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Re-valuing Swedish Outdoor Theatre

The modern outdoor theatre in Sweden was created around 1910. A description of outdoor theatre is usually characterized by a governing dichotomy between good theatre of high aesthetic quality versus bad, entertainment of low quality. This article is inspired by a postnarrativist interpretation of historiography when seeking a re-valuation of the historical material regarding outdoor theatre. By mapping and connecting different source materials, outdoor theatre is treated as an important phenomenon challenging earlier historiographical narratives. A juxtaposition of ideas about theatre as education and theatre as entertainment offers an in-depth analysis that emphasises the relationship between outdoor and indoor theatre around the beginning of the 20th century and calls for new ways of studying the intertwined relationship between art and entertainment. Mikael Strömberg is a post-doctoral researcher in performance studies, working in the field of research on popular entertainment, entertainment as communication, and Swedish outdoor theatre.

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Contemporary historiography argues that history is a study of the past, where the historian's work is as much about the historian's own time as it is about the past itself. Alun Munslow defines history as a literary and cultural practice and uses three approaches to historical knowledge to illustrate the changes in this practice—from reconstructionism via constructionism to deconstructionism.¹ Munslow represents the final approach whereby history is based on a unifying narrative about the past created by the historian.² Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen acknowledges the importance of the narrativist turn in historiography. However, in *Postnarrativist Philosophy of Historiography* he argues for what he calls a postnarrativist standpoint. The strong emphasis on the narrative as a unifying aspect is, in Kuukkanen's work, replaced by an argumentative approach. Kuukkanen's aim with a postnarrative historiography is not only to look at how different texts are organised as narratives, but also at the effects of these texts. "Historiography is about argumentation in a looser sense

than that of a clear set of premises and conclusions. It is about proving or giving reasons for accepting certain general points or theses.”³ Historiographic texts argue for one interpretation over another and offer facts in support of this differentiation. These arguments should not be considered as true or false, but as more or less appropriate, fitting, or warranted, according to Kuukkanen, who is specifically interested “in what might be called *disciplinary illocutionary intention* and *force*, which is to persuade peers and the wider audience to accept historians’ historiographical theses.”⁴ Instead of only looking at historiography in terms of differing narrative structures, Kuukkanen sees a relevance in directing attention to the reasons behind different arguments. This means looking at what they claim, why they make these assertions and within which context or discourse these are made.⁵ As a consequence, the relevance of the argument within a specific context becomes just as important as the text’s meaning.⁶ When looking at different historiographies it becomes interesting to ask what the historian was arguing for and why. But instead of using the “why” in terms of intention, I would like to emphasise the relationship to what Kuukkanen calls the argumentative context.

Value is an important concept for this article. Value can be defined “as a ‘socially recognized importance’: the weight that a society gives to an object or an issue.” The definition comes from economics but is relevant for all areas interested in value. Adam Arvidsson continues; “Since value is a normative concept, it follows that standards of value are socially constructed: they are the result of political struggles and, consequently, they vary from one social formation to another.”⁷ As this article will show, the values attached to outdoor theatre in different historiographic narratives are, if not part of, political struggles, at least associated with power and normative ideas about the role of culture itself.⁸ In this article, I will try to show some examples of how outdoor theatre has been valued in Swedish theatre history and argue for the importance of this performance mode.⁹ By mapping and connecting two competing opinions about theatre, that theatre should either be entertainment for the people, or an art form that the people had to learn to appreciate (art for art’s sake), I propose a re-valuation of outdoor theatre itself.

The need for a revised interpretation of the outdoor theatre as entertainment is twofold. It introduces a contemporary audience to new facts about the past and it challenges certain dominant narratives that are re-used again and again for describing the period from 1900. This is done by juxtaposing ideas from the time when outdoor theatre was established with examples of how outdoor theatre has been treated in Swedish theatre history. The result is a new interpretation of the role outdoor theatre had for the development of theatre as an art form in Sweden and also an emphasis on the importance to include it in theatre history.¹⁰ Although this article primarily uses examples from Swedish theatre history, the aim is not to argue for the Swedish condition as a general example for outdoor theatres, but rather to use specific empirical materials as a call for further investigations based on other regions and/or nations. The empirical material is grouped in three sections followed by a brief conclusion. The first section is about the nature of Swedish outdoor theatre: the way in which it was discussed around the time of its formation and subsequently how it has been treated by historiographers. The second section discusses a specific theatre

organisation, within which outdoor theatre functioned as an intricate part of several overlapping political, social, and cultural areas. Finally, I argue for an interconnection between outdoor theatre and its influence upon indoor theatre.

Swedish outdoor theatre

In 1910, Skansen, the large outdoor museum in Stockholm, opened its outdoor theatre.¹¹ The first summer was an experiment, but audiences and critics responded to the idea of an outdoor theatre and it became a recurring feature.¹² At the end of the second season, Anders de Wahl, a prominent Swedish actor from the Royal Dramatic Theatre, was asked to comment on the state of the outdoor theatre at Skansen in one of the larger newspapers. His conclusion was that the theatre did not live up to the expectations of what outdoor theatre should be. It was rather an ethnographic display made by dilettantes.¹³ This brief comment resulted in a heated debate lasting almost two weeks, in which several well-known actors, directors, dramatists, and critics participated. The debate is of interest when coming to an understanding of what the role of outdoor theatre could or might have been at the time.¹⁴ Two overlapping questions dominated. The first was whether the outdoor theatre at Skansen embodied the idea behind outdoor theatre. The second question was about what should be the role of an outdoor theatre. Though De Wahl claimed that Skansen was far from the idea of what outdoor theatre is, he was not able to specify what this idea exactly was. What outdoor theatre should be was not easily defined either. Some argued that it should be theatre performed on festive occasions, as a celebration, while others saw a completely different potential in outdoor theatre. The director of the 1911 season, Ivan Hedqvist, saw outdoor theatre as a people's theatre and emphasised the use of typical Swedish plays. Above all it was important to attract a large part of the population from all classes and offer good theatre at a fairly low cost. It should be entertaining/fun/comical and about everyday life or ordinary things to which the audience could relate.

A shared opinion among all participants in the debate was the importance of the Swedish natural environment.¹⁵ Nature created an atmosphere that affected both the content of the play and the way it was performed. Behind the importance of the natural surroundings also lay a notion of authenticity. Only a Swedish play could be performed in an environment surrounded by Swedish nature.¹⁶ The outdoor theatre could, therefore, be seen as a vital force, representing aspects in which the nation as a whole could take pride. On the other hand, according to a number of commentators, there were several problems with outdoor locations. Located in the open air, the theatre had to cope with the weather, and particularly during wet summers this could be financially devastating. Besides managing the tricky Swedish climate, the location also meant aesthetic limitations. The modern theatre that developed around the turn of the century put an emphasis on intimacy. Strindberg, for example, created his Intima Teater based on Antoine's ideas for the Théâtre Libre in Paris. Certain voices in the debate saw nature as a distraction, threatening the essential intimacy between actor and spectator. Consequently, outdoor theatre in their opinion could never contribute to the "real", dramatic art that was cultivated indoors.

The debate seems to have hinged on two differing perspectives. One group saw outdoor theatre as an artistic endeavour that required the best actors and directors the capital or the country could produce, resulting in occasional festive performances. The other group saw outdoor theatre as a space where well-known plays were performed, in a dialogic engagement with nature during the summer. The first group emphasised the contemporary aesthetic aspects of outdoor theatre and were interested in whether outdoor theatre could influence and change theatre as an art form.¹⁷ The second group treated outdoor theatre as a form of recreation for the people. It should be affordable for everyone and offer good theatre and entertainment. Good for the second group was not necessarily associated with the avant-garde or the latest developments in the theatre arts. It was rather something associated with the familiar, focusing on people and their everyday lives. Two opposing standpoints can be discerned from this. Firstly, a more aristocratic that stressed art for art's sake. If you lacked the tools or knowledge for understanding it, you needed to educate or cultivate your senses to be able to appreciate it. Secondly, in opposition to that view was a democratic claim that suggested that theatre should be for, and familiar to, everyone.

Despite the harsh criticism, outdoor theatre became a widespread and much loved phenomenon found all over Sweden, in large cities and in people's parks. How has this popular form of theatre been described by theatre historiographers in Sweden? Theatre historian Georg Nordensvan summarises outdoor theatre, labelled summer theatre, on one page (of a total of 483) in his second volume on Swedish theatre, published in 1918.¹⁸ According to Nordensvan the strength of the outdoor theatre lay in its ability to portray something typically Swedish, i.e. the natural environment and the people. Moreover, the purpose of the outdoor theatres was to offer entertainment when most indoor theatres were closed. In the case of entertainment, Nordensvan meant something that did not require any specific abilities in order to be understood. It was dominated by light-hearted fun and was accessible to everyone.¹⁹ Nordensvan's account is written before the peak of outdoor theatre in the 1920s but still contains an interpretation of the genre to which others would continue to refer. However, as the number of outdoor theatres increased, the quality declined, according to several commentators including Nordensvan. It is as though the popularity of the genre led to a devaluation of its aesthetic currency. There are aspects of this already in the debate where some, for example de Wahl, argued that "real" (dramatic) theatre was part of the art form as such, while entertainment was not. Elements in this debate suggested that when outdoor theatre became entertainment for a large part of the population it lost its potential to change theatre as art.

The historian Gösta M. Bergman fleetingly mentions outdoor theatre and the 1911 debate in his seminal work on how Scandinavian theatre became modern, from 1966. The main interest for Bergman, however, does not lie in the entertaining aspects of outdoor theatre, but rather in Strindberg's idea of a summer theatre. The divide between theatre as art and theatre as entertainment that was beginning to take shape in Nordensvan's account is well established in Bergman's book. Bergman found value in the avant-garde and his book reflects the widespread opinion, at that time, of the nature of modernity. Modern aesthetics around 1900 placed great significance on new stage technology and a number of

important artists. Both technical innovation and creative individuals were key factors for the avant-garde, represented by Copeau, Jouvet, Dullin, Pitoëff, Baty in Paris, expressionism, political theatre and the Bauhaus group in Germany, together with Per Lindberg, Knut Ström, and Olof Molander in Sweden.²⁰ The most recent history of Swedish theatre, published in 2007, hardly mentions outdoor theatre and does not mention the 1911 debate.²¹ A dominant feature in all these historiographies is an emphasis on the modern aesthetics that developed at indoor theatres in Stockholm and Gothenburg. Entertainment, produced for a larger part of the population, was of no value for the development of theatre at that time, according to several historiographers. The clear distinction between art and entertainment (i.e. not art) becomes a tool for organising aspects from the past. But is it a reliable distinction or rather a construct developed by a number of historians? Perhaps it says more about what the historian wants to argue for and less about the actual past? To further the discussion I would like to address an organisation founded in 1910, which aimed to offer a ‘cultivating entertainment.’

Skådebanan and cultivating entertainment for the people

The *folk* (the people) was a key concept at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, employed to unite the nation as a whole.²² The people were primarily the lower and middle classes, the bourgeoisie and the peasantry, with the king as their spokesperson. Towards the end of the 19th century, the King slowly lost his power to the growing parliament (“Riksdag”).²³ While right wing politicians saw the working class as a danger, the newly founded Social Democratic Party, together with the working class, argued that the rich, top echelon of society was the problem. It was basically a fight about whether national integration should come from above, or from the people. Nonetheless, politicians from both right and left used people (“folk”) as an important concept. It was used as a prefix for a large number of things, for example people’s education, theatre, and, of course, the Swedish welfare state (“Folkhemmet”). Education for everyone was an important part of the growing interest in the people. It started as a liberal idea but was slowly appropriated by the Social Democratic Party (founded in 1889). Being a liberal idea, coming from above, and not from the people, meant that people’s education and the cultivation of the masses was about elevating the taste of the individual to a higher level. The taste of the upper classes was the norm the lower classes should seek. The idea that all people in Sweden should receive the same education (“folkskola”) worked in tandem with a belief in the cultivation of the individual to appreciate good, high quality art.

Skådebanan (a Swedish word for the theatrical stage) was created in 1910 and sought aesthetic cultivation while offering theatre and entertainment to the people. Behind the organisation was Walter Stenström who, whilst studying to become a theatre director in Berlin and Vienna, came across ideas regarding a theatre for the people, for example the *Freie Volksbühne* in Berlin.²⁴ The organisation bought tickets from large, expensive theatres and then on-sold them to its members at a reduced price. In Sweden, this became one way of finding new ways of distributing quality theatre to the people.²⁵ Another important source of inspiration for *Skådebanan* was Romain Rolland and his *Le théâtre du peuple* (1903). Rolland emphasised that the new theatre should be created *by* the people

and not *for* the people. Stenström, however, did the opposite and argued that the well-educated elite should set the standards for what was good quality.²⁶ *Skådebanan* can, therefore, be seen as an elitist organisation working for the people.²⁷ It was of great cultural importance to offer theatre to neglected parts of Sweden and also to neglected layers of the population, according to Stenström. The aim of *Skådebanan* was, therefore, to spread “the excellent entertainment and vital source of cultivation that theatre was.”²⁸ When *Skådebanan* is mentioned in Sweden’s theatre history it is the cultivating aspects that are emphasised: the role of entertainment is usually omitted, or treated as a necessary evil for making money.²⁹

A closer look at *Skådebanan* can, however, offer another interpretation, re-valuing the importance of outdoor theatre and entertainment in particular. The outdoor theatre can be seen as combining cultivating aspects with the idea of being for the people and offering entertainment at the same time. This can be traced to Rolland, who claimed that the most important thing for a people’s theatre was the recreational aspects, thus underlining the entertainment aspects.³⁰ A people’s theatre, according to Rolland, should be a source of energy for the hard working population, and counteract boredom and exhaustion. Relaxation and recreation are also two important aspects of entertainment. Building on Rolland, Ellen Key argues that the theatre should aim at being an irresistible role model with a strong will and a genuine *comic force*.³¹ The theatre will only reach the people if it is about the people, and about their everyday life, according to Key. I see her opinion as a mix of the idea of theatre as a cultivating endeavour and as entertainment for the people. Key is, however, usually identified as a strong representative for cultivating creativity, rather than for an emphasis on entertainment and comedy. She, however, was not the only one using Rolland for inspiration. Versions of his ideas were articulated by prominent Swedish politicians at that time, such as Fredrik Ström³² and Hjalmar Branting³³, both of them part of the initiative to create *Skådebanan*. Ström, the second director of *Skådebanan*, gives a telling account of the complex relationship between popular entertainment and a theatre for the people. A people’s theatre, he claims, “should mix jokes and serious topics.” People want to laugh and perhaps cry, and then smile again. Strong emotions are important. Theatre, moreover, should portray everyday life in a realistic way and not preach or be moralistic. “The will to see a happy end is the will to see progress conquer.” The plays should be fun, amusing, and energising. And this is exactly how and why *Skådebanan* is an excellent example of Rolland’s idea about a people’s theatre, according to Ström.³⁴ There are several similar statements from other members of *Skådebanan*, in which they praise the combination of entertainment/enjoyment and quality theatre.³⁵ Theatre, focusing on laughter and popular entertainment, can, in fact, be quality theatre. This is, however, almost the opposite to the way in which *Skådebanan* has been treated in Swedish theatre history. Its work, providing members with tickets to The Royal Dramatic Theatre or The Royal Opera, thereby introducing the working class to Strindberg, or similar authors, is the usual way to frame the importance of the organisation. It is often described as a forerunner of *Riksteatern* (The National Touring Theatre founded in 1933).³⁶ *Riksteatern* was part of the Social Democratic government’s cultural policy. Again, it was the the high art (represented by the Royal Dramatic Theatre and The Royal Opera), located in the

capital, that should tour the nation and the people who should learn, through courses and study groups, to appreciate it. This underlines the normative aspects of value as described by Arvidsson above. Yet not all theatre represented the proper cultivated ideals decided on by an educated elite: only a small part did. Nevertheless, this way of evaluating certain theatres in terms of their offering of a specific repertoire can be found in several theatre histories, for example the book by Gösta M. Bergman referred to above.³⁷

Besides distributing tickets, *Skådebanan* toured the countryside to spread theatre to the nation and produced outdoor theatre in Stockholm. At one point, the organisation owned three large outdoor theatres in the capital. The repertoire at these theatres was dominated by the “comic folk play” (“folklustspel”). A typical “folklustspel” depicts strong characters in farce-like situations, where the plot revolves around everyday chores, love, lust, and money issues among farmers or the working classes. This is very close to Key’s and Hedqvist’s emphasis that the theatre should depict everyday life. The outdoor theatres in Stockholm were very successful and of major financial importance for *Skådebanan*. They also functioned as a popular and affordable way for a large part of the population to see theatre. Thus I argue that the outdoor theatre played a far more important role for *Skådebanan* than the distribution of tickets to certain selected theatres. That this part of the organisation has been neglected is primarily due to the repertoire being comic and about everyday life, which in turn connects to the idea voiced in the debate that outdoor theatre could not affect theatre as an art form. I have in the discussion so far tried to show, albeit briefly, how dominant ideas shape the creation of historical narratives. Although *Skådebanan* is often mentioned in history books, it is specifically the aspect that fits into the narrative about the importance of the avant-garde that reappears together with the well-established belief that it was the educated elite that could and should decide what the lower classes should strive for. The choices made by historians to exclude certain material, or facts, for example details and analyses of the comic folk plays performed at the outdoor theatres can be explained as a process of valuation. Value then becomes a normative concept that operates in connection with the created narrative. I am not advocating a value-free narrative, but instead use value as a critical, and perhaps necessary, concept. In the following and final part of this article, I want to sketch a new narrative that re-values the link between outdoor and indoor theatre.

Outdoor entertainment indoors

The example used for arguing that outdoor theatre, in fact, was important for indoor theatre and did influence theatre aesthetics comes from Gothenburg, Sweden’s second largest city.³⁸ The first permanent outdoor theatre in Gothenburg, *Slottsskogsteatern*, was established in 1914 by two women – Gerda Thomée Mattsson and Viran Rydkvist. Rydkvist left the theatre after a couple of years and formed her own organisation.³⁹ However, bad weather during a couple of summers led Rydkvist to look for an indoor alternative, and in 1922 she opened *Lilla teatern* (LT) (‘The Small Theatre’). The name is appropriate since it had a minimal stage and an auditorium seating less than 100. In 1926, she moved to a larger theatre with about 200 seats, but kept the name. The backbone of the

repertoire at LT consisted of farces and popular comic folk plays.⁴⁰ By transferring her work from the outdoor theatre to a small indoor theatre, and presenting a similar repertoire, Rydkvist managed to attract and keep a large working class audience that would not normally attend the theatre.⁴¹ At the same time, she used the theatre to comment on social and political issues. The plays performed at LT portrayed people from all classes, a deliberate choice and something Rydkvist strived for in all her productions. Well-known authors were part of the repertoire together with new local playwrights that were promoted. Rydkvist also produced a large number of plays by female dramatists.⁴² Rydkvist herself saw her work as a combination of two things. She wanted to offer the audience entertainment and something enjoyable together with an exploration of important and immediately relevant topics.⁴³ She and her theatre were described as friendly, democratic, honest, with an open mind for the serious as well as the frivolous aspects of life.⁴⁴ The argument here is that Rydkvist deliberately used and transferred themes and a specific way of acting, from the outdoor theatre to her work at LT, thereby creating a new aesthetic that combined ordinary topics with political issues in a popular and entertaining form.

One of the most popular plays, performed more than 200 times and on several occasions, was *En piga bland pigor* ("A maid among maids"). The play revolves around a young girl, an investigative reporter, who takes a position as a maid in a small farm.⁴⁵ The play is based on a true story written by the Swedish journalist Ester Blenda Nordström, who disguised herself to be able to depict everyday life and the tough working conditions at a small farm. She is seen, through this and other similar projects, as the first undercover reporter in Sweden.⁴⁶ It is not a coincidence that Rydkvist decided to perform a comical adaptation of Nordström's story. The focus on women and women's rights was a dominant feature at LT.⁴⁷ A meticulous use of the different female characters in comic folk plays can be seen as a decisive move in Rydkvist's work as director, producer, and actress. The topic of the play is one important aspect highlighting women's rights and working conditions. The way it was performed is another. Rydkvist often performed and usually chose older characters representing old ideals and a more outdated view of society. Almost all comic folk plays are built on pairs of characters, for example young lovers and old married couples, or a young woman with modern ideas as opposed to an older woman representing an older way of thinking. Rydkvist worked hard to create nuanced performances, to avoid stereotypes that belittled the subject matter discussed. A recurring theme in reviews from that time is a description of Rydkvist's comical skills as filled with compassion and a genuine interest for the characters she portrayed. The women and the men in the audience meet women on stage that discussed actual topics from everyday life. This was done in an amusing manner, without losing its political aspect. The female characters discussed important topics that most of the women in the audience could relate to. I see Rydkvist's systematic use of this throughout her work as a subversive undertaking.⁴⁸ Through plays about ordinary life, where women talk about issues from their everyday activities, Rydkvist created a dual function for popular entertainment, where laughter and a critical reflection of contemporary ideals and norms were combined.

Rydkvist stated in an interview in 1927 that for her fine art was never a motivating force. That was not the reason she became an actress. It was, rather the plays about ordinary people that interested her. She emphasised popular entertainment and argued that the important part for her was to reach the heart of the audience, to make them laugh or cry, and to be able to recognize the joy and sorrow of everyday life.⁴⁹ With Rydkvist I want to stress the importance of outdoor theatre for indoor theatre. It was mainly the ideas associated with outdoor theatre that motivated her work indoors. She managed, through an interesting repertoire policy in combination with a specific way of acting, to attract an audience often associated with outdoor theatres. In addition to this, she also used a genre associated with outdoor theatre and popular entertainment to discuss important topics relating to, among other things, a woman's place in society. Thus she managed to create a political people's theatre that not only developed its audience but did so by using popular entertainment.⁵⁰ Furthermore, she offered a new interpretation of what a comic folk play could, or should be about. The example of Rydkvist's work at *Lilla teatern* is an indication of why a re-valuation of outdoor theatre, both its repertoire and performance style, is necessary. In theatre history, it is always *Lorensbergsteatern*⁵¹ that is mentioned and hardly ever *Lilla teatern*. One reason is that the theatre at Lorensberg is seen as part of the modern breakthrough, through the collaboration of scenographer Knut Ström and director Per Lindberg. Again, the dominant narrative, organised by what was/is believed to be of value for theatre as a modern art form, returns.

Conclusion

The way outdoor theatre, in a Swedish context, has been valued throughout history forms the basis of this article. I have argued the need for new narratives, in which the outdoor theatre is seen as a vital part of the nature of Swedish theatre at the beginning of the 20th century. Furthermore, I have focused on value as an important concept not only for selecting and judging historical facts but also for shaping a historical narrative. Value has been used to show how earlier narratives included or excluded certain facts, and how value thereby functions as a normative concept. I question the dominating role ascribed to the existing narratives where the modern breakthrough and the avant-garde are seen as dominant aspects for theatre as an art form.⁵² I emphasise the need for a re-valuation of outdoor theatre and claim that by including outdoor theatre and its entertaining features, theatre, as an art form, can be understood in a more complex way. Outdoor theatre as entertainment is an important part of Sweden's theatre history because of the connection to ideas about *a people's theatre* and *the cultivation of the people*, as shown in relation to *Skådebanan* and Viran Rydkvist's work at *Lilla teatern*. The popularity of these, attracting large audiences, as well as its subject matter can, therefore, be used to create interesting comments on previous historiographical narratives. I, however, detect a trend in several Swedish theatre histories to exclude entertainment in favour of a "serious theatre"—believed to be more important for theatre as an art form.⁵³ The meaning of a text is not only about the underlying narrative structure and the facts used. It is fused with an argumentative force, according to Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen and such force must be looked at in relation to its discursive context. I interpret this as a difference between what is claimed and why it is claimed. The *what* and *why* in this article

can be summarised: what I argue for is the value of outdoor theatre and its connection to popular entertainment. I also stress the interesting overlap between the idea of a people's theatre and education for the people (in cultivating a certain aesthetic taste). However I find it problematic that only a small part of all the productions performed throughout history are believed to be of importance for theatre as an art form. I also want to discuss from a postnarrativist perspective on historiography how this might affect the work of the historian, and the changes in the critical analysis of earlier historical accounts. Gösta M. Bergman wanted to include theatre among the fine arts and argued that theatre went through similar developmental stages as other art forms when becoming modern. Bergman singled out the avant-garde, exemplified by Strindberg and some of the larger theatre institutions, as especially valuable for Swedish theatre. Through this, he created a narrative form that has been iterated, again and again, with the same emphasis on the valuable "serious/dramatic" theatre. It enforces the norm about what theatre should be, excluding everything that does not conform to that norm and, consequently, fit the narrative. In this article I would propose to emphasise the need for new or alternative narratives that can enrich the dominant ones while creating a multitude of possible interpretations of the past.

¹ Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing history* (London: Routledge, 2006), 20-21.

² Other representatives of the narrativist turn in historiography are Hayden White (*Metahistory*, 1973), Frank Ankersmit (*Narrative Logic*, 1983), and Keith Jenkins (*Re-thinking History*, 1991; *Refiguring History*, 2003).

³ Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, *Postnarrativist philosophy of historiography* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 95.

⁴ Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen, "Why we need to move from truth-functionality to performativity in historiography" in *History and Theory*, 54 (2015): 229. doi: 10.1111/hith.10755

⁵ Kuukkanen *Postnarrativist philosophy of historiography*, 67.

⁶ Kuukkanen *Postnarrativist philosophy of historiography*, 159-60.

⁷ Adam Arvidsson, "The Ethical Economy: Towards a Post-Capitalist Theory of Value" in *Capital & Class*, 33 (2009): 16. doi: 10.1177/030981680909700102

⁸ Good, cultivating art as opposed to bad, mind-numbing enjoyment of entertainment is one example of a normative assessment that is relevant for an understanding of outdoor theatre and its place in history. The distinction between fine/elite and popular entertainment is old. Peter Stallybrass & Allon White traces the distinction back to ancient Rome in *The politics and poetics of transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), 1-3. It has then developed throughout history, where the industrial revolution led to new versions of the dichotomy between art and entertainment.

⁹ There are several phenomena that can be labeled outdoor theatre. This article is interested in one specific kind of outdoor theatre. A translation of the Swedish word "friluftsteater" would be "free-air-theatre". Open air theatre is another word for these theatres. I will, nevertheless, use outdoor theatre due to its emphasis on nature.

¹⁰ I deliberately do not define popular entertainment. I see it as a complex concept that changes from time to time. The interesting thing for this article is not what popular entertainment is, but rather what happens when something is labelled as popular entertainment.

¹¹ There are traces of similar kinds of outdoor activity from the 1890s, from all over Sweden. But Skansen is the first permanent theatre followed by theatres in Malmö and Gothenburg in 1914. Skansen is the world's first open-air museum, founded in 1891. It shows five centuries of Swedish history, from north to south, through historical buildings and dwellings, peopled by characters in period dress.

¹² The outdoor theatre at Skansen staged new productions each summer until 1967.

¹³ The first comment by de Wahl was published in the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, August 18, 1911.

¹⁴ The following is based on several newspaper articles from August 1911. I have not indicated each source in this article, but instead written a summary of the discussion.

¹⁵ A longing for nature intensified during the last decade of the nineteenth century, just after the peak of the industrial revolution. The interest in nature was most likely a result of a growing urbanization and the industrial revolution. The former led to crowded cities, where the inhabitants longed for open areas in the countryside, whereas the latter led to a new working class, confined to factory work rather than agriculture and work outdoors. The Scout Movement, created by Robert Baden-Powell, is one example of how outdoor activities were part of stimulating young people in their physical, mental, and spiritual development. The thought of nature as a valuable and aesthetically vibrant location was important for the modern outdoor theatre and its development.

¹⁶ Shakespeare's stone pine (a tree common in southern Europe but not in Sweden) from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* could not be equated with the Swedish birch, for example, and the play was therefore not deemed suitable for a Swedish outdoor theatre.

¹⁷ This is driven by a rather abstract idea about "real" dramatic art as opposed to theatre as mere entertainment. The avant-garde can be seen as a representative of dramatic art where, for example, operetta is the opposite.

¹⁸ Georg Nordensvan, *Svensk teater och svenska skådespelare från Gustav III till våra dagar. Senare delen, 1842-1918* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1918), 479.

¹⁹ The main audience did not come from the upper classes but lower parts of the population.

²⁰ Gösta M. Bergman, *Den moderna teaterns genombrott 1890-1925* (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1966), 9.

²¹ *Ny svensk teaterhistoria. 2 & 3, 1800 & 1900-talets teater* (Hedemora: Gidlund, 2007).

²² I have translated "folk" to "people" in this article to avoid a strong emphasis on folklore. "The people" is a much broader concept in Sweden.

²³ Sweden did, however, remain a monarchy.

²⁴ For more on the European conditions see: Jason Price, *Modern popular theatre* (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

²⁵ Quality in this sense is equal to the taste of the educated upper class. In Sweden, this was represented by theatres such as The Swedish Theatre, The Royal Dramatic Theatre, and The Royal Opera.

²⁶ The first performance on offer to its members was Strindberg's *Mäster Olof* at the Royal Dramatic Theater in March 1911. This was a success and soon more theatres offered tickets through the organization.

²⁷ Among the founding members were, beside Stenström, two members of parliament, two actors, and Hjalmar, and his wife Anna Branting. None of them were working class, but came from highly educated families.

²⁸ Ann Mari Engel, *Teater åt folket? Skådebanan 1910-1985* (Stockholm: Skådebanan, 1987), 1.

²⁹ This can be seen in Nordensvan, 480; in Bergman, 504; in Engel, 23-25; and in *Ny svensk teaterhistoria*, 3, 125-127.

³⁰ "La première condition d'un théâtre populaire, c'est d'être un délassément." Romain Rolland, *Le théâtre du peuple*. (Paris, 1903), 103.

https://fr.wikisource.org/wiki/Livre:Rolland_Le_Th%C3%A9%C3%A2tre_du_peuple.djvu

³¹ Ellen Key, *Nöjeskultur* (Malmö: Framtiden, 1914), 18-19, my emphasis. Ellen Key (1849-1926) wrote several books on education and other topics. Most famous is perhaps *Barnets århundrade* ("The Century of the Child") from 1900, where she focused on education in the future, both for society and the welfare of the child in particular.

³² Fredrik Ström (1880-1948), socialist politician and writer. Member of Parliament, representing the Social Democratic Party between 1916-20 & 1930-48.

³³ Hjalmar Branting (1860-1925), editor-in-chief of the newspaper *The Social Democrat* from 1886, leader of the Social Democratic Party from 1907. Became a Member of Parliament in 1896 and Prime minister during parts of the period 1920-25. In 1921 he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize together with Christian Lange.

³⁴ Fredrik Ström, *Skådebanans månadshäfte 12* (1926). My translation.

³⁵ This is similar to the quote about the aim of *Skådebanan* by Stenström. Well worth remembering is that similar standpoints were voiced in the debate about the outdoor theatre at Skansen.

³⁶ See for example *Ny svensk teaterhistoria*. 3, 128-130.

³⁷ Bergman's involvement in this is an intricate matter. He was involved in a governmental report that led to the formation of *Riksteatern*. His ideas are really at the centre of both the political views on theatre and how this period has later been described.

³⁸ The case study on Viran Rydkvist has been funded by Stiftelsen för scenkonstens historia i Göteborg.

³⁹ Viran Rydkvist (1879-1942) started her career in Gothenburg but later moved to Stockholm. Her work as an actress is dominated by a lighter repertoire such as revues, comic folk plays, and film comedies. Today, she is usually remembered for a number of film roles.

⁴⁰ Even though the lighter comical and popular repertoire dominated, Rydkvist presented a varied repertoire. She was the first theatre producer to perform plays by Vilhelm Moberg (a famous Swedish writer). She also staged several pieces about women's rights. Later on, she produced plays about the Worker's Unions.

⁴¹ That the audience was a mix of upper and working class unusual for theatre at that time. *Ny Tid*, December 5, 1934. When Rydkvist opened her theatre it was the only theatre aiming at a broad audience. It was also the only theatre with the comic folk play as backbone of the repertoire. LT can be seen as a successor of a very popular revue theatre that ended its heyday in 1922. When it comes to dramatic/serious theatre, *Lorensbergsteatern* was the more refined and advanced stage, attracting the bourgeoisie. Besides these two theatres Gothenburg had a large theatre that performed operetta and opera.

⁴² In fact, LT offered more plays by female writers than any other theatre in Gothenburg during the same period (1922-1935).

⁴³ *Göteborgs Tidning*, October 30, 1927.

⁴⁴ *Göteborgs Posten*, November 15, 1969.

⁴⁵ The theatre adaptation was written by Ernst Fastbom.

⁴⁶ Ester Blenda Nordström (1891-1948) worked as a reporter at one of the larger morning papers in Sweden (*Svenska Dagbladet*) and wrote several articles under the alias Bansai. The story based on her work at a Swedish farm was published in 1914 and also resulted in a very popular book. Later, the novel was adapted for film and for the stage.

⁴⁷ These aspects have been analyzed by Carin Billger in her unpublished Master's thesis in literature. "Viran Rydkvist som 'hemslavinna' hos fru Thalia: Kvinnorepertoaren på Lilla Teatern i Göteborg 1922-1935," University of Gothenburg 1995.

⁴⁸ She worked as director and producer in-between the two World Wars. This was a changing time, not only for Sweden, but also for women. The right to vote in national elections was decided in 1919, and was fully practiced after the election of 1921. From 1923, women and men had equal working rights.

⁴⁹ *Göteborgs Posten*, October 30, 1927.

⁵⁰ When the theatre announced it was about to close a newspaper article described the theatre as "the last people's theatre in Sweden". *Göteborgs Posten*, August 26, 1933. My translation.

⁵¹ *Lorensbergsteatern* ("Lorensberg theatre") opened in 1916 (the opening performance was Strindberg's *A Dream Play*) and was seen as one of the most modern theatres in Europe at that time, with a rotating stage and a cyclorama backdrop.

⁵² The term "the modern breakthrough" rather than "modernism" is relevant in a Scandinavian perspective. The modern breakthrough in literature (1870-1890), is primarily associated with Scandinavian authors such as George Brandes (Denmark), Henrik Ibsen (Norway), and August Strindberg (Sweden). Theatre did not achieve this breakthrough as early as literature, which is one reason as to why historians, for example Gösta M. Bergman, argue that theatre in Scandinavia and especially in Sweden became modern 1890-1925.