

Utopia and Performance

An Introduction

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“There is nothing like dogma for bringing forth dreams. And there is nothing like dreams for engendering the future. Utopia to-day, flesh and blood to-morrow.”¹

- Victor Hugo

“The utopia for which I yearn takes place now, in the interstices of present interactions, in glancing moments of possibly better ways to be together as human beings.”²

- Jill Dolan

“It’s a much more radical question, a matter of survival: the future will be utopian or there will be none.”³

- Slavoj Žižek

All of these quoted authors – Victor Hugo, Jill Dolan, and Slavoj Žižek turn to utopia from a state of crisis. In his masterpiece, *Les Misérables* (1862), Hugo depicts a society in crisis, leaving its most vulnerable subjects – the poor – in a state of total misery. His epic culminates in narrating the events around the 1832 Republican upheaval in Paris and its political failure to change the state order. In the end, only the ethical actions of single subjects can attenuate

1 Hugo 2015, 818.

2 Dolan 2001, 456.

3 Žižek 2004.

the atrocities of social injustice. The quoted phrase appears in the introductory part of the chapter where he discusses the aims and actions of the revolutionary student club “The Friends of the ABC”, who engage in planning a revolution. In Hugo’s words, the dogmatic repression necessitates dreaming that in turn forges an idea about a possible and soon to be realized better life. So, the miserable conditions of an unjust society, the social and human crisis, engender utopia first in their hidden structure and then turn into open political action.

Both Žižek and Dolan also return to crisis, but not in a distinct historical moment that needs to be overthrown, but in the form of a constantly re-enacted performance. The constant state of crisis we – subjects to neo-liberal order, subjects to heteronormativity – are in necessitates utopia. While Dolan adds aspects of communality and solidarity to the idea of utopia, Žižek, pointing to the ever-on-going psychological repressions and class struggles, gives us a sense of urgency: There is a utopian future or there is none. There is a need to enact the utopia or there won’t be any possible action at all.

This pressing urgency is particularly felt today in times of climate change, post-Covid, and a raging war. In face of such multiple crises, we tend to search for some remedy in escapism, turn to the good things, ensuring ourselves that the climate collapse, the virus, the killings are there, still a bit afar, not yet in our immediate surroundings, not yet in my town, not yet in my household, not yet in my family. But those circles become tighter, drawing their lines closer and closer.

One of those moments when circular lines crossed my life was when Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen passed away on 6 January 2022. After two years of lion-like fighting against a powerful disease, he had to give in. And left us alone. Since the beginning of 2020 we had planned the 2021 ANTS conference on “Utopia and Performance” together. We had shaped the theme, phrased a call for papers⁴, developed plans to publish some selected papers from the conference in a themed issue of *Nordic Theatre Studies*. I looked forward to continuing our discussions on the theme and its reverberations in theatre practice and theatre studies, on utopia and dystopia being different and yet the same, on the possibility to escape and still activate one’s political striving for change, for betterment, for a harmonious being between different people, between nature and humans, between now and then, between earth and cosmos. And here I am, talking to myself, writing alone – silently. Kim’s intellectual spark is very much missed, as are his kind encouragement, critical objections, and creative contributions to our discourse.

And yet, also his passing made the publishing of this volume even more precious and urgent to me than ever before. We need utopia, we need critical interventions into the wrongdoings, failures, traps of utopian ideology. We need a non-place, when this place doesn’t offer a space for hope, a space for vision, a space for resonating with our crazy self. We need to assess that “Utopia is an ambition which puts question marks against the everyday inevitability of this world and, moreover, motivates thought and action – praxis – aimed at transforming what is through the lever of what could be.”⁵ This definition by Michael Hviid Jacobson and Keith Tester conditions the possibility of utopian action on whether there is confidence, hope, and non-threatening latent tendencies. But how to create and achieve confidence, hope, and positivity, even courage? I think that Kim would very much agree with me that theatre and performance are the perfect sites to look for sources of such empowerment and that it is there in the aesthetic experience that utopia can turn into transformative action.

So, Kim, this one is for you!

4 Some of the ideas from the call for papers that had been developed together with Kim Skjoldager-Nielsen have inspired and shaped this introduction.

5 Jacobson and Tester 2012, 1.



Figure 1: Utah Monolith 2020, photo by Patrick A. Mackie, Creative Commons

Back to basics, what is utopia? The term ‘utopia’ was coined and mainstreamed through the reception of Thomas More’s 1516 book *Utopia* in which he proposes a utopian concept of an ideal society located on a fictional remote island and, in this way, he disguises his critique of the English society of his time. In his book, More provides an etymology of the term deriving from the Greek *u-topia*, which means ‘non-place’. English pronunciation relates it to another Greek term, *eu-topia*, the ‘good place’. This has led to a general understanding of ‘utopia’ as a positive imaginary space in contrast to ‘dystopia’ as a disastrous setting, whereas the original meaning involves no judgement on the quality of the utopia. With the Enlightenment’s deliberate striving for the betterment of society, utopianism became associated with revolutionary thinking: Utopia was simultaneously located at the dawn of humanity and in the foreseeable future, almost within reach. In our day, a more critical discourse points to the ambivalence of the term: spelling out the dreamlike potential of good living as well as the danger of utopianism authorizing ideological powerplay and repressive political actions. Through dystopianism a more nuanced and critical understanding of what utopia can be is developed. Scott C. Knowles suggests that dystopia “rather becomes [the] limit case”⁶ to utopia. And Joni Hyvönen even states that dystopia becomes “a counter image to the present”, constituting a nightmare with a hope for change. Therefore, “dystopia provides optimism on the sly.”⁷

In many cultural traditions and narratives, utopian spaces offer a potential escape from a hard life in the here and now: Arcadia, the biblical Garden of Eden, the German *Schlaraffenland*, even the Swedish idea of the *folkhemmet* could be considered here. All these ideal spaces

6 Knowles 2016, 7, as quoted in Skjoldager-Nielsen & Skjoldager-Nielsen 2020.

7 Hyvönen 2019, 7, as quoted in Skjoldager-Nielsen & Skjoldager-Nielsen 2020.

have been shaped and communicated to offer hope for a place where one will be able to return to in an afterlife, or when acquiring another state of being – an acquisition depending on a certain behaviour, action, adjustment: something to strive for.

More recently, performance scholars have, from a spatial concept of utopian theatre, developed more politically engaged concepts of utopian performance, building on such thinkers as Ernst Bloch and Richard Dryer. Jill Dolan's *Utopia in Performance* (2005) and José Esteban Muñoz' *Cruising Utopia* (2009) have been very influential within this field. Dolan situates the 'utopian performative' in the experience of *communitas* emerging from the encounter between performers and spectators that "lets them imagine a different, putatively better future."⁸ These performance acts thus 'rehearse' a social utopian goal and foster its materialization. Writing as a self-identifying queer person of colour, Muñoz spells out a potentiality of performance that is utopian *per se*. The present performance reaches back into a past while opening a potential vision for the future, therefore suspending the performative act in the "not-yet-conscious" (Bloch). Performance hence offers a utopian time outside the heteronormative, or as Muñoz has it, straight time, which involves alternative realities, utopian concepts of living.⁹ Both authors propose concepts and perspectives that allow us to envision and discuss theatre and performance in terms of utopian thinking. In times of crisis, such as ours, theatre and performance offer hope and meaning and provide us with relevant critical acts that allow us to envision and perform social utopias, climate utopias, and even health utopias. Theatre and performance dwell between the realms of dreaming (Hugo) and urgent critical agency (Žižek). This volume sets out to investigate the utopian potentials of this in-between position.

Theatre and performance engage in proposing such utopian visions as a remedy, as a critical stance in times of crisis, as an imaginary flight from straight realisms, as practiced performativities potentially materializing different futures. The contributions to this special issue on "Utopia and Performance" explore these utopian strategies and proposals in different ways. Sean Metzger sets out to investigate utopia in terms of speculative geographies that make the search for and/or creation of worlds thinkable. The expansive rubric of speculative geographies is able to embrace both utopian and dystopian modes and relates to Muñoz' idea of utopia as "a horizon of possibility"¹⁰. Willmar Sauter explores aesthetic experience as a striking feeling of immediate presence that is able to create the future memories of the past. He thus points to a decisive moment of utopian performatives in the theatre: the moment of experiencing the here and now as a potential for better futures. Daria Skjoldager-Nielsen continues in that vein in discussing the experience of the theatre spectator as a moment of sensing true beauty and hence engendering a feeling of hope and love that might even have the potential to change the world. She explores the *Oratorium Dance Project* (2011) in Lodz as an example of such aesthetic experience. Sanni Lindroos presents to us the Turku City Theatre's musical production *Varissuo* about the Finnish *lähiös* –geographically and socially marginalized neighbourhoods associated with urban segregation and a set of stereotypes about their residents. She argues that in this production, the political potential of the utopian performative was erased and subverted into a counterproductive force affirming existing prejudices and further stigmatization. Ragnhild Tronstad unravels aesthetic experience as the core principle of Norway's theatre pedagogical program "The Cultural Schoolbag", which sets out to provide all school pupils with access to uplifting and educating aesthetical experiences regardless of geography, economy, religious, or cultural background. Anneli Saro investigates an attempt to create a utopian theatre institution or an institutional theatre utopia with the establishment of the Estonian theatre NO99 (2004-2018). She spells out the ideals and idealistic approach of the theatre founders – Tiit Ojasoo and Ene-Liis Semper – and discusses the failures but also potential impact on future theatre makers. Antoine Hirel argues for puppet theatre's potential to perform utopian bodies by discussing the case of the queer puppet show *Hen* by Johanny Bert. Here, the puppet body becomes the material for a vision of how bodies are conceived and constructed while at the same time presenting a utopia of more diverse and multiple body schemes. Maria Mårsall presents to us the utopian concepts and work of Frida Stéenhoff.

8 Dolan 2005, 168.

9 Muñoz 2009, 21-2.

10 Muñoz 2009, 97.

Stéenhoff took a utopian political stance in her investigations of the idea of peace and societal change materializing in her piece *Stridbar ungdom* (1907, Pugnacious Youth). Birgitta Lindh Estelle discusses Anne Charlotte Leffler's *Sanna Kvinnor* (1883, True Women) as a utopian vision of changing the prevailing gender norms in 19th-century Sweden. She investigates the stagings and reception of the time to bring out the different strategies to present and criticize the utopian energies of the piece. Annelis Kuhlmann presents the case of the Danish 1813 adaptation of Hamlet creating a harmonious and peaceful countermodel to the actual historical state crisis in Denmark. Hamlet hence provided spectators with a utopian vision of a potentially better Danish life.

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