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Tältprojektet

Musikteater som manifestation

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357 sidor, stort format, rikt illustrerad och med musiknoter

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The Tent Project: Music theatre as a manifestation is a study of a show that toured Sweden in the summer of 1977, called *We are a Legion (Vi äro tusenden)*. In a big circus tent, the show depicted the history of the working class and workers' movements in Sweden 1879-1977. The ensemble consisted of individuals from various music and theatre groups in the young, independent and politically engaged Swedish music and theatre movements, and people from established theatrical institutions or fee-lance careers. The total audience was more than 100,000 people. Part of the two-hour musical score within the framework of the four-hour play was released on an LP record. Excerpts from the show were also used in a film.

The aim of this study is to investigate which genres, traditions, and styles met in the Tent Project, which elements and contradictions resulted and which form and contents the play got. Of special interest are the types and functions of the music of the show.

A lot of material was collected to document the Tent Project and the history of the people who staged it. A series of interviews was made with members of the project. The show was reconstructed in details by means of various recordings, photos, and videos. This reconstruction is included in the study in the form of a complete manuscript, stage settings description, and musical score. Substantial excerpts from the interviews are included in order to illustrate the motives of the producers. 40 photos provide visual information.

The format of the book is highly innovative. It is presented in 'dialogic' format: the authorial text juxtaposed on the page with the remarks of those interviewed. In the sections containing the detailed reconstruction of the show, these two columns are in their turn juxtaposed to another two columns, transcribing the aural (words and music) and the visual (light, stage setting and movements) elements and processes of the music theatre play.

The music mixed jazz, rock music, and traditional Swedish popular song genres – not without conflicts. The cooperative, democratic, and non-hierarchical mode of production resulted in a heterogeneous and complex work. Musical functions were inspired by working-class traditions, agit-prop theatre, film music and the youth cultural rock music. The connections between music and theatre are studied.

The study elucidates the position of the Tent Project in the modern history of adolescent cultures and political music theatre. It was a manifestation of the creative abilities of the young, radical cultural movements of the 1970s and a manifestation of their solidarity with revolutionary streams in working class history. The study analyses the use of rock and film music methods in socialist theatre, as well as of cooperative modes of production.

The music of the show made it clear how deeply Afro-American idioms had become part of the musical identity of the younger generations. The musicians expressed their identification with fighting Swedish workers in the 19th century by projecting on them their own blues-oriented musical basis. The type of music they named “timeless”, or “their own”, was blues-based rock with some jazz elements. Whereas the jazz saxophone players in the ensemble preferred to establish purely instrumental spaces free from verbal language, the rock musicians were not afraid to let music interplay intimately with words, in songs and opera-like dramatic scenes. And the most rock-oriented composer loved using music as “film music”, i.e. as a mood-creating and “invisible” background music that underlined the emotions shown on stage. This broke with a strong Brecht-Eisler tradition in political theatre, with its ascetic fear of bodily expressivity and the seducing power of music. The Tent Project was much closer to late modern youth culture, where strong emotional acting out from the rock stage is central.

The Tent Project had a collective heterogeneity that was typical for the alternative movements. People with different experiences and backgrounds met and tried out new and democratic forms of cooperation across different boundaries. There were not one, but three or four composers, writers, directors etc, and the participating individuals and groups were thus allowed to add their own ideas to at least some parts of the show. The result was a montage form where various styles and traditions were mixed, far from any high cultural aesthetics and instead firmly anchored in modern popular culture, with roots in carnival culture. There were serious shortcomings in the project, partly caused by difficult economic conditions, partly a result of the prominent ideologies of its time. What was meant as an igniting manifestation soon was felt as an awkward tombstone. But the disrespectful collage forms, resulting from the efforts openly and without any centralized hierarchic leadership to cooperate across various borders, contains a valid utopian germ and critical edge against dominating cultural traditions.

This relates to general aesthetic and political views on popular music. The Tent Project, as the music movement in general, can be read as a testing out of an aesthetical model for unrestrained communication, where expressivity and interaction are merged into a richer, communicative rationality. The meeting of popular music and an active and creative audience creates possibilities for transgressing dominant norms and power structures in dynamic, unexpected and impure mixtures of traditions, in open and polydimensional encounters between subcultures and generations, groups and individuals, genres and styles.

The Tent Project was soon felt to be the final manifestation of a movement dissolving in a multitude of different directions, rather than a beginning of something new, as it had hoped itself. Changed conditions for free groups as an effect of the economic crisis and of an ideological crisis within the new left movements, the emergence of local historical amateur theatre plays in the Swedish countryside, the punk explosion and the internal problems of the music movement combined to prevent a direct continuation of what had been started. The unity of the movement was sincerely threatened by internal conflicts on issues of cultural politics. Tendencies towards commercialization and institutionalization increased, blurring the borderline between alternative and mainstream, while the commercial sector found new offensive strategies to incorporate domestic rock. The collective identity was broken up and splintered into fragments. Today almost no festivals are directed against the commercial music industry anymore – the front lines have moved elsewhere. Music festivals still persist, however, in a range from the very local to the national ones; from the ones only about music to the ones combining rock with political or social causes, like in the Swedish ANC gala and national variants of the Live Aid “mega events”; and from the specialized to the stylistically heterogeneous ones.