

## A Silence that Speaks Volumes

The (conservative) Alliance is pursuing an active cultural policy. Their strategy is passivity. It entails sitting on one's hands while waiting for The Great Culture Proposition, which will be completed in the early months of 2009 and will then be remitted to affected institutions for consideration. This takes time. Meanwhile, the opposition is also twiddling their thumbs while Swedish cultural institutions are crumbling. This is precisely what they had in mind.

It's an interesting time in the life of Swedish theatre. Artistic directors across the country are exploring different strategies for staying afloat. Three methods dominate: expansion, streamlining and cutting output. The interesting thing is that all three methods tend to lead to the same result, economic collapse.

Expansion: How much can an institution grow without additional nutrition?

Streamlining: How much can you streamline your organization and retain it at the same time?

Cutting output: How little can you do and still stay in business?

Of the three models, the last one is by far the worst strategy, since the only persuasive argument for publically funded art is the tenacious production of art of high quality.

It is alarming that a gradual erosion of Swedish cultural values is now taking place. Frozen allocations equal reduced allocations. How can that be? Well, inflation to start with, increased costs for salaries and pensions have eaten away at subsidies, draining their value.

The situation can be likened to that of Haga, a popular neighborhood in Gothenburg that was slated for demolition during the seventies to make room for high-rise housing. There was a strong popular opinion opposing this initiative. There are some battles that the powers that be would rather not fight in broad daylight. They switched strategies. They let Haga decay until no one could say anything except "tear the whole thing down".

Is that the fate awaiting Sweden's cultural institutions? This passivity is nothing more than a silence that speaks volumes.

Each and every day the newspapers are full of "the crisis of the Swedish theatre". Those of us that work in the theatre barely recognize ourselves in this description. More theatre is produced today than ever before. And the quality is very high. Audiences frequent the theatre in ever increasing numbers. The Swedish theatre is respected abroad. Swedish theatre for children is world-renowned. It not the theatre that is in crisis, but our cultural politics.

So why won't this government invest in culture? Can it simply be that we have a government that considers a 163 billion crown national budget surplus (official July 2008 statistics) to be more important than charging the idea of democracy with a content of tangible value? The governing parties' present passivity in cultural policy is drastically depleting the cultural life of this country and the base of experience and knowledge that has taken generations to build up.

Reduced subsidies are forcing theatres to increase their degree of self-financing – they are forced to sell even more tickets. This trend is still in its infancy. Content has as yet to be affected to any major degree. But a continuation of this negative trend *will* have consequences, and we *will* see quality sacrificed to the growing importance of quantity. We are already drowning in commercial static. Many different entities producing exactly the same thing, this is what the free market economy calls freedom of choice.

This static is pervasive and it invades all medias.

Commercial interests discovered long ago that superficiality is profitable. The media talks to us as if we were infants. Culture is an important pocket of resistance – one of the few left today – and we cannot allow it to lose its bite. That would turn us all into losers.

The times we live in focus on the surface, the wrappings. Those of us who work with content are deeply worried by the infinitesimal price tag our government has put on one of the cornerstones of democracy: culture and the freedom of expression. Few politicians today subscribe to the notion of continuing education for its citizens, the theatre comprising an advanced course in human studies. They might warm to the idea, but lack the vocabulary, the language to express it.

This is a society in which everything is subject to measurement – particularly in monetary terms – though it is difficult to find a national economic correlation for immaterial values. But it is precisely these values which one might designate as the nation's spiritual infrastructure, that define the real measure of a nation's wealth. These are the values that can bring a nation together in the face of disaster, like when a large passenger ferry sank in foul weather drowning hundreds in the icy Baltic, or when a wave on the other side of the planet wiped out everything in its path. Is it possible to measure empathy or compassion in monetary terms? Of course it isn't. There must be another Richter scale.

Cultural workers and politicians need to share the responsibility of creating a language that would describe these immaterial values. That which can't be named has a tendency to go unnoticed. We need sensitive measuring devices to detect their workings in society.

Why must we always weigh the operating budget of a theatre against an operating room in a regional hospital? It is because these are soft values. You would never weigh a hospital bed against the need for safer highways because highways have a concrete value, easy to measure. Hospitals are seldom profitable: how could you even demand that of a public health institution that must be available to everyone? Neither should the theatre be expected to reap a profit: how does insightfulness compete in a system ruled by measurement and concrete values? Poetry, the flowering apple tree outside your window. What is that experience worth? What's the market value? Blossoming apple trees, how many crowns per cubic meter? One could get lost in that jungle.

Everyone knows the importance of maintaining infrastructure: if you don't keep up your roadways and rail systems, they will deteriorate. You'll need to slow down traffic. Finally, the roads will become unusable. The same is true for the spiritual infrastructure. If we don't invest in culture – in our identity as a "we" – our path will be strewn with obstacles and we will need to slow down until we finally come to a halt. End station. All

passengers disembark. And we'll look around and what will we see? A foreign country. We've become strangers.

Why do we have a government that seems hell bent on, as quickly as possible, selling out our common material and immaterial infrastructure? Why would they have us turned into law-abiding consumers? Are we a nation or a shopping mall? This isn't about who is or is not entitled to collect unemployment. Something else is under attack, something structural, but at the same time invisible.

The Theatre Union released today a book entitled "The Invisible – The Theatre Union's Guide to Cultural Policy" containing texts authored by a large numbers of persons in the cultural sphere. Simultaneously we are launching a think tank under the same name with the mission of analyzing and debating cultural questions. We the undersigned would encourage all responsible politicians to read this book and to take our worries seriously as the threshold will soon be reached. It is not possible to cut anymore, without destroying the very bone marrow. It is time for politicians to prioritize cultural policy.

Archimedes once said, "Give me a place to stand on and I will move the Earth."

We need to create this place together.

Jacob Hirdwall (playwright and dramaturge), Stina Oscarson (artistic director Orienteatern) Leif Zern (author and theatre critic) Jonas Kruse (actor), Anna Carlsson (president The Theatre Union), Tomas Sander (Theatre Union) Mattias Andersson (playwright , artistic director. Backa Teater, Richard Turpin (actor, director), Måns Lagerlöf (artistic director. Ung scen Ost), Karin Parrot Jonzon (artistic director Byteatern), Lisa Hugosson (Riksteatern), Staffan Olzon (director), Jan Mark (dramaturge), Åsa Melldahl (director), Elin Klinga (actor), Peter Oskarsson (director), Med Reventberg (artistic director Västerbottensteatern), Lars Björklund (author and priest), Lars Rudolfsson (artistic director Orienteatern), Farnaz Arbabi (director and playwright), Maria Löfgren (director and artistic director Västmanland Youth Theatre), Ingvar Hirdwall (actor), Kia Berglund (artistic director Teater Giljotin). Marika Lindström (actor), Rolf Lassgård (actor), Ann Petrén (actor), Minna Krook (choreografher), Alexander Öberg (director), Anna Söderbäck (president of KLYS), Anna Wallander (actor), Alexandra Rappaport (actor), Linus Tunström (artistic director Uppsala Stadsteater) Erik Uddenberg (playwright, dramaturge), Mira Bartov (artistic director Folkoperan)

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Translated by Edward Buffalo Bromberg