

# Introduction

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Some readers holding this special issue *Poetics of Playing* in their hands might be wondering how such a publication is possible without any official call for contributions. This requires further explanation.

In 2011, Magnus Tessing Schneider and Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen, the new editors of *Nordic Theatre Studies*, informed readers in the introduction of the journal about their intention to start publishing a second annual issue related to conference activities. When Skjoldager-Nielsen became the president of the Association of Nordic Theatre Scholars and resigned from his duties as editor with Schneider in 2013, Anneli Saro and Ulla Kallenbach took over their positions with an ambition to put the idea of the former editors into practice. Currently, I am Professor of Theatre Research at the University of Tartu and Ulla Kallenbach has just received her PhD degree from the University of Copenhagen. A new book editor was also appointed, Magnus Thor Thorbergsson from the Iceland Academy of the Arts. It is my hope that theatre research in the Nordic and Baltic countries will be covered even more thoroughly in *Nordic Theatre Studies* due to these changes.

As of 2014, *Nordic Theatre Studies* will publish two issues per year: the first will be based on certain scientific events taking place in the Nordic or Baltic countries, while the second issue will follow the traditions of the journal, having both a thematic and an open section for articles.

The current number grew out of a seminar of the Theatrical Event working group of the IFTR held

at the University of Stockholm in 2012 (hosted by Willmar Sauter and Rikard Hoogland). The group collected several important explorations of playing as a core of performing into the book *Playing Culture. Conventions and Extensions of Performance* (2014, Rodopi, edited by Vicki Ann Cremona, Rikard Hoogland, Gay Morris, Willmar Sauter) that was divided into four sections: theories, extensions, politics and conventions. After finishing the manuscript, a new project was started in 2011 – *Poetics of Playing* – in order to investigate more traditional forms of theatrical playing. Since members of the group noticed that the majority of researchers (6 out of 8 authors in this number) working on the project were from the Nordic and Baltic countries, we made a proposal to the Board of the Association of Nordic Theatre Scholars to publish a special issue on the poetics of playing.

Playing is one of the key principles of theatre and other performance activities and as such, it has been a cornerstone of the Theatrical Event working group. Since new theatrical forms are expanding and challenging our concepts of playing, the working group decided to continue its ambition to question playing and play culture. The initial aim of the working group was to develop methodologies and strategies for the analysis of playing, in particular the relationship between performers and audiences, physical presence and embodiment, reality and fictionality and the various functions of playing. During the course of this collaboration, it became clear, however, that different members defined and understood the notion of poetics quite differently, thus we

gave up the idea of developing a coherent theory or paradigm of analysis that all members could apply and elaborate on, as has been the case in three earlier books: *Theatrical Events. Borders, Dynamics, Frames* (2004), *Festivalising! Theatrical Events, Politics and Culture* (2007) and *Playing Culture. Conventions and Extensions of Performance* (2014). As a result of that, authors who make use of the terms of poetics and playing define the notions according to their understanding and needs. In addition, we noticed that most of the case studies tended to tackle the relationships of fictional and real or fiction and reality in playing and this led to the title of the issue – *Poetics of Playing: Fictionality, Reality and Playing in between*.

The opening article by Anneli Saro deals with terms such as ‘poetics’, ‘poetics of playing’ and more specifically with the poetics of ambivalence. The author defines poetics as a search for general principles underlying particular types, genres and styles of works of art, while stressing that it is not a normative but a changing set of rules guiding both artistic creation and reception. And finally, the theatre project Unified Estonia Assembly by the Estonian group Theatre NO99 is analysed in the framework of the poetics of ambivalence.

Next, Luule Epner asks the question, what do actors do in contemporary theatre with the intention of mapping out a number of widespread contemporary acting strategies. She uses the spectrum ‘fictional – real’ as a main tool of inspection and productions from Estonian theatre as her main examples. Three categories of acting are distinguished in the article: being someone else, being oneself and performing actions. In the scale, one can see a gradual decrease of representation and increase of presentation.

Jurgita Staniskytė uses similar opposing terms – play and reality – as a starting point of her overview of the Post-Soviet Lithuanian theatre where experiments with presentation of reality have become a rather common trend. Nevertheless, she admits that while engaging with the codes of reality or ‘real’ material onstage, Lithuanian artists try to dismantle the binary opposition between realistic representation and anti-realistic playfulness, between fictional and real.

Contrary to the aforementioned authors, Barbara Orel, in her article “Fusing the Fictional and the Real in the Contemporary Performing Arts: Projects by the Via Negativa Group”, is more interested in the perception of potential spectators than in the qualities of different types of productions. In her analysis, experiencing something as fictional or real is decisively influenced by the perceptual activity of the spectator. Orel distinguishes between two co-existing concepts of representation and reception that she calls, on the basis of Denis Diderot’s essays on theatre and fine art, theatricality and absorption.

Janne Tapper’s article is basically a model for a particular type of reception strategy for postmodern art. He states that the main aesthetic elements of postmodern culture are surfaces that lack depth and history but despite these features the human mind is able to produce coherent individual trajectories and eventually also a coherent culture. Tapper warns, however, that the blurring of boundaries between play and reality, an issue all the former authors of the number have analysed, may also lead to delirium and ill-founded practices.

Vicki Ann Cremona takes readers as far as Tunisia, exploring the poetics of confrontation of stage director Fadhel Jaibi and the social functions of theatrical playing. She also enriches the issue with some new definitions: “I take poetics to mean the artistic force of a production, which are transmitted through textual and physical staging. ‘Poetics of playing’ has much to do with the praxis of the persons involved in the process of a performance, especially the actors and director, but it also comprises the way the spectator experiences the production.”

Masha Berlova investigates the functions of playing in a broader societal field by using the Swedish King Gustav III and his departure to the Russian war in 1788 as examples. The theatricalization of political events and the role of king as created by Gustav III adorned life but also significantly changed reality. Berlova boldly states that the goal of the king was not the creation of a fictional world but the creation of political propaganda, which to a certain extent is related to fiction but is, nevertheless, real in its consequences.

The final article creates a rather smooth succession to the preceding text as well as between the current and forthcoming number of the journal, which is dedicated to theatre and technology. Willmar Sauter vividly describes and analyses the court life of Gustav III in his Drottningholm palace with the aim of exploring the possibilities of re-creating the playing culture of the eighteenth-century by means of digital, interactive playing. In the article, six functions of playing are introduced – entertainment and emotions, aesthetics and ethics, education and economy – and the notion of poetry of playing.

To conclude, this special issue *Poetics of Playing* deals, first of all, with theatrical playing that can either be framed or not. Playing is a characteristic of performers, participants and spectators during a theatrical event, though the agents involved use different strategies of playing or play different games. Theatrical playing operates simultaneously on two levels – at the symbolic level of play or fiction and on the non-symbolic level of reality – and the interplay of these levels is an especially intriguing phenomenon that deserves further investigation.