

Mia Törnqvist

Art Has No Loyalties

I live in a country where theatre people sometimes complain about the lack of oppression in society. They wish theatre was a place of opposition and truth, a place where people would go for inspiration and to gather courage to change their lives, a place where the unspoken would be spoken and the repressed would be liberated, an important and necessary forum for free thought.

The crisis of Swedish theatre is often attributed to the fact that you can no longer shock your audience. It seems that everything has already been said or done. You can criticise the government or the capitalist system, you can perform naked, piss on stage or make homosexual love. The audience will just shrug their shoulders or simply find it tasteless. The theatre has lost its edge. It cannot offer anything but museum-like entertainment. With no borders there is nothing to trespass. What is there left to be said?

A Chilean director, once a guest at the theatre where I worked, said that Sweden was a free country, but that the Swedish people had instead placed the police inside themselves. In some ways he found that to be a more serious problem than living with the police as an external threat.

If this is true, the borders that we are looking for exist, but we have to turn our eyes inwards. The task of the artist must be to draw that hidden policeman out, bring him into the light and start questioning him. To do this work in theatre is more difficult than for the individual artist since in theatre the questioning must be directed towards ourselves and our own self-righteousness. Theatre is a collective work and everybody involved must be convinced of its purpose, which makes the movement slow and hesitant.

Why try to reveal taboos that we ourselves share with the audience when it is so much easier to divide the world into *us*, the good, and *them*, the evil, or even better *it*, the evil? The conflict between the little good man and the evil society is a classic one which finds its way into every heart

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in as much as Hollywood has turned it into a tear-jerker narrative.

The problem today is not that everything has been said, the problem is that we are afraid of talking, because talking means questioning our own truths.

Sweden is a small country where very few opinions circulate in the media at the same time. At most we have a “left wing opinion” and a “right wing opinion” on a matter. You either belong to one side or to the other. Within one group there is not much space for dissenting opinions since they could be used as a weapon in the hands of the opposite group. This reality is a mirror of the political game and does not favour free thinking, or the questioning of established truths.

For a woman artist, freedom is an even greater challenge since being a woman artist is a political act in itself. Colleagues and friends expect her to be politically “correct” and loyal to certain statements.



I have experienced this personally, in a funny and unexpected way, when one of my plays was staged. The play, *A Devil Passing through the Room*, is about a group of people, five women and one man, who believe that their children have been sexually abused. They are blinded by their own feelings of humiliation, fear and the longing for revenge. In order to free themselves and obtain redress they sacrifice an innocent man in the name of justice.

For me it was interesting to delve into this mechanism of revenge from a female perspective. I recalled group situations from my youth, girl-leaders who demanded 100% solidarity from their friends, sweet and educated girls who could transform themselves into a lynching mob when their lower instincts were stimulated.

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But the confusion was also the result of false expectations. The critics and part of the audience simply did not expect this to be said by a woman and therefore they didn't hear it. For me this was an uncanny experience, much worse than bad reviews and an angry audience. I would have preferred rotten tomatoes to not being heard.

This is a good example of what happens when art and politics get mixed up. Free thought or independent questioning, not anchored in the current description of the world, is somehow looked upon with suspicion. The dominating image of the world is the simplified version that the media gives us. Despite the voices that call out for the

new and the controversial, the media tends to confine the artist to the existing political spectrum, to the land of the known and defined.

But art has no loyalties. As an artist, I must be free to investigate and expose ugly mechanisms in the female world and still claim that the most appalling injustice in this world is the discrimination against women. Just as I must be able to call Israel a racist state and condemn its nationalist politics and still claim that the Holocaust is the worst crime against humanity in modern times. There is no contradiction. Both things can be true at the same time. Art must be free from all the tacit rules in political and social life. If art is free, it is, by its own nature, trespassing.

There is one area within cultural life that I would like to mention as an example of a more liberated space: theatre for children. I would even say that Sweden has been in the forefront when it comes to literature, theatre and film for children. There is a respect for the young audience that I have not experienced in other countries. The work is serious and the address is sincere, and you cannot be sincere and moralistic at the same time.

When my daughter died I knew that I had to write about death, and about life that comes after death. I chose to do it for children because I felt that they would be a more courageous audience and more open to what I had to say.

I have always written both for adults and for children. In the writing process there is not much difference for me since I never really think of my audience when I write. However, I may make higher demands on myself to be as clear in thought as possible when I write for children, which can only be favourable for the dramaturgy.

Writing this play about love and death

was a way to work myself out of the darkness. To write it for children forced me to distinguish what was essential in the emotional chaos that I lived in, to concentrate on that and leave the rest behind.

The play, *The Dreamed Life of Nora Schahrazade*, tells the story of a mother and father who lose their new-born child and their different ways of coping with sorrow.

The mother withdraws into a fantasy world where she dreams the life of the dead daughter, whose name is Nora Schahrazade. The father is frightened by the way the mother reacts to the loss. He is desperately holding on to the routines of his old life and to his work in a tobacco shop, but his customers abandon him and he is only holding up on the surface. Both parents live isolated in their own frozen room of grief.

One day a Child appears in the tobacco shop, a tough but angelic creature who smokes cigars and sells paper dolls. Carefully she guides the mother and the father through the sorrow. Who is she? Maybe a messenger from the other side; maybe just a child who recognises the existence of inner worlds. She moves easily between the visible and the invisible, between the living and the dead and she sees no contradiction between fantasy and reality.

She joins the mother's game. Together they play their way through the life of Nora Schahrazade up until the day she becomes a grown-up woman. Nora Schahrazade marries and leaves for a honeymoon far, far away. Who knows if she will ever come back? At that point the mother is ready to confront her life without her dead daughter.

After death comes life. This is a play about life despite pain and death. It is also a play about love; love for a child, love between two parents who cannot reach each other and love for life itself. Despite the tragic theme it is full of humour and the

ending is full of hope.

Before producing the play I must admit that a lot of fear and some moralising pervaded the theatre. A child psychiatrist was invited to talk to the ensemble before each of us could decide to go ahead with staging the play. He claimed that the fear was the fear of adults, not of children. "A child cannot lose a child", he said. A child can lose a parent, a sister or a brother but not another child. Children will not experience this as a threat, but they will recognise the sorrow. Sorrow is part of everyone's existence and it should not be hidden or denied. Adults are often threatened by the sorrow of children. It makes them feel guilty or impotent. Therefore children hide their pain in order to protect the adults. To deal with this "hidden" feeling in the theatre was only a positive thing according to him.

The mother in the play refuses to protect the world from her pain. She acts it out in the same way that a child would, by playing and pretending. She refuses to let go of her fantasy before she is ready. The game she plays is a defence of her right to mourn.

This play certainly demanded a great deal of courage from everybody involved. But the beautiful thing about courage is that it is contagious.

MIA TÖRNQVIST (Sweden) was born in 1957. She lived for many years in Italy and back in Sweden she worked as translator, mostly of plays. After attending the Dramatic Institute, she worked in the theatre both as dramaturg and independent playwright. Having left her permanent position at a regional theatre in 1994, she now spends most of her working time writing. Her plays are: *Kanelbiten*, *Tulips and Dynamite*, *Medea/ a mono-drama*, *Joseph in the Well*, *In the Shadow of God*, *The Dreamed Life of Nora Schahrazade*, *A Devil Passing through the Room*, *Margareta: The Story of a King and her Men*, *Brothers*.