracy, rather than passive recipients of political decisions. The theatre format related to democratic theory of deliberation, where the central idea was for people to come together in conversation to find solutions to common problems. It illustrates that democracy can be practised in different forms, even outside political institutions.

Chapter 5. Monument

In this chapter I will discuss the third probe. It explored how technical mediation could contribute to the democratisation of public space, and whether documentary strategies might facilitate interaction with different stakeholders in society. The probe resulted in the production *Monument* that premiered at Helsingborg Stadsteater in 2022. The project was initiated and directed by Lisa Färnström, and the script and concept were a collaboration between Färnström and myself. The production was Helsingborgs Stadsteater's contribution to the international city fair H22 in Helsingborg with focus on innovation and urban development in the municipality.

Monument was a mixed media walk which could be downloaded to a mobile phone app for free. The performance could be accessed any time during June and July 2022. The three-kilometer walk started at the entrance of the Helsingborgs Stadsteater and then the audience passed by cultural institutions such as Helsingborg Concert Hall and Dunkers Kulturhus, before ending up on a bridge close to Campus Helsingborg, located in the former factory premises just south of Helsingborg Central Station. For 50 minutes, the audience were presented with different stories and reflections on Helsingborg. On the predetermined path, the audience could also experience monuments created in 3D through augmented reality (AR) technology.

The probe started from the notion that memorials reflect how citizens understand themselves, their time and the place they live in. In "Down with Flags, Statues, And Monuments: Cultural Memory in a Deliberative Democracy" (2002) legal scholar Robert Lipkin reflects on the role of monuments in relation to democracy. He writes that monuments, as cultural memories, are a vehicle to transfer cultural and political deliberations into contemporary society. Through the memorials, it becomes possible to create a narrative that helps interpret a cultural past, while also contributing to the self-identity of the current generation. The problem, Lipkin writes, is when a single narrative is allowed to dominate all other perspectives on shared public memory and where the messages contained in the narratives cannot or should not be questioned. Lipkin argues that this is the opposite of deliberative democracy and suggests that a solution to this is to invite a societal dialogue on status and memorials where citizens can make their voices heard.

Lipkin's discussion resonates with the work on *Monument*. The

idea for the project was to invite citizens of Helsingborg to imagine new statues or memorials to be part of the urban landscape of the city. In the autumn of 2021, Färnström and Helsingborgs Stadsteater announced a competition in which the citizens were to come up with suggestions for monuments: If you had the opportunity to build a monument in Helsingborg, what would you build? The call was presented in the local newspaper, on the website of the theatre, on postcards and on billboards around the city. The prize would be to have the winning proposals visualised and placed in Helsingborg through AR technology.

In addition, there were other activities to find voices that the theatre could not reach through their regular channels, such as social media and advertising. During the autumn Lisa held workshops with middle school kids. Later, Lisa and I met with a group of landscape architecture students and a network of Syrian women in order to also get proposals. The result from these workshops also ended up being part of the competition.

THE PROBLEMS WITH MONUMENTS

When Färnström presented the idea to the theatre, she described how the project's intention was to have both public and inclusive conversations about monuments (personal communication, July 28, 2021). The ambition was that the project would be innovative and playful, that the project would explore how established processes and perspectives for the construction of, placing, interpretation, assessment and care of monuments in public space could be challenged.

In Sweden, monuments have usually depicted historical figures from the nobility and royalty as well as military commanders. Today, this is not really the case anymore, instead, famous authors such as Astrid Lindgren and (male) football stars are chosen to be commemorated in the public space. The discussion about monuments in public space has not been as present in a Swedish and Nordic context as in, for example, the US.

Black Lives Matter has particularly scrutinised monuments as colonial heritage in the United States and this has led to a heated debate. In the US there have been art projects inspired by the critical discussions and aimed at addressing issues such as racism. One of the first public artworks in the United States to be presented using AR, *Broadway Augmented* was first shown in 2014 in California.

Described as “public art, virtually installed, superimposed on the real world through your phone” (Broadway Augmented, 2014), eleven artists from around the country designed public artworks for locations on Broadway that could only be viewed in real time on an Apple or Android phone or another smart device. The works consisted of public sculptures created through 3D modelling. AR technology made it possible to produce these artworks beyond the physical constraints of reality and present them in a specific location on the street.

Another more recent artistic example from the UK is the *History Bites* project in London in 2020. It allowed users to experience black history through commemorative plaques and sculptures using AR technology. The aim was to raise black children’s racial self-esteem and racial identity by showing them positive stories about black people, to prevent them from internalising negative stereotypes about their ethnic group (Hahn, 2020). *Monument* had many similarities with both art projects in terms of how it was conceptualised and designed, but the theme was adapted to a Swedish context.

Even if the discussion has not been as present in the Nordic context as in the US, there have been conflicts. A year before the project started there was a critical discussion around the use of monuments in the art academies in Oslo and Copenhagen, where employees left or were forced to leave their positions (e.g Pedersen et al., 2020; Brekke, 2020). In addition, there was also an ongoing project in Malmö, a city with inhabitants from more than 180 countries, where researchers and social entrepreneurs had initiated the creation of an anti-racism memorial. The initiative highlighted the need for a meeting place for Malmö residents to process the racist attacks, where several persons were killed by a serial killer, that took place between 2003 and 2010.

Furthermore, even when monuments represent people without a seemingly political bias or a problematic societal context, they may cause controversy anyhow. In Malmö, the statue of the famous soccer star, Zlatan Ibrahimovic, was destroyed and dishonoured by upset fans when he, as a former Malmö FF player, chose to invest in a rival football team. The project at Helsingborgs Stadsteater would not have been realised without the influence of these discussions and considerations.

THE SELECTED MONUMENTS

Helsingborgs Stadsteater received close to three hundred proposals in the competition. Most of them could be sorted into five specific categories. First, kings and statesmen (a surprising suggestion in this

category was the proposal to honour Vladimir Ilyich Lenin outside the theatre). The second category included inventors, musicians and athletes. There were more than ten suggestions to commemorate the late pop artist Avicii, who had passed away a few years earlier. The third category was friends and family. The fourth had to do with improving city life. And the fifth and last category had solutions to social issues that citizens recognised in the city. Of these three hundred proposals, six monuments were selected by a jury. The jury consisted of Lisa Färnström and Yvonne Eriksson from the artistic team, plus two external members chosen to represent the people of Helsingborg: Rijal Mbamba, a radio and TV presenter, and Asma Shiekh Attieh, a coordinator at Studieförbundet⁷ in Helsingborg. The external jury members were not only there to bring additional perspectives and voices to the selection process, but they would also have the role of ambassadors for the project and help get in touch with citizens that the theatre was unable to reach. The proposals that were selected were all very different in style. For the jury, it was important that the proposals told something about the present.

The first monument that was selected wanted to pay tribute to the nurses who struggled during the pandemic:

I specifically selected an assistant nurse because I think, like, there are very many who work with it, it is many times ungrateful, it is underpaid and there is a lot of responsibility and a heavy workload on top of it.... and if you look at statues here in town, it is just football players and old war armies, et cetera. And I think that if there is someone who should be highlighted and get extra ... their moment in the spotlight, it is people in health care... so I have chosen assistant nurses, they need to be highlighted, they need to be recognised more, they make a difference in real life. (Dahlqvist & Färnström, 2025)

The person who submitted the proposal motivated his proposal by stating that Helsingborg only has statues of football players and historic military generals and thus, he wanted to highlight the work of nurses because it is ungrateful and underpaid work that nevertheless involves a lot of responsibility and a heavy workload.

Another selected proposal addressed the narrative of Helsingborg as a divided city:

⁷ Studieförbundet is an organisation within the Swedish public education system

Hello, my name is Elin. I have lived in Helsingborg for two years and have worked here for two and a half. I would like to rearrange Helsingborg. Shake things up. Throw buildings and parks and shops up in the air and scatter them. In a new way where everything is mixed. Where everyone is close to a cultural institution, where everyone is close to a park. Because I want everyone to feel like we live in the same city. That we meet and that we have the opportunity to talk to each other. So that we understand each other and have a better community in the city and thus become more involved in each other's life situation. (Dahlqvist & Färnström, 2025)

For the submitter, it was important for everyone to feel that they live in the same city. This, in turn, would create a better sense of being a part of a community, as all citizens would feel more involved in each other's lives. Another proposal that was selected was: "A hanging garden with many exciting plants and water installations. It should appeal to people of all ages" (Dahlqvist & Färnström, 2025). This proposal was chosen partly because it was one of several similar ones that wanted to reshape the city, but also because it was a suggestion that would work well to visualise with AR technology.

As mentioned above, Lisa and I met with a group of Syrian women. They were all part of a network of women connected to Studieförbundet through the jury member Asma Shiekh Attieh. When we asked them what was missing in Helsingborg, they all said they missed a place where they could take their children.

What we want to build is an activity centre where all women and mothers can be. Where they can enjoy their leisure time. Maybe food, coffee and the children can just be there, and play there with each other. The women must get to know each other. Teach each other too. They must break the isolation they have... especially the women who have a foreign background. And maybe have more control over what is happening around them. (Dahlqvist & Färnström, 2025)

In the workshop with the landscape architect students, they were specifically asked to give suggestions on how Helsingborg could become a greener and more progressive city with a focus on climate change work. One proposal that came from this workshop was later selected. This proposal was based on the impression of Helsingborg

as a city with very hard surfaces of concrete and asphalt, especially along the shoreline:

The vision is to blur this edge and to stop fighting the water and allow the water to come into the city... em... and that would create softer edges with plants and a new pond and create a little more balance with all of this hardscape that is all around. Well, I think coastal cities have ... they face a lot of challenges especially with climate change and sea level rise. Something definitely needs to happen and you could do that in a few different ways. One is to try and, you know, fight the water with sea walls and all kinds of grey infrastructure or you could try to incorporate more green space, it is a more natural way of combating some of the challenges that come with sea level rise. So there are all kinds of things out there you could start to do and I think you need a mix of solutions to deal with some of these big challenges. (Dahlqvist & Färnström, 2025)

Although there is a lot of greenery in parts of the city, the proposal would further work on highlighting solutions on how the city could become better prepared for future climate challenges.

The last selected proposal came from an 11-year-old boy. He proposed a monument in the form of “a giant planet that hovers over Knutpunkten and looks like a mini-Earth” (Dahlqvist & Färnström, 2025). The reason? Because it was cool. This proposal was perhaps the most imaginative, but also tailor-made to be created and displayed with AR technology.

There was one perspective that was missing after the jury work and workshops had ended. A report on climate adaptation from 2019 provides analyses of what will happen if the water level rises in Helsingborg (Berdica et al., 2019). This report states that the sea level in the event of a storm could rise by more than two metres as early as 2035. In the worst-case scenario, the sea level could rise to 3.5 metres by 2100. In the report, the researchers write that these uncertainties about the future sea levels mean that the consequences are probably underestimated in a long-term perspective. This means, for example, that shelters built today may not prove to achieve the right level of protective effect in the future. This would of course have a profound impact on the city.

As no proposal had been received that addressed this specifically, and because it felt important to include it in the piece, it was decided

that this would be added despite it not being a proposal from any citizen. Färnström and I discussed this artistic choice, and what it would mean in relation to the open call. However, when we started interviewing the persons who had submitted the proposals, we realised that they often did not have any special feelings about being selected and that some of the participants preferred not to be interviewed, while others had not even provided their contact details. For them, it was more about contributing to an artwork and being part of the theatre's activities. This was also one of the reasons why the project started to focus more on the stories than on the statues, which I will get to shortly.

TECHNICAL MEDIATION

In *Monument* the audience was invited to take part in a mixed media walk via an app. The format is characterised by enabling innovative ways of perceiving, navigating and experiencing places and communities. In an article by sound artist and artistic researcher Eduardo Abrantes (2021), he describes the audiowalk as a combination of sonic scenography, embodied dramaturgy and sound design, in which the listening is activated through an immersive stereo soundscape for headphones, providing a being in, with, through, between and against the place and situation (Abrantes, 2021, p. 31). The technology has been used to create art for some decades. The visual artist Janet Cardiff started to produce mobile art pieces already in the mid-nineties, but since then, it has become a format that has been used in many different artistic fields. An example from performing arts is Rimini Protokoll's *The Walks* (2021). It is a collection of audio walks for the mobile phone. Each walk is a short audio experience covering a specific location and allowing interaction with the urban landscape. The production uses guided and staged listening in parks and in supermarkets. Voices, sounds and music transform familiar places and landscapes into theatrical situations through storytelling, dialogues and choreography.

In *Monument*, the selected proposals were presented through AR technology. This technology has been around for more than twenty years. In the anthology *Augmented Reality Art* (2022), the artist Tamiko Thiel notes that technology adds to the experience of physical space as the virtual artworks are superimposed on the real camera image of the surroundings. Thiel argues that both individuals and society place invisible layers of meaning onto personal and collec-

tive memory. Augmented reality makes it possible to merge memory and culture with the actual physical place (Geroimenko, 2022, p. 99). Through this the artistic expression enters a dialogue with the site, enabling associations to memory and culture, as well as allowing the viewer to physically interact with the location. This was also the main reason for trying out and using this technology in *Monument*.

STRATEGIES FOR THE SCRIPT

When Lisa Färnström and I were working on the script, we discussed many different strategies on how to combine the verbatim descriptions of the selected monuments with other stories and discourses into a coherent narrative. The Nigerian writer Chimamanda Adichie argues that if you want to tell a story about a person, a place, a country or a continent, it is important to include as many stories as possible (Adichie, 2009). Adichie, a postcolonial feminist and activist, argues that literature influences how people see themselves and others, and that stories can be used to control narratives. A single story describes only a stereotype, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. This approach places demands on the author as it becomes important to present a diversity of perspectives. In addition, the finished work will be influenced by the social position from which the author is speaking.

Adichie's text became an inspiration for the project. Our solution to include a manifold of voices was to use 'place' as the subject for the script: "What is this place? For whom? What do we want it to be?" (personal communication, Färnström, May 31, 2021). Technology provided the means to answer these questions. In *Mixed Media in Public Space* (2023), the Swedish choreographer Marika Hedemyr discusses how art can strengthen the relationship to public space through mixed media walks. Hedemyr argues that, when creating site-specific works in public places, it becomes apparent that a place never consists of a single narrative. Instead, it always contains a multiplicity of perspectives and stories that define what a place is and what it could be. This is also the case with *Monument*, where the audience was able to listen to stories and reflections from citizens during a walk of three kilometres through the city of Helsingborg. What was important in *Monument* was not only to find narratives that relate to the place, but also how the meaning of the place is negotiated through various societal narratives and life stories.

There are many stories about Helsingborg. It is a city by the sea, a city for entrepreneurs, but also a city divided into a rich north and a poor south. The latter also influences how the municipality views the future of the city. The vision document that governs the city assumes that all citizens share a common future even if they have different lives, needs, dreams and stories, and to accommodate all these differences, Helsingborg must become a “creative, united, global and balanced city” (Helsingborg, 2015). The hope is that large construction projects will solve the socio-economic challenges the city is confronted with. However, when speaking to people in the city, it became evident that these ambitions are not reflected in daily life.

Much work was put into the dramaturgical structure of the performance. Färnström and I circled around the question of how the script could be structured and how different types of narratives could be contrasted. In other words, we were looking for a dramaturgy with the ability to include different types of material that could show the various narratives of Helsingborg.

The dramaturgical structure was based on themes related to Helsingborg rather than dramatic conflicts. Here are the headlines of the dramaturgical structure:

WHAT IS HELSINGBORG TO YOU?
WHAT WOULD YOU BUILD IN HELSINGBORG?
SUGGESTIONS FOR MONUMENTS
THE PEOPLE ARE THE CITY
HELSINGBORG IS THE SEA
REFLECTIONS ON THE CITY
AGILE PROCESSES
CHANGING PLACES
HELSINGBORG IS SWITCHING PLACES
HELSINGBORG IS...
THE PUBLIC SPACE
SOME STATISTICS
HANGING GARDENS
THE CITY OF ENTREPRENEURS
WE DO NOT WANT TO PARTICIPATE
IMPORTANT WOMEN
INGEBORG HOLM
THE POOR RELIEF PROGRAMME

MARIA PERSSON'S PLACE
THE IMAGE OF HELSINGBORG
MEETING PLACES
WHO IS BEING HEARD?
TRANSFORMATIONS
THE FUTURE
THE END

Instead of following a single character or linear plot, the themes included multiple characters, events which allowed the audience to experience the city through different perspectives. The dramaturgical structure provided a framework to include a variety of material.

WRITING THROUGH RECORDINGS

Finding and producing material required different methods and approaches. An important working tool for producing *Monument* was the recording studio. The recording and directing were shared between Lisa and myself. The studio, and other recording equipment, was used both as a means of collecting material, but also to record text that was in the script. Using the theatre's professional sound studio, we were able to both record actors and regular citizens as well as to get different kinds of qualities in the reading. Mobile recording equipment also made it possible to make recordings to capture a documentary 'feel' to some of the fictive voices. In *Intermediality and Storytelling* (2010) Marie-Laure Ryan claims that one cannot always tell whether a text is fiction or not through simple inspection. There needs to be a 'signpost of fictionality'. A text that starts with 'once upon a time' is likely to be fiction while a non-fiction text cannot use fictional devices without being understood as fictional. These signposts concern form as well as content. Ryan concludes that "fictionality is neither a semantic property of texts, nor a stylistic one, but instead a pragmatic feature: a feature that tells us what to do with the text" (Grishakova & Ryan, 2010, p. 10) According to her, it is therefore not possible to know whether a statement is true or not when it is uttered, as long as one does not signal to the listener whether it is true or not. I believe this also applies to other qualities. In sound recordings, noisy outdoor recordings indicate a documentary feel, as does the difference between a literary and verbatim style in the text and oral presentation.

In *Monument*, this contributed to a dramaturgical and compositional thinking in relation to the different material. Documentary and verbatim material was mixed with fictitious stories, in such a way that it was not always clear which one it was.

EMBODYING NARRATIVES

Much of the gentrification process in Helsingborg is described in a very specific way: the descriptions of newly built neighbourhoods, hotels and beaches use a style of language as if the descriptions were formulated by a copywriter in an advertising agency to sell a product. The communal beach is described on the Helsingborg website as if it is an advertisement in a travel brochure:

Helsingborg has a fantastic stretch of coastline with a range of different beaches to choose from. For Helsingborg residents, a day at the beach is a given if the sun is out and there are warm winds. Pack your beach bag and choose one of the city's beaches, perhaps the chic Tropical Beach in the middle of the city centre that, with its palm trees, is reminiscent of the Mediterranean Sea. (Visit Helsingborg, 2022, my translation)

In *Lines of Narrative* (2000), writer and psychologist Shelley Day Sclater describes how discourse structure how societal narratives are told and interpreted, while the narrative provides further interpretations and negotiates how the discourse is to be understood (Andrews et al., 2000). In Helsingborg, it is evident that the language used within the municipality, and in the gentrification project that is being implemented, is infused with specific rhetorical tropes, such as entrepreneurship and creativity, to create a specific image of Helsingborg as a city. In the example above, the public beach becomes not only a place for recreation, but also a getaway to an exotic seaside paradise. To have a communal beach in the middle of the city is not enough.

Another example of this is the conference centre SEAU, which is located right next to the sea in the area of Dunkers Kulturhus. The conference centre is connected to a hotel with the restaurant 'The Living Room'; that was presented like this on their website:

Here, everyone is welcome. In our living room you can hang out with your friends and meet new people. With the sea, the boardwalk, the

city, the continent and the entertainment venue The Tivoli as your closest neighbours, you're always in the first row. [...] The Living Room Dining & Bar is exactly what it sounds like, your living room with food and drinks. A vibrant place where there is life and movement from morning to night. Here you can sit down on cushy sofas or comfy armchairs and have lunch or dinner. Our cuisine puts Nordic ingredients in focus. Here you can have your office and then walk directly into the AW⁸. (Nordic choice hotels, 2022, my translation)

To capture this language, a fictional character was created, 'The Visionary'. A man working as an IT entrepreneur who had bought an apartment in Oceanhamnen, opposite SEAU and across from the harbour. In the fictional context, the man was asked to describe his life in the new neighbourhood:

When they built the new hotel, SeaU, many people opposed it. My mom complained. But honestly, I like the hotel. I usually recommend it to new visitors so we can have a drink in the lounge or on the terrace and enjoy the view. I think about it like this: Paris has the Eiffel Tower. New York has the Statue of Liberty. Berlin has Brandenburg Tor. London has Big Ben. What do we have? Potential. Helsingborg has potential. On the other side of the water, you see Oceanhamnen, Helsingborg's new neighbourhood. I just bought an apartment there, right across the water, just behind that tall blue and white office block. I work in IT and frequently have meetings with clients from all over the world. Yes, the world is smaller now than when I was a kid. When my clients come here for business visits, I boast that I live in the best city in the world. One that truly thinks ahead. A place created for new ways of meeting, with a sustainable city centre designed for the future, and where you can really enjoy life. After a long day of hard work, I always take a dip at the Banana Bay. After that, you feel like a new person again. We do not need Big Ben or some old Statue of Liberty. We have potential, and that's enough for me. (Dahlqvist & Färnström, 2025)

By embodying the advertisement texts, with its characteristic focus on success stories and international outlook, through a fictional

8 AW, or Afterwork, is the term used in Sweden when colleagues go straight from work to socialise somewhere.

man's 'story', it became possible to point to implicit dreams of greatness. Allowing the superficial lingo used to promote a beach, a restaurant or a neighbourhood to be spoken by a person, the ideology that surrounds these places in Helsingborg was made explicit.

COUNTER-NARRATIVES

The Helsingborg website states that the future will offer a smarter, more caring and sustainable city where offices, retail and housing create a mixed environment for citizens (Helsingborg, 2020). This is the narrative that the city wants to promote. To prepare for societal challenges, the city has adopted a gentrification strategy (e.g Högdahl & Petersen, 2019), hoping that large development projects will solve the societal challenges the city will face. However, regardless of these efforts, one of the most common, and also most enduring, narratives to describe the city is the division between a rich north and a poor south, where Trädgårdsgatan divides these two parts of the city. Elisabeth Högdahl (2007) states that the street is an invisible barrier that people have to relate to. The street is not only a boundary that people encounter in everyday life, but also a tool to help imagine what Helsingborg could be in the future. Högdahl argues that there is a desire to cross and remove this border, shared not only by citizens but also by politicians, officials and business-people.

In the script, the narrative of the divided city was used to contrast the story of the successful IT entrepreneur. Here a man from a working-class background reflects on how the streets have been important in his family history:

In the past, many poor working-class people lived here. My family did too. My mum lived at Trädgårdsgatan 17 all her life. She worked at 'Galoschan' until they sold the factory to someone from outside Sweden. She's buried in the cemetery on Södergatan, and she could see her old flat from the grave if she were to look up. She always said that Söder was different back in the day; it was mostly workers living there, along with many lonely women caring for their children. She never wanted to move away from Trädgårdsgatan, even when she ended up in a dementia home in the north in her old age. By then, she did not know where she was. North or south. I tried to get her into another home on this side, but there was no room. This is

where I used to smoke, she always told me when we walked here, standing in this doorway. And over there, in the park, your dad and I kissed for the first time. I miss her. (Dahlqvist & Färnström, 2025)

The narrative from a different socio-economic class was used to renegotiate the dominant cultural narrative of the entrepreneurial Helsingborg. Instead, a different story was told about a woman who works in a boot factory and who was proud of her origins and roots. (e.g Dahlqvist, 2021). Not only do these contrasts create a richer narrative of the city in the script, but it also makes it possible to create counter-narratives to the prevailing political discourse.

WHERE THE STREETS HAVE A NAME

During the walk through the city, the audience passed a place known as Hallberg's Stairs. The name refers to one of the three consuls who presided over Helsingborg's trade for several decades from the end of the 19th century. The title 'consul' was awarded to prominent businessmen, entrepreneurs and ship owners (Helsingborgs Stadsllexikon, n.d.) and many streets, squares and even buildings are still named after these men. In the book *Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative* (2016), Marie-Laure Ryan and geographers Kenneth Foote and Maoz Azaryahu write how naming streets in memory of these men is in line with narratives of local history: "street names have much to tell about ideology and power, identity politics and political history of the cityscape" (Ryan, Foote & Azaryahu, 2016, p. 141). Street names are not a narrative as they lack an underlying sequential structure, however, they can become a storyline when a chronological or thematic sequential structure is introduced into the spatial arrangement.

To reflect on the name of Hallberg's Stairs in *Monument* an actor was asked to present the stairs as if he was a politician in the city and asked to talk about the historical significance of the name.

Helsingborg has always been known as the city of entrepreneurs. Long ago, when the castle was still operational, this pathway led down to the sea: Hallberg's Stairs. These stairs are named after Johannes Hallberg, one of Helsingborg's most significant historical figures. Johannes deserves to be recognised as a role model for today's young entrepreneurs. He was born at the end of the 18th century. Johannes Hallberg was the son of Ola Hallberg, who was a simple

brickmaker. Yes, Ola Hallberg was his name. And he was the father of Johannes Hallberg. When Johannes Hallberg was fourteen years old, he started working as a farmhand for Thomas Jacobsson. But when Thomas went bankrupt the following year, Johannes got a job with Consul Carl Hindrich Root ... who is actually another famous man who deserves to be recognised. At Carl Hindrich Root's, Johannes Hallberg met Oskar Daniel Krook. Johannes Hallberg and Oscar Daniel Krook then started a business together. As I said, Johannes is really one of Helsingborg's foremost men and he deserves to have these stairs named after him. Hallbergs Stairs. Johannes Hallberg eventually became a consul for Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, France, Russia and Portugal. Today, he is known as the 'Consul of Consuls' and remains one of the most prominent figures in Helsingborg. And these stairs are named after him. Johannes Hallberg. Hallberg's Stairs. (Dahlqvist & Färnström, 2025)

To emphasise that history is often gendered, all male names were repeated as often as possible in the script to illustrate this structural injustice. This use of the place as a narrative device highlights the distinction between "being a narrative" and "having narrativity" (Ryan, 2004, p. 9). Narrativity refers to the functions that govern what makes us recognise and interpret a story: in short, narrativity evokes a narrative response. Ryan writes that in addition to life itself, images, music or dance can have narrativity without being stories in the literal sense. Narrative could be understood as "being able to evoke [...] a script. In addition to life itself, pictures, music, or dance can have narrativity without being narratives in a literal sense" (Ryan, 2004, p. 9). This "allows the extension of the concept of narrative beyond verbal artefacts" (Ryan, 2004, p. 10). She remarks that even though language seems to be best suited for storytelling, this opens for other media and art forms, but also space, to be incorporated in storytelling.

In *Monument*, this understanding was central, as it opened the possibility of creating stories based on streets, hotels, and neighbourhoods. In the creation of these stories, it also became possible to decide what would be perceived as documentary statements or as fictional texts performed by an actor. The narrative understanding contributed creative methods to help expose the stories of the city and to demonstrate how they are constructed.

WOMEN OF IMPORTANCE

In Helsingborg, there was, and probably still is, a strong criticism, not least from feminists, of the fact that so many places in the city only honour historical men. In 2021, a feminist organisation submitted a list of names of women to the municipality that they believed deserved to be recognised (Hedlund, 2021, December 27). Lisa Färnström and I were keen to include this list as part of an explicit feminist counter-narrative. However, when we contacted the people behind the organisation to ask if they wanted to meet, they told us that they did not want to be part of the production in any way:

Hi! We are delighted that you liked our wish list. However, we need to decline a meeting, even an informal one, as we do not wish to be involved in H22 in any capacity. We have concerns regarding the focus of H22 and the implications for resource allocation. I understand this is not something Stadsteatern is responsible for, but I still want to explain our position. (Dahlqvist & Färnström, 2025)

Already in an opinion piece from 2019, the feminist organisation directs sharp criticism at the city's priorities. They wrote that by approving the budget for the city, the politicians had decided to invest a quarter of a billion kronor in the city fair H22 while at the same time cut back on spending for things like housing for homeless and Helsingborg's Women's Shelter (Bergvall, Berg & Thorén, 2019, December 17). Although the feminist organisation did not want to participate and discuss the list in the piece, they were asked if they could at least make an audio recording of their email response. Their response letter contributed an important perspective to a narrative about the city as it criticised its priorities. They agreed to this.

When later being asked about female pioneers in Helsingborg that they thought should be considered when naming new streets, they wrote: "If you wish to highlight historical women based on our wish list, you are free to do so, as we do not control the writing of history. Good luck to you! Best regards, The Board of FemHBG" (Dahlqvist & Färnström 2025).

It was decided that the Hallberg's stairs were to be contrasted with a collage of voices reading out the names of women who deserve to be highlighted in the Helsingborg's history:

Nanny Palmkvist, educational pioneer
Sally Bauer, outstanding long-distance swimmer
Kristina Borg, led the local movement for women's suffrage
Caroline Seger, one of the country's greatest footballers
Eva Wigström, preserved hundreds of folk memories
Maria Zoéga, entrepreneur behind the success of the coffee company
Nelly Krook, enabled business and investment
Anna Q Nilsson, fearless film star
Martha Persson Henning, doctor
Carolina Hjort, pioneer in special education
(Dahlqvist & Färnström, 2025).

In the section presented above, the names of the streets and the way they are presented form a narrative that reveals a structural injustice since only men are highlighted and celebrated through the naming of streets. This was done by placing different structural patterns, perspectives and themes in a sequence, both within an embodied story and between different forms of text and linguistic structures.

INCLUDING SELF-CRITICISM IN THE NARRATIVE

As mentioned above, *Monument* was Helsingborgs Stadsteater's contribution to the city fair H22, and the project used new and innovative technology with all the connotations that it has with entrepreneurship and innovation. It was thereby instrumental in creating the image of Helsingborg that the politicians wanted for the project. As the project continued, Lisa and I became increasingly concerned about our own roles in relation to this. There was an ongoing critique in newspapers, from citizens, researchers, and non-profit organisations about how the city was allocating resources towards gentrification instead of solving problems like homelessness, domestic violence, or trying to overcome the socio-economic divide between different parts of the city. At the same time, we also realised that we had a responsibility to the theatre and to the citizens who had submitted proposals and taken the time to share their life stories with us. If we were to openly criticise the premise of the whole project, we would be diminishing those contributions and everyone's efforts.

The solution to our problem was to introduce a new fictional character, performed by Färnström. This persona would embody the artistic team to create a narrative voice for the piece. The radio pre-

senter and jury member Rijal was then invited to ask critical questions to this fictional character. To give the interview a documentary flavour, it was decided that he could ask whatever questions he wanted without telling Färnström in advance. It was important that these questions were perceived as critical and that they questioned the premises of the whole project. However, it proved difficult to improvise. Instead, a script of questions was created to prepare the 'interview'.

Rijal: Hmm. Alright. In short, what is *Monument* actually about?

The Artist: *Monument* is an attempt to tell the story of Helsingborg, exploring what kind of place it is today. We have reached out to many people in Helsingborg to understand their perspectives on the city.

Rijal: You say you've asked many Helsingborg residents, but have you really managed to reach everyone?

The Artist: No, we have not reached everyone in Helsingborg.

Rijal: Why is that?

(Dahlqvist & Färnström, 2025).

In the interview it is stated that the efforts to include different voices proved difficult to achieve. The reasons were many. Färnström and I did not have access to a diverse network in Helsingborg. The theatre already has a large and loyal audience that is homogeneous in terms of age, ethnicity, and socio-economic class, and their outreach is designed to communicate with this audience. In addition, the length of the artwork of 50 minutes limited the possibility to include a diversity of voices. At the end, interesting perspectives that could have added more perspectives to the narrative were excluded; there was not enough time to feature them due to the time constraint.

The Artist: It is difficult to reach

Rijal: Because, in the end, it is about people's lives. It is about who gets to speak and who is seen. Whose image do we see when we look at the city? We all understand how important representation is, and what it means in radio, television, the arts, and music. Should we not put more effort into ensuring that we include these voices? (Dahlqvist & Färnström, 2025)

It was also important to include criticism of the concept of the project. Most of the artistic team did not live in Helsingborg, which further contributed to a lack of connection to issues that are important to the citizens.

The Artist: It is frustrating, and now we're having this conversation, and in an hour and a half, I will get on a train to Stockholm and return to my normal life. Yes, the question is... what does it mean to do something meaningful? (Dahlqvist & Färnström, 2025)

There was also an awareness that many integration projects are just short-term interventions with no long-term impact.

Rijal: It is tough. Is it not typical that figures like Raoul Wallenberg, Magnus Stenbock and Henke Larsson have real monuments, while women and minorities have to settle for augmented reality concepts like *Monument*? I can understand why people might criticise this and ask, "Why not give us a real statue?"

The Artist: Yes, I see your point. Art can be both wonderful and frustrating at the same time. Our project is about exploring the "what if." What if we had an all-activity centre? What if we had a hanging garden? What if we had large monuments to honour nurses instead of Magnus Stenbock? It is about imagining possibilities. I believe that fantasies and ideas are essential for real change to occur. (Dahlqvist & Färnström, 2025)

It felt important not to defend our own position but to leave it open for the audience to reflect on, agree with, or dismiss. Therefore, the only answer to all these criticisms was that art could provide other perspectives on society through the power of imagination.

MULTI-PERSPECTIVE SCRIPT

During the probing process, much effort was put into making the script. The goal was to create a multifaceted narrative from the public spaces of Helsingborg in which different experiences of the city could coexist and illuminate each other, and through this show a variety of voices and experiences. By including several perspectives, a narrative structure was created where the audience had to navigate through the different stories. To achieve this, the script included a mix of many different materials:

- 1) Verbatim material, such as the interviews conducted with the citizens who had submitted the selected proposals.
- 2) Semi-verbatim material, such as statements of people who were connected to the theatre and knew about the project, who we could ask to reflect on the theme.
- 3) Personal conversations with persons working within the municipality and the cultural institutions.
- 4) Material from documents and other written material, such as reports and promotional texts from web pages belonging to hotels, conference centres, and the municipality.
- 5) Statistics
- 6) Radio Broadcasts
- 7) Fictional stories.

In addition, some of the voices had specific functions, such as the guiding voice that was included to instruct people where to go and how to use the software.

Monument was created by bringing together different text materials in a dramaturgy where events and stories were presented through a structure built on themes. The result can be described as a multi-perspective narrative. According to the narratologist Marcus Hartner (2014), multiperspectivity can be defined both as a fundamental aspect of storytelling or as a way of telling in which multiple and often diverging points of view are used to create a narrative. Multiple perspectives can fulfil a variety of functions; most often they highlight the limited nature of a single perspective or draw attention to various types of differences and similarities between the perspectives that are presented. Hartner suggests that the aim is not to present a truth but rather to illustrate that different perceptions of reality can coexist.

This method is often used in research on dramatic and performative text, where narrative concepts that can be connected to multiperspectivity, such as polyphony and polyvocality, to describe particular aspects of how to understand the function of the line, the text and the performance. It thus involves an approach to both the writing as such, and also to the text. In *Handlingarnas Sken* (2023), Annika Nyman writes that to her, polyphony means allowing different disparate arguments to be expressed through one and the same character. To let “the impulses, functions and directions of the actions be multiple” (Nyman, 2023, p. 277, my translation). This

means enabling several different simultaneous interpretations for the characters in the plays, while at the same time maintaining causality between the actions of the characters.

For Tale Naess (2020), polyvocality goes beyond this. It is not only about the combination or collision of different voices, or the potential to create clash and tension between the composition and its parts, or between parts within the composition. The polyvocal can also exist within the parts themselves, within the passages, or even inside a character. This approach tries to avoid an overall point of view in the play, thereby destabilising the idea of a unifying narrative or narrator.

Vanja Hamidi Isacson writes in her thesis *Flerspråkighetens potential i dramatiska verk* (2022) how she explores polyvocality through a compositional lens, allowing for a multiplicity of texts, sources, voices, languages, and styles. By creating dramatic works where multiple voices and languages coexist, Isacson challenges norms around which languages can be heard in Swedish theatre. Perspectival storytelling and multilingualism create opportunities to make marginalised experiences visible while challenging ideologies and claims to power connected to the use of language.

Monument certainly relates to these different ways of characterising perspectival narratives; however, it is essential to see the methods used by the artists to describe their works as linked to different practices and socio-political goals. In Isacson's case, there is a clear political agenda to change the view of the norms of language and the exercise of power that it represents. For Nyman, multiperspectivity is a tool for bridging the gap between dramatic writing and literary writing. For Naess, it is about developing performative text as a form of collective writing.

In *Monument* the strategy of multiperspectivity became a pragmatic feature to include a manifold of voices and perspectives. This strategy and method helped to structure the material and to create a coherent 'story' of Helsingborg that the audience could take part in during their walk through the city. Furthermore, this strategy also contributed to the fact that the collection of material had to be done via outreach to audiences that do not normally visit the theatre. It required the artistic practice to be open to what comes up in the encounters, which in turn unlocked both the process, and also the theatre as an institution.

LEARNING OUTCOMES FROM THE PROBE

Monument was as much a communication and outreach project as an artistic one. Therefore, it would have been good to have a communicator in the artistic team whose job it would have been to get in contact with different social groups, making sure both to communicate the idea of caring for the citizens who proposed monuments, and to nurture the connections to the people who participated in the workshops.

In conversations with Lisa Färnström it became obvious that the concept of the piece changed in the middle of the process. What started out as a project about monuments in urban space instead turned into several areas of interest. First, it became an investigation into how the citizens of Helsingborg perceived their city and the large gentrification projects that were going on at the time; this made the critical voices increasingly interesting, as they expressed that they did not have a voice in the democratic process. Second, there was an ongoing discussion in the newspaper where academics presented interesting takes on what was happening in Helsingborg, but this discussion wasn't noticeable among the citizens we met, nor did we find these conversations among politicians and officials. Third, both Lisa and I thought it was important that theatre becomes more inclusive, both in relation to class and ethnicity. This meant that much time was spent trying to reach out to potential audiences that were not visible among the regular audience of the theatre.

All of this meant that the concept developed continuously, and a consequence of this, was that the competition element that initially was communicated to the residents of the city started to fade into the background as the project progressed. Also, as the project changed midway, the 'right' material was collected late in the process. Färnström and I waited for the material from the open call before starting to write the script, record voices, and create the soundscape for the work. It would have been better had the project started with an interview process to find interesting life stories that could guide the further work. By doing so, it would have been possible to actively look for more documentary voices, providing an even wider range of perspectives to the production. Now the institutional process guided the artistic probing instead of the other way around.

CONCLUSION

The probe explored how theatre can contribute to making more voices heard in the public space. The project began with a competition inviting citizens to propose ideas for monuments. Many of the city's existing monuments honour historical men associated with power and prestige, while other groups have been invisible in the public sphere. Through advertisements in the media, three hundred proposals were collected. To collect more stories, workshops were organised with different groups, including Syrian women and landscape architect students. These workshops provided new perspectives on the city's identity and its potential for future development.

The selected monuments were visualised using AR technology. The proposals also became the basis for the script and themes of the performance. The script used both documentary and fictional stories to create a narrative about the city. By mixing interviews, statistics and fictional characters, it became possible to contrast different narratives and create a dialogue between the vision documents and the experience of the residents themselves.

The discussion of gentrification and inequality in the city was a recurring issue throughout the project. The inclusion of critical voices in the work made it possible to produce a more complex picture of Helsingborg to the audience. Introducing a fictional narrative voice enabled criticism and self-criticism, paving the way for reflection on the shortcomings of the piece in relation to the power structures of the city. Most of the artistic team did not live in Helsingborg, which created a distance between the city's inhabitants and their reality. However, the inclusion of citizens in the creation process made it possible to identify ways to interact with the public space of the city, and to establish connections with groups in society that were not reachable through traditional marketing channels.





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Troubadour
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Can Dance
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What life would
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III. Engagement



How to vote

Everyone has one vote

Everyone can come up with proposals

The majority decides

If the vote comes within 60-40 we in

We continue to keep the conversation

In any vote we must listen to the min

If there is a minority, they have the r

Everyone has the chance to speak on

The purpose and

Freedom an

How to ch

Chapter 6. Participation and Deliberation through Conversation

In Chapters 3 and 4 I have presented the probing process for the two performances *Skapa Demokrati* and *Öva Demokrati*, which were the result of the inquiry. In this chapter, I will return to these performances to discuss how the approaches and methods used in the performances relate and can contribute to democratic participation and deliberation. In theories of democracy, participation refers to making sure that citizens have the opportunity to participate in political processes actively. According to this notion, the direct rule of citizens should be promoted whenever possible. This focus on active participation also relates to art which aims to engage with social actors in artistic processes. According to art historian Claire Bishop (2006), the most stated motives for participation in art are activation, authorship, and community. She claims that the ambition of the artists is to empower the participant through the artistic experience and thus strengthen social bonds by negotiating meaning through the artwork. In *Artificial Hells* (2012), Bishop writes that while participatory art may seem to be based on democratic principles, this rarely changes the conditions for the individuals as it

maintains existing power structures: translating experiences from the arts into the social sphere to bring about real political change is often difficult. Therefore, she is critical to the outcome of the social processes found in the artworks, as participation is turned into social exercises that do not contribute to real change. In *Skapa Demokrati* and *Öva Demokrati*, these kinds of exercises were the whole point, as they were a testbed to experience democracy and to engage in deliberation with others. Folke Tersman and Torbjörn Tännsjö write (2022) that although citizens of Sweden are very used to various forms of participation through organisations and workplaces that increase citizens' ability to participate in political processes, many of these arenas are disappearing. Participation in NGOs is declining while many organisations are being restructured to become more like private companies. They argue that this is an unfortunate development; democratic arenas should be revitalised rather than dismantled. In a personal conversation (September 3, 2020) with Tersman, he emphasised that theatre, even if it is fictitious, could have an important role to play in helping to strengthen democracy. The theatre is an institution that could provide opportunities for citizens to practice participating in democratic processes. In *Skapa Demokrati* and *Öva Demokrati* the audience was given the opportunity to experience what it means to propose democratic objectives to a group of people they didn't know, to make a case, to listen to others and to vote, while at the same time, they were given a space to imagine alternatives to today's society together. The latter should not be trivialised.

PARTICIPATION IN A THEATRE CONTEXT

In *Audience Participation in Theatre* (2013), the theatre maker Gareth White argues that while Bishop's descriptions provide an important starting point for understanding the role of the audience in participatory theatre, her argument is largely based on a different institutional context. According to White, an audience could, in the context of theatre, be understood as both a social construction and a position that relates to the outside world. Theatre audiences are formed and behave according to traditions and cultural contexts, but they are also observers of what happens in their own and others' real life.

In his book, White outlines different principles for understanding the role of the audience in relation to participation drawn from

theories of, for example, Jacques Rancière, Nicolas Bourriaud and Erika Fischer-Lichte. However, White has a more pragmatic approach than these theorists. He starts from a notion that: “Audience participatory performance has among its building blocks – it media – the agency of the participant, and their point of view within the work” (White, 2013, p. 8). He points out that participation in theatre covers a wide field and features many different expressions. He suggests that different performances relate to the approaches presented above in different ways, based on how they are conceptualised.

To me, the pragmatic notion of participation is more helpful in my artistic practice than the more ideological ideas about the role of the audience in relation to the artwork or the social context. I believe that the audience members can have different positions in different performances, or even within the same performance. This became apparent when I presented *Skapa Demokrati* to thirty theatre students in Oslo in 2023. I was invited to be part of a workshop reflecting on the role of the audience in theatre. In the event there were so many students and I had half of them sit in a circle, as in the performance at Dramaten, while the other students were seated in an auditorium to observe the performance. The performance now had two different types of audience, half of them participating and the other half spectating. In this performance, I had asked the teacher leading the workshop, who was sitting in the auditorium, to raise his hand after an hour to ask if he could join. When he did, he was first denied to join in. He then started to challenge this decision, which led to an animated discussion between the two audience groups. Some of the audience members in the circle invited him and the other the spectators to join in, yet, very few people wanted to participate in the democratic conversation and instead criticised the efforts made by the audience members in the circle.

When we discussed the performance after the presentation, one of the participants said she was so frustrated by the democratic process. She said: “I leaned back and tried to watch everything that was happening from the outside to see how my peers were struggling to discuss the different proposals, but suddenly I felt I had to clarify something, and suddenly I was completely involved in the performance and negotiations that were going on” (personal conversation, April 27, 2023). She explained it was like that throughout the performance. To me it was evident that the two audiences had different experiences. In the circle, participants were locked into nego-

tiating the different proposals. Even though it was fiction, it seemed to be important for the participants to create a structure for self-governance. However, as it was a messy process, some of the participants oscillated between being able to fully commit and trying not to get caught up in the mess. The audience in the auditorium saw how fifteen people tried to organise themselves around a common democratic task, and how difficult it was to complete this. Through this workshop, it became clear to me how different the audience experience can be within the same theatre format. Also, the feeling of being part of the performance and being an observer of it, can change over the course of the same performance. It becomes possible to stage different levels of participation. This contributes to creative practices where, on one hand, it is possible to engage the audience and on the other, to enable moments of reflection on what the reactions and emotions of this engagement mean on a structural and societal level.

THE DEMOCRATIC PROCESS IN THE PERFORMANCE

In *Skapa Demokrati*, it was possible for the audience to change the premise of the performance if only they could convince others to agree to it through voting. During the performance in Oslo, I took very little responsibility for moderating the conversation and sorting out the various proposals from the audience, as I wanted to understand the role of the moderator in the performance. The audience became increasingly frustrated as they felt I was not fulfilling my duties. Finally, one of the audience members decided to nominate himself as the new chairperson of the group. When the participating audience voted on the proposal, he received an overwhelming majority, and I had to resign. The rest of the performance was led by a member of the audience. For the performance to be true to its concept, all proposals had to be subject to the democratic process. It was also important that decisions were respected. Such an approach required that the format could not be too tightly controlled or structured, as it would not have allowed for such an approach. To make it work in the performance, the democratic situation provided a framework rather than a dramaturgical structure.

As discussed earlier, the actors proposed electoral rules for audience approval. They typically received affirmation, but on one occasion, the audience disagreed with the decision being based on a

majority vote. When it came time to vote, all decisions were taken by majority vote anyway, even though the audience had not approved such decisions. It seemed that the audience wanted to keep the voting process open, to see what kind of issues would be discussed and decided, and only when they were sure that this was the best method would they agree to vote. However, this was never stated, the audience adapted to the situation and took a pragmatic approach to the process. These examples illustrate something paradoxical about *Skapa Demokrati*, as it is based on the premise that the decision to launch a new democracy is taken by a majority vote. What precedes democracy?

Öva Demokrati had a more structured dramaturgy. The performance discussed ideas taken from research, but there was no actual agenda around any of the ideas included in the performance. They could just as easily have changed between performances. The performance was based on a different premise than in *Skapa Demokrati*. In *Öva Demokrati*, it was important to demonstrate that a democratic process involved citizens accepting and submitting to democratic decisions. The audience had to take a stand on proposals that they might not have felt committed to for democracy to work.

Skapa Demokrati and *Öva Demokrati* were created for audiences to experience democratic practices. By allowing the audience to discuss and make decisions together, the performances illustrated the existential conditions of democracy, as discussed earlier. We are codependent on each other to find a way forward. In this way, a relationship between performance and audience emerges, that not only reflects democratic processes but also becomes a place where democracy was practised and understood through participation.

EXPLORING CULTURAL CONTEXTS

In *Skapa Demokrati*, the audience negotiated basic democratic values. They were encouraged to make proposals on the objectives of democracy and to discuss which freedoms and rights were important. For the Swedish audience, these suggestions often corresponded to the Swedish constitution. This was the case for all ages. Young people suggested that the fictitious democracy should have a tax system, a pension and free healthcare. Taking part in the democratic process felt natural. In a personal reflection after one of the performances, one young audience member said that she didn't think she was that invested in democracy, but she was surprised to find out how much she actually cared.

During the performances at Dramaten, I did not reflect on the audience members' attitude towards democracy. When presented in performance in various cultural contexts, however, I started to reflect on the differences. At the Swedish Embassy in Washington D.C., nearly forty minutes at the beginning of the performance were spent ensuring that minorities had the opportunity to make their voices heard before decisions were made. A parallel development occurred when the audience included undergraduates at Georgetown University. However, this was not the first time the performance caused reactions. In a performance at a research conference where I moderated the discussion, an audience member who said she had not grown up in a democratic system, explained that she was afraid of what would happen in the performance. She explained that she had very little previous experience of a democratic process. On the same occasion, the democratic approach was ideologically questioned by another audience member who came from a country outside Europe. She made a post-colonial and feminist interpretation of the performance format and completely questioned the idea of having to submit to the democratic rule of the fictional democracy. Out of this came a proposal to allow a veto on any proposal that could be considered patriarchal or demeaning to minorities. I, being a white middle-aged man from Sweden, probably contributed to the interpretation that democracy is a Eurocentric and patriarchal phenomenon.

This is what makes *Skapa Demokrati* interesting to me, firstly because issues of importance to the group will have a major impact on the proposals submitted and the discussion that follows. Secondly, the performance also allows an understanding of different approaches to how democracy is perceived in the cultural context in which it is performed. In this thesis, I have not focused on the latter, but I believe that the performance could be developed to study this. However, this would also require a more rigid methodology to understand the parameters that influence the audience's perception of democracy.

DELIBERATION BETWEEN THE AUDIENCE MEMBERS

Öva Demokrati explored democracy as a practice by involving the audience in deliberation and decision-making. Deliberative democracy focuses on the process whereby political decisions are motivated by public reasoning centred on the common good. In a delib-

erative democracy, there should be a respectful dialogue between informed and competent citizens who are open to hearing the arguments of others. Through deliberative conversations, citizens have the opportunity to reflect on and deepen their understanding of societal issues before making decisions. In the performance, the audience was given the opportunity to discuss and vote on different proposals to strengthen democracy in Sweden. Although the outcome of the discussion had no real impact on the political sphere, it seemed that the audience still felt that the decisions they made could have real consequences. However, a fair deliberative process is not only about articulating good arguments but also about giving people a voice. At Dramaten, the audience was not curated to represent a statistical sample of the Swedish public. Instead, audience members bought tickets to a performance that they chose to attend.

In *Innovating Democracy: Democratic Theory and Practice After the Deliberative Turn* (2008), philosopher Robert Goodin describes mini-publics as small groups of citizens who discuss democratic decisions together. These groups can claim representativeness when they statistically represent society, and through this, these mini-publics can gain formal power in a political system by making it possible to influence public opinion. Goodin argues that if these mini-audiences are not statistically representative, they can be compensated for by holding many conversations on the same topic to see what (if any) larger patterns emerge from these conversations. Goodin also argues that although these groups have no formal power to change, they are still valuable from a democratic point of view. Engaging in dialogue exposes all potential solutions and enables the participants to examine their individual strengths and weaknesses.

There were challenges with *Öva Demokrati* and *Skapa Demokrati* particularly in ensuring that all voices were being heard and that discussions were not dominated by a small group of participants. Here the moderator had an important role to play. There was also a risk that the dialogue reproduced existing power structures rather than challenging them. According to Goodin, this has to do with the dynamics of the mini-public. If there is a 'natural' starting point for conversations on a particular topic in a certain cultural context, this will influence the following conversation. This means that these dialogues will have certain characteristics. One is that these dialogues become inflexible: the further into the process the conversation gets,

the more difficult it is to shift from one path to another. Another typical characteristic is the unpredictability of the conversation.

Goodin describes how early statements have a major impact on how the conversation will progress, and because these are somewhat arbitrary, it is not possible to control the outcome. To deal with this, a conscious strategy around inclusion and representation is required. This was also something that became apparent in the performances. A way to solve this was to introduce new elements in the performance to break this dynamic. In *Skapa Demokrati* this was hard to achieve due to its open structure. In *Öva Demokrati*, the deliberative conversations were followed by a voting procedure that pointed to the imbalance of power in the democratic system.

DELIBERATION AS AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT

In this chapter I have described how *Skapa Demokrati* and *Öva Demokrati* have explored participation through deliberative conversations. There are, however, other ways in which deliberation can be used in theatre to strengthen the democratic engagement of the audience. Dramaturg Louise Ejgod Hansen discusses in her article “Theatre Talks as Micro-Democracy” (2018) the ways in which theatre can be understood as a democratic art form within the cultural policies of the Nordic countries, particularly with reference to theatre and participation. Rather than assuming that going to the theatre makes us democratic, Hansen examines how this happens and asks how people should participate if the theatre experience is to contribute to the democratisation of society. Her research draws on focus group interviews conducted immediately after a number of selected performances in Jutland, Denmark. Hansen used the audience development project *Theatre Talks* created by Scenekunstnetværket Region Midtjylland, as a case study to explore her notions. She states that theatre has a close and complex relationship with democracy, both theatre and democracy have their origins in ancient Greece, but also the audience’s experience of being part of a larger collective has contributed to the notion, expressed by Hannah Arendt, that theatre is the most democratic of all art forms. The theatre experience provides an opportunity for individual reflection and public debate and invites people to speak and act. For Hansen, the latter is an important argument for looking more closely at audience experiences at specific performances: could the theatre be a place where individuals can reflect on and discuss social issues? To

explore this, she uses Fishkin's deliberative polling as a lens to study audience reception. Through her project, participants were given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences of different theatre performances. Hansen argues that these conversations became an opportunity to engage with worldviews quite different from one's own, and that this engagement also engaged the audience. The combination of potential for community building and the exchange of experiences and reflections demonstrates the democratic potential of engaging participants in the theatres.

Hansen's project is somewhat different from the two performances I have discussed here, but her approach illustrates the potential of using models from democracy research in theatre, both to allow audiences to reflect on their experiences, but also to practice the basics of democracy. I think her example shows a potential for how deliberation can contribute to the role of the audience becoming part of a democratic dialogue based on theatre.

A NEW FORMAT: THE CONVERSATIONAL THEATRE

The purpose behind *Skapa Demokrati* and *Öva Demokrati* was to find models for how theatre can contribute to democratic engagement. By using performances that explore participation and deliberation, it became possible to demonstrate how democratic principles work in real life. Thus, it became possible to understand how theatre could claim a role as both an artistic and democratic space. These formats then led to a new theatre format, the conversational theatre (Dahlqvist & Haller, 2025c). This new format provides audiences with the opportunity to test their arguments against one another. By engaging in conversations, it becomes not only an artistic experience but also a method for developing societal practices. The format allows citizens to reason, argue and listen to others' viewpoints.

In the format, the dramaturgical structure provides a framework for the audience to explore and challenge their thoughts about society while listening to others' life stories and perspectives. For this to work, the conversation must be open. To provide the audience with a fuller theatre experience, it can be supplemented with audio and video elements. The video projections are good for helping to contextualise the theme, to introduce facts, and document the input from the audience. Performative elements become tools to determine the level of interactivity. In an open format, video and audio provide cues to guide the audience to the next segment. When a

more structured dramaturgy is desired, the audio and video help establish a coherent narrative through the performance.

The conversational theatre is a format that can be adapted to discuss societal topics beyond democracy. The interactions between the audience members are central to the performance. Rather than delivering a narrative or a message, the format creates space for the audience to discuss and negotiate societal issues in an inclusive environment.

CONCLUSION

Skapa Demokrati and *Öva Demokrati* provided audiences with an arena to meet and discuss democracy. The performances focused on participation and deliberation. By allowing the audience to discuss and make decisions together, the performances became a way of exercising democracy. By allowing the audience to propose and discuss how society should be governed and organised, or how democracy could be improved through various proposals, the theatre can help citizens to strengthen their understanding of democracy and their own part in it. These two formats have led to the development of a new theatre format, the conversational theatre. I have suggested that it could be defined as a performative format in which the audience's conversations with each other form the core of the performance.

Chapter 7: On Inclusion

In this chapter I will reflect on the work with *Monument* and discuss how it relates to democratic inclusion. The production included a process that consisted of several different parts. For example, there were outreach activities, documentary fieldwork, conceptualisation, writing and the work to produce the app. During the probing, there was an underlying idea that the project should include the citizens of Helsingborg in the performance. Inclusion is a fundamental principle of democracy since it aims to ensure that the voices of citizens are recognised. However, there are different ways of understanding the concept. Sociologist and political scientist Rainer Bauböck argues in *Democratic Inclusion* (2018) that there is not just one principle of democratic inclusion, and that therefore it is important to distinguish their different roles within the boundaries of democracy (Bauböck, 2018, p. 6). In his reasoning, he narrows these principles down to three. Two of the principles he mentions I have already discussed, 'the all affected principle' and 'the all subjected principle'. In *Skapa Demokrati*, democracy was formed within the circle in the theatre space, which meant that we illustrated how these two principles affected the notion of community within the audience, and how going from one to the other changed the understanding of the limits of democracy. The performance, however, was based on the assumption that the audience already felt part of society and that they had access to the democratic institutions. Here, I will focus on the third type as it ties in with the ambitions of *Monument*.

The third principle can be defined as encompassing everyone who has a legitimate interest in membership. Bauböck assumes that citizenship is not just a set of rights and obligations but membership of a self-governing community, so a democratic principle of inclusion must focus on individuals' relationships to a particular political community rather than to a government and its decisions (Bauböck, 2018, p. 39). He also notes that membership of a political community is a necessary condition for human autonomy and well-being (Bauböck, 2018, p. 40). In *Monument*, the focus was on including the voices and perspectives which we perceived as excluded in Helsingborg, especially in relation to theatre and cultural life. The strategy therefore was, in addition to making an open call to the theatre's target group, to invite people with different socio-economic backgrounds and thus to reach a different audience than the one

who usually attends the performances at Helsingborgs Stadsteater. The theatre has a large and loyal audience engaged and initiated in the repertoire and attending the performances. Yet, socio-economic differences are visible among the visitors. In Helsingborg, the theatre and other cultural institutions are in the wealthy northern part of the city.

Baoböck's inclusion principle suggests that citizens can or should demand to be included. Still, it is often not easy for excluded groups to demand access to cultural and democratic meeting places. Instead, I believe institutions should have a democratic duty to reach out to groups that do not feel part of the majority society. This project required developing strategies to involve people, creating networks with different groups, and engaging in discussions on the inequalities of who is represented and heard in the urban space. Moreover, it demanded reaching out to citizens who did not feel included vis-à-vis the cultural institutions in the city.

INCLUSION THROUGH TECHNOLOGY

The idea behind *Monument* was to create an artwork that could include diverse perspectives from the citizens of Helsingborg. To accomplish this, different texts were used as artistic material to present a variety of societal narratives. The technical mediation of the mixed-media walks helped realise this. Audiowalks and other similar performative formats provide a creative means of expression that contributes to inclusion. In her thesis, Marika Hedemyr writes how she has developed what she has coined "choreographic storytelling" (Hedemyr, 2023, p. 216). In her mixed reality walks, Hedemyr creates a narrative structure where different voices, perspectives and narratives interact to characterise a place. The audience becomes an active part of the story by being able to physically navigate the real environment while taking part in sound, image and text via their mobile phones. Hedemyr reminds that "when creating a work in a public space, both you and the work will become part of the web of stories already attached to the site" (Hedemyr, 2023, p. 219). It is therefore important to decide how to relate to the dominant narratives of a place. By allowing participants to choose their own path through the story, a polyphonic experience is created allowing for both individual and collective interpretations.

In *Monument*, the movement of the audience through the city was part of the dramaturgy. This created, as in Hedemyr's example, a de-

centralised experience in which the audience itself merged the different perspectives and elements of the story. The city was used as the focal point to include multiple voices. And then, the dramaturgy was structured around themes that in different ways reflect the perception of Helsingborg.

Hedemyr outlines how four different perspectives, technology and devices, attitudes and values, narrator and guide and the role of the audience, affect the compositional practices for making the mixed media walk (Hedemyr, 2023, p. 222). It was also the case for *Monument*. The different stories were structured as separate audio files triggered by GPS; a new audio file started when the listener passed by a location. The technique allowed control in detail when and where the stories were presented to make them relate to what was in a particular place. However, it took time to understand the limitations of the technology and how it related to time. It meant that there were dramaturgical challenges to find a timing for how long it takes to walk between different GPS points. The dramaturgical work in the performance oscillated between consideration of time and place, affecting how the stories could be told. A guide was included in the audio files to help the audience orient themselves during the walk, giving instructions to make it easier to take part in the walk. At the same time, the guide was given the role of ‘the all knowing narrator,’ which also took away some of the notion of inclusion. Through this function, it became apparent that there was a given and correct way to orient oneself through the city. When analysing the work retrospectively, it would have been interesting to investigate whether it was possible to have a more open narrative in which different geographical areas could harbour stories about the city and the audience could listen to the stories on their own terms. I believe this would have contributed to inclusion, as it would have been possible for the listeners to find the perspectives by themselves instead of having us present them linearly. It was, however, not possible with the technology available to us.

Hedemyr writes about how the audience and passers-by are included in the story by becoming part of a “storyworld” (Hedemyr, 2023, p. 223). In her example, audience members can be given fictional roles to become part of the work. In *Monument*, this approach was not used. Here, the listener participated in predetermined stories and perspectives in a linear narrative. There were some moments where the audience was asked to visit the stories of others.

A lesson learnt is integrating the audience members' perspectives and, more explicitly, including them in what Helsingborg is and can be. It could have contributed to a sense of inclusion.

WHO CAN BE HEARD IN THE URBAN LANDSCAPE?

The work on *Monument* started with collecting ideas for memorials. This was done through an open call asking citizens to submit proposals and stating their motivations for the monuments they wanted to see. The activities had to do with engaging with the city, with who can be heard and seen in the urban landscape. In "Silence, Motifs and Echoes: Acts of Listening in Postcolonial Hamburg" (2019), Katharina Kellermann argues that who has the privilege to speak for and about others is as much a part of the city's memory landscape as the material traces left in urban space. For her, the question of citizenship is therefore connected to a culture of remembrance. (Kellermann, 2019, p. 93). Who is represented and whose story is heard is crucial on an existential level. She reminds us that urban memorial landscapes are not only manifested in the form of architecture, street names or monuments, but also have other material incarnations. A critical, social and artistic analysis of postcolonial memory cultures should therefore also take these into account. She points to acoustic materialisations such as voices, sounds, music and atmospheres. These influence individual and collective perceptions of the city and can be markers of social action. Using various acoustic concepts, Kellermann discusses how a political listening to the sounds of the city, as well as the silencing of the sounds that are absent, allows for a reconsideration of the meaning of a place, and further allows the city to be remembered in new ways. Kellermann writes: "I adopted the use of sound to reveal obscured dimensions" (Kellermann, 2019, p. 100) To me, the work on *Monument* seems to have had a similar agenda as the one Kellermann describes, but instead of exploring the city through its soundscapes, as she did, the idea of our production was to use the exploration of the urban landscape as an artistic method to narrate the city and to find and present perspectives that were excluded from the dominant social narratives. It was important to include the motivations for the selected monuments, as well as the proposals that were declined, to open a discussion of what and who can be heard in the public space.

As I mentioned, one of the lessons learned is that the process

should have been different, starting earlier with the writing of the script. When I reflect on the work, I return to this notion because it would also have enabled working even more with documentary storytelling, to integrate sounds and recordings from the city into the story to create a more complex and richer narrative, especially about the city and whose stories are manifested there. It would also have been interesting to integrate AR technology more into the experience of the urban landscape. The technology has the potential to imagine other worlds radically and actively contribute to a more inclusive society.

The ambition with *Monument* was to make the selection of the chosen proposals transparent via the work of the jury. However, it quickly became apparent that the AR technology affected the selection, and what could be modelled in 3D became a factor in discussing the proposals. Artistic considerations also came into play. It felt as if certain perspectives were missing. While it is true that the proposals were decided by a jury, it was not possible to see the artwork as a democratic process because it was a theatre event created for a specific context. There was very little at stake for those who submitted and those who were selected. While the ambition was to discuss how memorials contribute to shaping societal narratives, here, we could have done more to contribute to an in-depth discussion by making the selections more important. It could have been done by giving the monuments more emphasis in the audiowalk and initiating discussions in the theatre where the audience could discuss who and what should be manifested in the urban space. At the same time, it quickly became clear that the discussions in Helsingborg were not about memorials but rather about who has the right to reshape the city's narrative, even though the memorials in Helsingborg were also problematic in different ways.

REPRESENTATION IN THE PUBLIC SPACE

In a personal conversation (February 21, 2022) with Anja Petersen, an ethnologist working at Dunkers Kulturhus, she spoke about an encounter a few years earlier with an immigrant who had recently arrived in Sweden. During a guided tour of the city, the woman approached Petersen and asked her about a statue in a small square near the city hall. It was a statue of David from the Old Testament. When Petersen asked why she was interested, the woman explained that the story of David and Goliath was still very present in the country she came from, and that she therefore found the statue problematic. The statue portrays David after he has defeated Goliath. He stands with one foot on his antagonist's

severed head. Petersen said that the woman explained that Goliath was a Philistine from what is now Palestine. At that time there was no war between Israel and Hamas, as there is today, but a conflict was still ongoing, and people had to migrate because of what was happening. The woman said: "Here he is now, humiliating his opponent in the middle of the parade street in Helsingborg". She was surprised why a secular country such as Sweden had a statue depicting a story from the Bible. There was no answer to this.

An important aspect when creating *Monument* was that memorials in the urban landscape also should represent a perception of society. Moreover, these monuments are important from a democratic perspective because, through the challenges of a limited historiography, they show the importance of taking marginalised voices into account. In *Monument Wars* (2009) art historian Kirk Savage argues that public monuments contribute to a sense of community. The public monument fulfils a deep need for connection that he believes can only be fulfilled in a real place. It is a place where an imagined community is materialised and confirmed in a simple way. This experience is grounded in a sense of belonging in both individual and collective bodies. (Savage, 2009, p. 4). His argumentation draws from reflecting on the role of the National Mall in Washington D.C. The Mall is the constructed park between the Capitol and the Washington Monument, home to memorials and statues as well as museums and other cultural sites. It is also a place where many political and civic rallies and protests, as well as presidential inaugurations take place. Savage writes that The Mall thus became a space for political and societal rallies in the 1960s and the 1970s. It allows Americans to witness how different groups urged the society to reflect on itself. The Mall has thus become a space for the political theatre to reflect on the symbols and on the country's history with the specific aim to reflect on the American identity. To me, it suggests how collective memories can help to establish a place where society can be negotiated and established beliefs renegotiated. Savage describes how the Vietnam War Memorial was inaugurated at The Mall in 1982. It was the first monument in the US which commemorated the victims rather than glorified the nation. The monument, designed by Maya Lin, was a granite wall with all the names of every soldier who was lost in combat during the war in Vietnam. Lin calls her work an anti-monument, a concept first articulated by British historian Herbert Read, who said that the only logical way to remember catastrophes was to create a memorial of disillusion and despair. Nevertheless, most public monuments are, according to Savage, essentially

designed to bring closure to a historical event and therefore become a conservative form of art. The idea that a monument should stand forever removes any kind of historical complexity from what is depicted. It is this lack of historical reflection that makes it a challenge from a democratic point of view. Statues built a few hundred years ago are suddenly problematic because of what they signal today.

Returning to the statue of David, Petersen said that a few years earlier, a debate had taken place in the municipality around the statue when politicians were approached with a proposal to replace it with a statue of a working-class woman. During the debate, some of the politicians argued against historical revisionism and that removing the statue would give in to this. The proposal was rejected. Similar arguments have been heard in the debate about removing statues that may be perceived as symbols of oppression against blacks in the United States. Legal scholar Robert Lipkin (2000) writes that monuments, as cultural memorials, are vehicles for transmitting cultural and political considerations to contemporary society, and these messages become a narrative that interprets our cultural past and orchestrates a collective self-identity for the present generation. It becomes problematic when the memorial becomes a message that is uncritically expressed with the goal that citizens accept the implicit message without any questions or objections. Monuments that dictate a specific meaning for events stand in opposition to deliberative democracy and culture. This shows that history is not neutral and that there are many considerations around how we deal with the memorials that belong to history. In the case of the statue of David in Helsingborg, it remains in the same place.

In *Monument*, the artistic idea was to make room for a discussion of who and what is represented in the urban space. One way to do this was to bring these aspects into the script. Even if art cannot solve the feeling of exclusion, it can be important to recognise that the experiences are taken seriously. However, it is also important to realise that this can minimise the frictions that exist in society. Art then only contributes to the blurring of power relations and the relativisation of incompatible perspectives rather than harbouring actual conflict areas.

OUTREACH ACTIVITIES

Lisa Färnström's goal was for this phase to be "very similar to the process of a conventional documentary theatre" (personal communication, May 31, 2021). The process of collecting proposals helped to create legitimacy for the project, and to anchor the project amongst the citizens and within the theatre institution. However, the project was initiated for a completely different reason, partly to find formats where the theatre could have an audience during the pandemic and partly to work with emerging technologies and novel performing arts formats. The effort to include the audience was thus more about exploring communication than opening up the theatre and contributing to the involvement of the new public. However, it was obvious that many resources were put into the project and that the open call was important for the theatre as it helped strengthen ties with their audience. In 2014, the Centre for Audience Development at the Freie Universität in Berlin released a report on audience development in European theatres (European Theatre Convention, 2014). The study focused on what theatres were doing to include new audiences. The activities were divided into four categories: programmes, marketing, education and service. The researchers noted that it was interesting that activities included in programming primarily involved strategies around development of new works rather than trying to reach specific audiences with specific productions. *Monument* fell into the category of developing new formats, as opposed to focusing on outreach. In the study the researchers also found that cultural organisations across Europe have questioned whether they are really contributing to the challenges facing society. The report argues that it is crucial for theatres to maintain and strengthen ties with a broad cross-section of society to contribute to the development of democratic societies in Europe. I believe it is possible to do this even if the commission is to explore and create works using emerging technologies.

In *Monument*, finding stories to the audiowalk required working with documentary strategies to get access to perspectives that the open call could not provide. As the theatre is in the wealthy part of the city, it was suspected that proposals would mainly come from citizens living in socio-economically privileged areas. This turned out to be true. It was therefore important to find voices from outside the majority community, and especially from people with a migrant background. As I mentioned, one of these workshops was with a

group of Syrian women. The first meeting took place at the theatre, where the women were invited for coffee. The theatre's artistic director welcomed them. It was important to show how valuable their visit to the theatre was. In one of the personal conversations (February 22, 2022) with the women, they shared their experiences of coming to Sweden to try to create a new life. They talked about how they organise networking meetings to learn how Swedish society is organised, and how these meetings also served as a gateway for newly arrived women to become part of society. All said they were happy in Helsingborg and that they had a home and an organised life. However, they had to make financial considerations to make ends meet. One of the Syrian women said that she could not afford to be downtown, or to visit the newly built hotels and houses. She said that neither she nor her husband drank alcohol, so they did not want to go to bars or restaurants, but that they sometimes went out on Sundays with the family to eat in restaurants. The boys liked French fries. Above all, she visited the Väla shopping mall with her children so that they would have something to do at the weekend. She said that there she and her family would walk around and do things with the children. Meeting the Syrian women highlighted an important but discouraging aspect of the role of theatre in society. Sitting in the foyer of the Helsingborgs Stadsteater, the women called for a place where they could meet and enjoy culture. It was clear that they did not see the theatre as such a place.

I believe that projects like *Monument* can make a difference. The outreach and documentary strategies made the theatre open its doors and invite people who otherwise would not have visited the institution. Theatres, such as Helsingborgs Stadsteater, has the potential to profoundly engage its audience in a dialogue about issues that concern society. It is possible to replace the shopping centre and provide people with an arena to feel like they are part of the community.

ETHICAL CONCERNS

Monument explored a process in which different theatre and materials, fictional and documentary, were combined into a narrative. The structure of the script made it possible to let different stories exist in parallel and comment on each other. It was done by using fictional statements, embodying social discourses, and using real voices, which were edited and restructured. In the process, the

work thus oscillated between verbatim and documentary material as well as fiction. The ambition was to capture a complex reality without reducing it to just ‘one single truth’. The question is how to understand the blending of all these elements. In an article, the independent filmmaker and post-colonial theorist Trinh Minh Ha states that there is no such thing as a documentary. She claims that “it is illusory to take the real and reality for granted and to think that a neutral language exists [...] To use an image is to enter fiction” (Balsom, 2018). Minh Ha understands documentary as a movement between the artist and the world. “The first is to let the world come to us through an outside-in movement – this is what some call ‘documentary’. The other is to reach out to the world from the inside out, which is what some call ‘fiction’. But these categories always overlap” (Balsom, 2018). By combining fictional and documentary voices and stories, a question of authenticity and responsibility arises. I am aware of the challenges with this approach, which deals with authorship and context. In “Perform, Citizen! On the Resource of Visibility in Performative Practice Between Invitation and Imperative” (2019) theatre scholar Maike Gunsilius points out that strategies such as ‘giving a face’ and ‘giving a voice’ to marginalised positions from the privileged perspective of the artist can be problematic. (Gunselius, 2019, p. 266). This was something Färnström and I struggled with during the process.

In *Monument*, we never claimed that it was a documentary work to avoid some of these challenges. The question of whether this worked remains. Nevertheless, we created a narrative where the boundaries between documentary and fictional were blurred. This allowed for a broad representation of reality, where different voices and narratives could coexist without being forced into a uniform structure. This diversity can be seen both as a strength and a challenge, especially in relation to the audience’s perception of what is documentary and what is fiction. The strategy thus affected not only form and structure, but also the ethics of storytelling. Trinh Minh Ha writes: “If you are close to someone like your mother or your lover, and you make a film about them, how would you show and tell? It’s quite difficult. Every time you speak about them, you can hear the other person’s voice challenging and protesting: ‘No, I’m not like that. What’s wrong with you?’” (Balsom 2018). Instead, she suggests that one could speak of someone nearby:

When you decide to speak nearby, rather than speak about, the first thing you need to do is to acknowledge the possible gap between you and those who populate your [performance]: in other words, to leave the space of representation open so that, although you're very close to your subject, you're also committed to not speaking on their behalf, in their place or on top of them. (Balsom, 2018)

It raises the question of whether it is possible to allow documentary subjects to resist and demand their right to influence how their story is used, or even refuse to participate in a project, even if it is presented as fiction. Minh Ha speaks of people that are close to her, but I believe the same goes for people we met during the workshops and in our fieldwork. My interpretation of Min Ha's notion of 'speaking nearby' is that it is a way of listening to the Other and trying to interpret the life stories as closely as possible, through one's understanding, with the realisation that this interpretation may be wrong. Encounters with others can be problematic, and it is important to be humble about them. The alternative cannot be to describe one's own experiences and just invite people with the same background as oneself. However, in *Monument*, we were cautious on how the verbatim material was presented and to credit the interviewees in the recorded statements. In some cases, we also presented the recordings to the persons we met to make sure that they could influence how they were presented.

CONCLUSION

Inclusion is seen as a fundamental principle of democracy by making different voices and perspectives visible. In *Monument* the starting point was to ask citizens what sort of memorials were missing from the urban space. This took the form of an open call in which residents could submit proposals for monuments with motivations. In addition to this call, workshops were also organised to gather other perspectives on the city. In the artwork, documentary and fictional elements were combined to create a multiperspectival narrative about Helsingborg. Through using technology participants were invited to navigate the urban space, and experience how these multiple perspectives of the city came together and interacted.

The project was based on the premise that inclusion is not only about letting all voices be heard but also about actively working to ensure that these voices are given a place in the democratic process

and in forming a common identity of the city. In the chapter, I highlight the importance of challenging structures by inviting citizens from different socio-economic backgrounds and cultural experiences.

Lastly, I reflect on the ethical challenges of mixing documentary and fictional elements, which requires an awareness of how to represent people and their experiences without denying them the opportunity to shape their own narrative. It is a challenge to make sure not to speak for anyone but instead to give space to the voices of others.

Chapter 8: In Dialogue with Society

In the previous chapters, I have discussed the various works and how they can contribute to democratic processes. In this chapter, I will reflect on how theatre as an institution and art form can contribute to societal engagement. In *Democracy, Theatre and Performance* (2024), theatre scholar David Wiles argues that democracy always was and always will be an act of performance. It is related to tragedy in the way it likes to contrast two moral principles, usually in the form of justice or equality versus freedom (Wiles, 2024, p. 169). In theatre, power relations are negotiated as the actors try to find the best arguments against each other and the audience. He claims that in both politics and in theatre reason cannot be separated from emotion; a good argument can be the best way to create a feeling in the listener that the speaker is the best leader for that moment. However, if democracy cannot free itself from rhetoric, the audience needs to be attuned to its techniques. Educating people about democracy should perhaps involve teaching young people how to behave and how to evaluate spoken performances (Wiles, 2024, p. 183). I believe that a way to do this is to return to the original role of theatre. Literature scholar Richard Halpern, going back to ancient Greece, argues in the essay “Theater and Democratic Thought” (2011) that theatre served as a place for political debate and contributed to the education of citizens in deliberative reasoning and critical thinking. In his text, Halpern discusses how theatre in Greece mimicked political life and functioned as a place where ideas, conflicts, and alternative futures could be explored. He concludes that a more detailed study of Greek theatre could offer a model of how politics can be related to a social context. Perhaps theatre could offer a model for articulating, not only the political and the social, but also, on a methodological level, philosophy and a more materially conscious form of history. (Halpern, 2011, p. 572). I have tried to achieve this in this thesis. By combining existential narratives that put human striving at the centre with social interaction between individuals, theatre can become a medium for people to meet and get to know the arguments of others. It creates an understanding of other people’s beliefs, goals, and life stories while addressing the present and present social challenges. I believe these efforts make it possible to simultaneously experience democracy as a socially habituated act and a philosophical and political idea. Raising one’s hand to make

one's voice heard is a bodily practice that a citizen learns in a democratic society. To make one's voice heard. To speak and to listen. It is what potentially makes the meeting between people in a theatre space transformative. However, the encounter itself might contribute to change. In *From Deliberation to Dialogue* (2012) political scientist Daniel Andersen states, with reference to Habermas, that while he still believes that arguments can play a role, he believes the encounter with others, face to face, is something that makes it possible for people to change their opinions: "The very presence of the other becomes a potential catalyst for change aside from what is said" (Andersen 2012, p. 6). Following his argument, I believe that through these artistic encounters it is possible to experience the processes of democracy, and to try out methods for learning how democracy can be developed. This is the precondition for social change.

BIPARTISANSHIP

In this research project I have chosen to focus on democracy as a form of governance, and not as a battleground between political ideologies. By framing the performances around democratic principles such as participation, inclusion and deliberation, I wanted to explore how theatre could provide a model of how democratic principles work in practice. I am aware that it is possible to raise critical questions regarding such an approach: Does the avoidance of party politics impede on the ability of theatre to engage with pressing contemporary issues? There is a risk that I might simplify the complex nature of engagement in society, and that the performances will be perceived as disconnected from the social sphere. However, socially engaged theatre does not necessarily involve taking a specific political stance; it can also be a matter of making space for a wider range of perspectives and allowing audiences to express their own opinions. By allowing the audience to discuss the governance of society rather than their political views, theatre can provide a platform for the audience to explore democratic principles without the divisive baggage of party affiliations. There will naturally always be differences of opinion among audience members, but by focusing on what unites rather than what divides, the chances of an open conversation, built on trust and the willingness to listen to others, might be greater. I hope this will strengthen the link between theatre, audience and society.

I believe that creating a space for dialogue requires the artist to

leave room for uncertainty and openness. Instead of offering fixed solutions, art can help raise questions and open up critical thinking. This could strengthen the ability of citizens to participate in the democratic dialogue by encouraging reflection and challenging existing norms and power structures. It could serve as an alternative political sphere by providing an arena for citizens to engage politically, including individuals who would like to take a more active part in democracy but are unable to do so due to education, culture, socio-economic status or gender. Therefore, art can offer an important platform for citizens to debate about our shared future.

THEATRE AND THE SOCIAL SPHERE

There is often an idea in society, politically expressed or not, of what art is and can do. This also informs cultural policy. In 2023, the Nordic Council of Ministers produced the report “Kulturens roll och nytta i samhällsutvecklingen” (The Role and Benefits of Culture in Societal Development, my translation), which is an overview of research on the societal benefits and impact of culture in different areas of public life, based on the discussions on Nordic cultural policy. The report notes that art has been given a variety of societal roles and functions over time. However, it is evident that cultural policy in the Nordic countries sees art as something that can contribute to the development of society in a broad sense. This may involve, for example, the formation of a national identity, promoting economic growth, or contributing to good health. This attitude can be observed very clearly in Sweden, where a committee has been set up to develop a cultural canon to strengthen Swedish identity, and where the policy of the Minister for Culture emphasises business and entrepreneurship.

However, there are other arguments in favour of understanding art and culture as an essential part of democracy. Cultural economist Justin O'Connor advocates for rethinking the role of art in society. He writes in *Culture is not an Industry* (2024) that there is a need to see culture as part of democratic citizenship and not as an industry for generating work and innovation: culture is crucial to imagining a new vision of the future. He advocates that culture, as an object of public policy, should be moved out of the ‘industry’ and back into the sphere of public responsibility. This means reversing the dominant discourse of the last thirty years, and convincing poli-

ticians and public opinion of the importance of culture for the social foundations of an equal and free society.

I believe this should be interpreted as a new form of instrumentalisation of art, where the potential of the arts to serve as a democratic tool is emphasised. Joel Hellman, Dean of the Georgetown School of Foreign Services, writes:

The power of performance, the power of storytelling and the power of narrative are absolutely essential. In my mind, they are some of the only things that actually can have influence on the political dialogue in this very peculiar moment in the politics of the United States and Europe. (Hellman 2022)

I believe it is both hopeful and terrifying to believe in the power of art. To put your hope in art being the only thing that can bridge polarisation and establish trust in society feels like gambling with high odds, yet it also restores the radical potential of art and theatre. The key question is how to ensure that statements like Hellman's above do not become mere empty phrases. Perhaps theatre should accommodate both the dream of a solution to political polarisation, and as a place that promotes inclusion, conversation and intimate encounters between people where change is more easily identified.

It is why it is important to actively work to open theatre to all groups in society. To me, this relates to what the political scientists Mark Chou, Jean-Paul Gagnon and Lesley Pruitt write in the article "Putting participation on stage: examining participatory theatre as an alternative site for political participation" (2015). They argue that art provides opportunities for the public to see things anew, thereby undermining the 'rationality' of liberal democratic politics. Political narratives are structured by ideology, which limits the ability to evoke radical solutions to our societal challenges, which in turn are balanced against opinion polls and considerations of how parties and politicians should maintain political power. Artistic narratives, on the other hand, can depict a society in the making, allowing for new opportunities for social communities. While the inability of theatre to speak to large audiences and influence immediate political outcomes may be seen as a weakness, it does not necessarily have to be. The authors suggest that those who now seek unconventional forms and forums for political participation often do so because they are dissatisfied with formal, institutional politics and with the

power of the state to manipulate what is and what is not politics. It may be that the performances in this project contribute to democratic engagement precisely because they open up to other experiences and contribute to new types of encounters. While noting that theatre participation is both limited and non-representative, this is countered by another key feature: the embodied nature of theatre. Based on three performances, Chou and his colleagues discuss how theatre can contribute to the practice of participatory democracy. By witnessing and sensing the struggles of others, the audience can be transformed into something akin to a political body. In a society where so much is mediated, dispersed and virtual, the immediacy and old-fashioned nature of a theatre encounter can be a remedy for alienation and displacement (Chou et al., 2015, p. 619–610). In the different texts discussed above, there appears to be a consensus that theatre can contribute to democratic engagement through participation, deliberation and inclusion. In this thesis I have tried to highlight formats and strategies for the arts to include marginalised voices and perspectives, to engage people in conversations about democratic principles, yet I do not know, other than through anecdotal feedback, whether the performances have actually brought about any change or affected anyone or not. I write the latter not to downplay the achievements of this thesis. Rather, there is a need to articulate how theatre can change norms and behaviours, contribute solutions to complex social challenges, and do so without compromising artistic and aesthetic quality.

CAN THEATRE CHANGE SOCIETY?

In the text above, I describe how the encounter within a theatre and arts context might contribute to transformative change at the individual level, but the question is how it is possible to change a social structure. Although it is obviously more difficult, history shows us that it is not impossible. When Färnström and I were out scouting for stories for *Monument* to be presented during the audiowalk we learnt about a film that led to Sweden getting a new legal framework for poor relief in 1918. In the personal conversation with Anja Petersen, mentioned earlier, she said that the film was adapted from a play that premiered in 1906 at the Helsingborgs Stadsteater. The playwright, Nils Krok, was on the board of the incentive care in the municipality and had become more critical to know about certain policies affecting the poor and vulnerable people. His intention for

writing the play was to create debate. In the theatre play, a woman was left with small children and a failing family business after her husband died. She was ill and had no way of supporting herself and her children and asked the poor relief in Helsingborg for help. She got approval for support, but the amount she would get was too small for her to live on. The solution was to move into an almshouse. When she recovered from her illness, she wanted to move out of the house and get her children back, but her wish was denied. She was charged for her stay, and now she had a debt to the city that she could not pay.

The theatre play was debated after the premiere, but it did not get the desired result. Krok then reworked his script into a film and gave it to the well-known Swedish director Vilgot Sjöström who decided to direct the film. When the film premiered, it was criticised for portraying the relief practices in a too cruel and cynical way.

Given the claims to authenticity inherited from Krok, the film version of Ingeborg Holm stirred controversy in the press. Taking cues from a critical review in *Dagens Nyheter* after the film's opening in Stockholm, an incensed social worker maintained that the film distorted the realities of the Swedish system – and especially the practices in Stockholm – regarding poor relief. (Olsson, 2010, p. 75)

Nils Krok defended himself and said that the film only depicted reality. This is an example of when art intervenes in real politics and changes a society. It shows that art can contribute to change even at a structural level. However, it is important to emphasise that this example is not proof that all art can, or even should, be transformative at a societal level. In the case of the welfare system in Sweden, the change would almost certainly have come anyway. The film, and the play it was based on, came at just the right time to embody a change that was long overdue.

THE DUAL FUNCTION OF THEATRE

At a time when democracy is being challenged globally by growing populism, authoritarianism and polarisation, the arts can help counter these trends by providing tools for a more inclusive and informed public debate. This gives citizens the means to better understand and influence democratic processes. The performances I have presented are examples of how this can be realised. In *Skapa*

Demokrati, participants engage in discussions that challenge their views on democracy. *Öva Demokrati* deepens this process with deliberative conversations where the audience is divided into groups to practice democratic argumentation around predetermined policy proposals. Although some topics were perceived as less engaging, everyone was encouraged to participate in the conversation. Different voting methods show alternative ways of expressing the will of the people. *Monument* included people's stories about the city they live in, highlighting how memory and the public sphere are shaped. These different approaches to the performative and conceptual expressions of theatre are not only representations of different aspects of democracy, but they also inform our understanding of it.

There are also other examples of when theatre is actively involved in shaping society. *The Art of Assembly* is one of many such initiatives, a series of lectures and conversations that bring together participants from different fields of art, social activism and academia to discuss the potential of collective assembly in times of uncertainty. The series is based on dramaturg Florian Malzacher's book *The Art of Assembly. Political Theatre Today* (2023). The website presenting the project states that the potential of these assemblies lies not only in changing reality by designing radical models of democracy but also in actively shaping them (*The Art of Assembly*, 2023). The Dutch project *In Search of Democracy 3.0* by New Heroes is another project to strengthen democracy through theatre. On its website, the collective describes its activities and presents a performance about the future of democracy (*In Search of Theatre*, 2025). The performance combines theatre, music, and direct communication to explore what the audience considers to be the most important elements of a democracy. It also invites the audience to share their ideas on strengthening it.

Through these and similar projects, it becomes possible to make more arguments about the theatre as a place that can accommodate criticism of societal discourses and as a democratic institution. In *Theatre is Democracy in Small* (2022) Milo Rau puts forward a similar idea. Rau reflects on the difficulty of democratising a theatre institution due to its size and structures but emphasises that we need to try. A theatre institution is so much more than just a stage for plays.

It is an agora, a place where all the voices and society are to be told.

Yes, a city theatre is a democracy in the small. It is, you could say, the

blueprint for an idyllic republic in the making – with all its conflicts, its diverse opinions, its dreams and hopes. (Rau, 2022, p. 172–173)

Theatre should not only reflect history and the present but also be part of the negotiation of what the future should be. And he adds: in dialogue with an audience, the city and the world. Perhaps that is what theatre can contribute to in different ways. Theatre can create alternative models in which society is not only mirrored but constantly tried, performed, tested, rethought, or even reinvented. By balancing these different functions, theatre can not only reflect societal challenges, but also serve as a model of inclusive engagement, bridging the gap between artistic expression and political practice. This interplay between critique and institutionalisation is what makes theatre an important actor in a democracy.

DO WE NEED AN ALLIANCE?

My starting point for this project was a concern about the state of democracy in Sweden. What I have found is that the theatre institution can play an important role in providing a platform for democratic engagement. However, theatre institutions in Sweden and Europe are currently navigating a difficult landscape of political distrust and anti-democratic forces.

Bringing together various perspectives and areas of expertise may require a collaborative effort to enhance democratic engagement. One approach to achieve this is to create alliances between theatre, civil society and academia to strengthen democracy and public debate. Theatre explores the existential and moral struggles of human beings, fostering a sense of belonging. Civil society organisations bring together individuals with shared interests, providing spaces for meaningful participation from people of all backgrounds. Meanwhile, academia offers knowledge and insights into the significant societal challenges we face today. By working together, these sectors can create opportunities for civic engagement, promote social cohesion, and challenge dominant narratives. Such alliances could help cultivate a democratic culture that is resilient and capable of managing conflict and diversity. This initiative would require not only practical collaboration but also efforts to build a common understanding of the concepts and processes that shape democratic resilience.

This project is a proposal for such an alliance. All performances

are created within the framework of institutional theatre, where artistic research has provided methods for probing themes and approaches to developing new formats which, in the case of *Skapa Demokrati* and *Öva Demokrati*, have been informed by the research being done at the Institute for Futures Studies.

CONCLUSION

Historically, theatre has been a place of political discussion, where democracy and theatre share a common ground. By returning to this original function, theatre can serve as a model for how to develop society, not only by reflecting on it but also by actively testing and exploring alternative possibilities. To further strengthen democracy, theatre can build alliances with civil society and academia. Theatre can thus provide an inclusive arena, giving voice to marginalised groups and helping to create alternative forms of democratic participation. By engaging in dialogue with society and citizens, theatre can function both as a site of social criticism and as a democratic institution.





IV. Transformations



Chapter 9. A Change in Practice

Using artistic probes as a starting point, I have explored how theatre can be conceptualised and structured to allow an audience to experience different aspects of democracy. The purpose was to understand how theatre can contribute to strengthening democracy by engaging in dialogue with society.

Through the performances, I have developed methods and strategies for theatre which promote democratic inclusion, participation and deliberation. In conversational theatre, a format developed from *Skapa Demokrati* and *Öva Demokrati*, deliberation is the core activity, giving the audience the opportunity to reflect and actively engage in democratic processes. The format helps to practice skills that are crucial for a healthy democracy, such as negotiating on values while also listening to others. The format highlights cultural differences. In Sweden, the audience seemed to trust in democracy, while performances in the US focused more on minority rights, illustrating differences in how democracy is perceived. Also, in some cases, audiences changed the format of the performances by renegotiating the rules, which demonstrates the potential for the format to allow audi-

ences to both participate in, and to challenge the democratic process.

In *Monument*, strategies were used to allow different voices and experiences to be included. Through an open call the citizens of Helsingborg were invited to contribute with proposals for monuments. This was complemented by a documentary method in which stories were collected through workshops with different groups within the community. The dramaturgy was structured to include a variety of perspectives, thus contributing to create a web of stories, observations and memories. These included a group of Syrian women who arrived in Sweden during the 2015 migration wave. Their experiences highlighted the challenges that prevent groups from participating in cultural life, which in turn points to the need to open up theatre institutions to include new and different groups of society.

The research shows that theatre can provide methods to engage citizens and contribute to larger political and societal discussions and generate new forms of knowledge. As we live in a time of political polarisation and distrust of democratic institutions, it is essential that theatre can further strengthen its role as part of the democratic infrastructure.

DISCOVERING ONESELF THROUGH THE ARTISTIC PRACTICE

The Icelandic pop star Björk sings, “I thought I could organise freedom, how Scandinavian of me” (Björk, 1997), and her lyrics also apply to me. It has become obvious how influenced I am by my own upbringing, and the fact that I live in Sweden. And also, by my own political affiliation with the political left. This applies to my view of democracy and the role of the state in safeguarding it. I have a strong belief in political and societal institutions. This seems evident in the performances I have included in my research. However, this does not mean that there are not any risks and ethical implications despite good intentions. *Skapa Demokrati* was created with an implicit notion of democracy as something good in and of itself, but since the goal of making a constitution never was achieved, one legitimate interpretation of the performance is that democracy is something that is difficult, perhaps impossible, to achieve. What does it mean if I advocate for democracy as a flawed system?

To create socially engaged theatre does not necessarily mean taking a specific political stance, it can be enough to create space and enable the audience to take a stand for themselves. However, there

are associated risks around the integrity of the participants, as the format invites discussions around the personal beliefs of the audience members. In *Skapa Demokrati* and *Öva Demokrati*, it seemed that some of the audience members explored the limits of the premise of the performance, and that others took positions that they would not necessarily take in real life. To some extent, the audience 'performed' as participants in the performance. In the case of *Monument*, it was important to engage with the participants about their participation, especially when we used verbatim material. This meant that we excluded material that we had wanted to use, even if it did not in any way discuss anything sensitive, simply because we were not sure that the interviewee understood that they would be part of a work of art and what that would mean.

I have learnt through this project that it is important to always try to keep the focus on my own position and responsibility in these processes. For this to be possible, it is necessary to recognise my own biases in and throughout the process, and to actively try to include more voices and perspectives. I have attempted to articulate the dilemmas I faced when describing the probes, but I also acknowledge that I have several blind spots that I have yet to recognise, but they will surely be evident to others when they read this text. It is a labour perhaps best described by Samuel Beckett: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better" (Beckett, 1983). I believe that the ethical considerations in artistic research should include considerations in relation to one's own position, to the function of the theatre as a moral institution, to speak like Schiller, and in relation to the Other. These different positions, however, sometimes conflict with one other, and then one has to choose which perspective is the most important. It is a strategy that I have used in this work.

RETHINKING AUTHORSHIP

Theatre is a collective art form where performances are created together with others. This does not necessarily mean that it is a democratic process: people have different roles, and these come with different expectations and responsibilities. The functions are credited differently, depending on the institutional context. As both a playwright and a director, I get to hold two titles. Rather than considering the artistic process as a hierarchical structure, in which a director or playwright controls the whole process, Kent Olofsson and

I have emphasised how various artistic input helps create the performance (Dahlqvist & Olofsson, 2024). The process involves several phases where artists and collaborators can contribute their creativity at different times in the process. Early phases involve establishing themes and a common language, while later phases involve adapting the material so that artists and collaborators can influence and shape the artistic expression. Depending on the stage of the production, some roles and artists may have more influence than others, but the important thing is that everyone is given the opportunity to contribute within their areas of expertise during the process. I have continued to develop this approach during this study, opening the artistic process.

In all three productions, I collaborated with others, during the conceptualisation phase, in the writing process, and also during the production phase. The probing was done through collaborative efforts and in dialogue with others. In *Skapa Demokrati* and *Öva Demokrati*, both myself and Fredrik Haller shared authorship and requested that this should be reflected on websites and in PR material. Perhaps more importantly, is that the actors were involved in the conceptualisation from an early stage. Alongside them, we discussed the role of the actor in relation to the moderator of the performance. It was important to recognise the special skills of each actor. In *Monument*, Lisa Färnström was the artistic director and the person who initiated the whole project. But right from the start, she opened the process, partly by expressing her desire for collective writing, but also by being pragmatic about who would direct the actors in the end, and who would do the interviews with social stakeholders.

Throughout the process, and through working with Färnström, I also found that my relationship to my younger colleagues has changed. Just five or six years ago, I was so busy with my own artistic inquiry that I did not always engage with what others were doing. However, during this study I was able to take on a different role, partly by being able to direct my attention to the practice of others, and partly by reflecting on the processes through the research project. It meant that I was able to support others in meeting different artistic challenges. This shift was also felt in my work as a teacher at the Malmö Theatre Academy together with, for example, the acting students. In that process, it was important to let the actors be involved and to influence the dramatic text and the production as much as pos-

sible. I tried to give the students creative agency so that it became a shared endeavour to investigate the text, the theme and the staging.

NEW BEGINNINGS

As I have presented, I have been looking for a way to address the challenges of migration and globalisation. I wrote plays to show how injustice affected those seeking refuge and tried to describe the sense of powerlessness of people being excluded from wealthy Europe. In 2015, with the huge wave of refugees from Syria, I felt that I could not say or do more, and that actual politics must deal with these issues. In the probes included in this project, there was a desire to understand both the role and the challenges of democracy. From these studies, I started to consider how the methods and strategies might be translated back to performances based on dramatic text.

This resulted in the performance *Ibsendekonstruktion II: Brand*, which premiered in March 2023 at the Malmö Theatre Academy. The play was an adaptation of *Brand*, written by Henrik Ibsen in 1865. It tells the story of the idealistic priest Brand, whose dogmatic approach to religion drives his son and wife to death. The play has been interpreted in different ways, as a religious drama where values from the Old and New Testaments meet, and where Brand finally sacrifices everyone around him for his uncompromising faith. It has also been read as a moral drama where different approaches to how life should be lived clash with each other. It describes how ideals can both empower and alienate people. Another interpretation is to view the play as exploring the clash of diverse agendas regarding power. In the play, society is governed by a mixture of political power and the church.

This interpretation also aligns with the Oslo based theatre director Kamaluddin Nilu, who, in the paper “Contemporary Political Relevance of Ibsen’s Brand” (2007), elaborates on the staging of *Brand* in Bangladesh where Islamic fundamentalism was addressed through the performance.

To me, the major message of the play is thus that fanaticism – or extreme idealism – and human qualities cannot be combined, and that fanaticism is bound to fail in the long run because it is contradictory to the essence of being a human being and to the essence of human relationships. (Nilu, 2007, p. 109)

Nilu describes how although Bangladesh is a secular state, religion still permeates society. Several political leaders have used Islam to achieve their political goals. In his article, he shows the similarities between Brand's worldview and the political parties that want to introduce Sharia laws in the country.

Ibsen's play allows for political interpretations of the present, and this is also why I wanted to use it as a lens to better understand the political discourse, as well as a vehicle to portray the struggle between different power structures and how it radicalises a person.

THE CONNECTION TO THE POLITICAL SPHERE

When staging *Ibsendekonstruktion II: Brand* I came back to the experience of Haller and I being on the tour boat on the Rio Grande with the woman throwing kisses to the Mexican family. I started to reflect on how the discourses on migration differ between the US and Europe. As I discussed above, the discourse concerning migration has religious connotations in the US. Under the first Trump administration, this changed somewhat in the discourse, yet the issue was still informed by religious beliefs. In Europe the narrative has instead emphasised the continent as a moral bastion. In a speech to the European Parliament, Angela Merkel stated: "Solidarity is based on tolerance and this is Europe's strength. It is part of our common European DNA and it means overcoming national egoisms" (Kleiner, 2019). Contrary to Angela Merkel's remarks, many European leaders have adapted a tougher stance on immigration. The idealistic discourse seems to clash with the actual politics. The attitude can also be found in Swedish Society. The party leaders are trying to convince the general public that they are the only ones who can solve crime, which they linked to migration, by suggesting and introducing policies that are limiting democracy. Since the conservative alliance needs the support of the right-wing nationalist party to gain a majority in parliament, these policies are becoming increasingly repressive. The focus is on immigrants. The *Tidö Agreement* (2022), which governs their political coalition, is a document in which they have agreed to a common agenda. In this agreement, the different parties state that their ambition is to create a paradigm shift when it comes to asylum seekers: "Sweden shall not in any respect be more generous in its asylum assessment than what follows from obligations under EU law or other legally binding international agreements" (Tidöavtalet, 2022, p. 29). Even if it is not directly stated, it seems that

this policy shift also has religious connotations. Leaders of the Sweden democratic party have expressed Islamophobic views openly in media, and they are not alone in having these opinions. The current leader of the Christian Democratic Party launched the concept of 'the ethical mother tongue' back in 2018, to promote Christian ethics and Western humanism against, as interpreted by her, a relativistic approach from the left towards migrants. These values were from the start also tightly connected with a tougher stance on migration: "We believe that our society should continue to be based on Christian ethics and that being clear about our values is crucial for integration" (Busch Thor, political speech, March 3, 2018). In 2023, she returned to this concept: "We are fighting this battle of values so as not to allow another ethical mother tongue to emerge" (Kristdemokraterna, political speech, 2023). Even if the concept remains the same, it seems that a possible outcome of questioning these values has changed over the years. When first mentioned, the values were crucial for integration, and a few years later, it seems that the very nature of Swedish values were under attack and needed protection by introducing a more restrictive policy on migration.

When choosing to rewrite and stage the play, I wanted to illustrate how the drama had connections to the democratic developments in Sweden. To me, the political rhetoric sounded a lot like the words Brand was expressing in the Ibsen play: "I do not speak here now as a priest; scarce know if I'm a Christian really, yet know full well I'm a man, and know full well that I see clearly the cancer eating up this land" (Ibsen, 2007, n.p). In real life, party leaders link their opposition to migrants to Islam as a religion and then frame this as a threat to the majority population: if we do not protect our Christian identity, we will eventually have an Islamic state in Sweden. The only ones who can make sure that does not happen are the incumbent government; the politicians claim that they alone are brave enough to introduce repressive measures against asylum seekers, migrants, and anyone who is not 'Swedish' to save Swedish society from ruin.

THE MEDIATION OF A POSITIONALITY

The trip to McAllen did not result in a theatre performance, but in *Ibsendekonstruktion II Brand*, I returned to the event to understand how I could use it when staging the performance. The two acts of the performance were different in nature. In the first act, I staged the text in a conventional way, with the actors illustrating the story through dramatic situations. In the second act, however, I asked the actors to come on stage to observe the dramatic conflicts of the fictional characters, mimicking the woman on the boat. In addition, other actors started filming the actors who were watching the dramatic situation, taking on my position. Hence, the camera was used to focus on the observer of the personal and sociological interplay between the fictive characters. This was enabled through an understanding of how performances could be staged through technical mediation. In *Staging the screen* (2007), Greg Gieseckam suggests that the way in which video and film are used in performances has changed; initially film was used as a tool to support the stories presented on stage, but nowadays video is often used to comment on what is being staged, with additional narratives, events or information complementing or commenting on the story on stage. Film and video have thus contributed to a dramaturgy which allows impossible stories. And it has also been used to question how stories and characters are constructed (Gieseckam, 2007, p. 247). This was exactly what I was looking for in my staging of the play. In *Ibsendekonstruktion II: Brand*, the technical mediation provided tools to present different perspectives than what was presented on stage. The actors observed the events on stage as being outside the dramatic conflict. They were looking in on what was happening. The idea was to put them in the same position as the woman on that field trip in McAllen. Through the interactions between the characters in the play and the actors observing them, the audience could witness aspects of communal life in the village on both a structural and personal level. The camera operator would then mimic my position on the boat filming, inviting the audience through technical mediation to confront their blind spots.

In *Liveness on stage* (2014), Claudia Georgi reflects on how video projections challenge what is presented live on stage through the mediated action. She describes how she often ignored what was happening on stage to look for her own mediated double as the cam-

eras swept over the audience when she attended *Revolution Now!* (2010), a performance by the British and German performance collective Gob Squad. Through the use of projected video, she was invited to what the group described as a television revolution staged for the cameras. Here, the projections became a way for her and others in the audience to become part of a fictional political movement. Interestingly, she describes how she often ignored what was happening on stage to look for her own mediated 'doppelganger' as the cameras swept over the audience when she attended the performance.

I had the ambition to provide the audience with a similar experience as the one Georgi describes above. To have the audience project themselves as the filmmakers of the performance. To witness different layers of representation, in the same way I did on the tour boat on the Rio Grande. And to provide an arena for the audience to reflect on what their own gaze represents. In the staging I used the play to do an analysis of society and to reflect on autocratisation. I wanted to show how easy it is for politicians to portray themselves as the protagonists who can help society, and by doing so, undermine democracy.

Epilogue

It has been almost fifty years since I was in Hong Kong, waiting with my family at the ferry station. If I had not felt that strong sense of injustice over the poor man not getting his soft drink at the ferry station, I might have been a different person today. I might have been thinking about society in other ways, having different political ideas. As I think back, even more specific memories resurface. How my family and I walked the Temple of a Thousand Steps, and when I finally got to the top of the stairs, the first thing that greeted me was a billboard for an international soft drink company. Or when our family visited a village with one of Vietnam's more than fifty minority populations and all the children in the village followed my sister and I around because we were exotic with our blonde hair. I changed as a young person through being exposed to other cultures, other ways of life, and other ways of organising communities. Yet even though it is a different world today, I feel that some fundamental things inside of me have not changed. I still have a desire to address societal challenges. This project has only confirmed my conviction.

Today there is a different world order than when I was young during the cold war. Hong Kong is ruled by China. The second Trump administration has started to destabilise and dismantle the democratic institutions in the United States. In Europe, a growing number of xenophobic parties are being elected to parliaments. The war in Ukraine is still on-going. Inflation has triggered a global crisis that has led to economic turmoil. Carbon emissions continue to rise as economies have reopened after the pandemic. It looks more and more likely that this trend will continue. Two years from now, the cost of living is expected by experts to be the main threat to the global political agenda. In ten years, six of the top ten global risks will be dominated by climate change and its related risks, such as large-scale involuntary migration. We are currently living in a world where scientists disagree with politicians on what must be done to counter these risks. The danger is both real and existential: a societal collapse turns society on its head and means we may no longer remember how we once imagined a shared future. We need to work together to address these challenges. A start is to remind ourselves why democracy is important, and to recognise that the threat to democracy can be reversed and prevented.

Credit List for the Performances

Skapa Demokrati (Creating Democracy)

Skapa Demokrati premiered at Dramaten in 2021 and iterations of the performance have since been performed in Norway and the US. The performance was initiated by Helena Hammarskiöld at Dramaten&. It was produced by Dramaten in collaboration with Malmö Theatre Academy and The Institute for Future Studies.

Concept and direction: Jörgen Dahlqvist and Fredrik Haller

Light-, Music- and Video Design, Costume design, Scenography:

Jörgen Dahlqvist and Fredrik Haller

Actors: Julia Marko-Nord and Victor Iván

Technician: Balder Lindberg Roug

Öva Demokrati (Practising Democracy)

Öva Demokrati premiered at Dramaten in 2021. An iteration of the performance has since been performed during a conference organised by Kommittén Demokratin 100 år. The performance was initiated by Helena Hammarskiöld at Dramaten&. It was produced by Dramaten in collaboration with Malmö Theatre Academy and The Institute for Future Studies.

Concept, direction. Light-, Music- and Video Design, Costume design, Scenography: Jörgen Dahlqvist and Fredrik Haller

Actors: Julia Marko-Nord and Victor Iván

Technician: Balder Lindberg Roug

Monument

Monument was a mixed media walk guided by a mobile phone app that could be downloaded for free. The production was produced by Helsingborgs Stadsteater. The performance could be accessed during June and July 2022. During the walk, the audience experienced monuments created in 3D through AR technology.

Concept for the overall project: Lisa Färnström

Direction: Lisa Färnström

Text and Dramaturgy: Jörgen Dahlqvist and Lisa Färnström

Visualisation: Yvonne Ericsson

Sound and Music: Siri Jennefelt

App and AR-implementation: DVA Studio

Monument Proposals: Elin Norin, Nina Safavi, Jörgen Gottfredsson, Inger Lindskog, Niklas Dalmyr and Tahani at SFR

Voice Actors: Elin Norin, Birgitta Rydberg, Gustav Berg, Nils Dernevik, Linda Ritzén, Nina Jeppsson, Carina Ehrenholm, Ellen Nordlund, Robert Olofsson, Kajsa Ericsson and Lillebel Höglund, Cecilia Skog, Michael Mania, Jonas Svensson, Christine Lundberg, Emma El-hallah, Julia Westerlund, Nina Safavi, Jörgen Gottfredsson, Asma Shiekh Attieh and Tahani at SFR, Rijal Mbamba, Klara at FemHBG

Ibsendekonstruktion II: Brand

Ibsendekonstruktion II: Brand premiered at Malmö Theatre Academy in 2023. The play was an adaptation of *Brand* by Henrik Ibsen.

Concept: Jörgen Dahlqvist

Text, Direction and Scenography: Jörgen Dahlqvist

Light Design: Thomas Dotzler

Costume Design: Eva Hedblom and Ranin Souliman

Make Up Design: Sandra Haraldsen

Actors: Lydia Ahlsen, Markus Berg, Mira af Ugglas, Pascalle

Arias Basualto, Adam Kais, Adam Dahlström, Matilda Esselius,

Nathaniel Hagos, Erik Lundholm, Dodona Imeri and Filip Mrdjen

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Jena Press



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