

## **The Fairy-Tale Theatre: Reception and Authorship at the Margins of the Ingmar Bergman Archive**

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This paper examines documents from the collections of the Ingmar Bergman Archive relating to an early stage in Bergman's career: in 1941, at the age of 23, Bergman was recruited by the city of Stockholm to work as the manager and director of Sagoteatern ["The Fairy-Tale Theatre"], Sweden's first functioning children's theatre, which produced seven plays throughout 1941 and 1942.

The theatre was housed in the Civic Centre in Södermalm, South Stockholm, which at the time was a predominantly working class area. Its ensemble consisted of acting students who worked for free. Staff representatives for each school in the Södermalm area distributed tickets and promotional material at their respective schools. In an information leaflet from 1941 about the aim of the theatre and its repertoire, Bergman explains that the city administration had provided the premises and the stage for free in order to establish a permanent children's theatre in Stockholm.

This was the smallest theatre in the city at the time. The auditorium measured 9 x 6 metres and held as few as 100 seats. The stage similarly measured only 5 x 6 metres but Bergman asserted in the information leaflet that the technical equipment held the same standard as any other stage in Stockholm.

Bergman's original intention was to establish what he called a unique forum for cooperation within the Swedish theatre world, establishing contact with young talented authors and established visual artists.

Another initial ambition was to run two theatres at the same time on the same stage, presenting performances of two separate productions each evening: first (at 6.45 pm), a children's play, within the framework of Sagoteatern, and afterwards (at 9 pm) a production for the general public – About two weeks after the opening of Sagoteatern Bergman started Medborgarteatern "the Civic Theatre". However, only one production, of Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata*, was realised, as the initiative did not garner the same financial support from the politicians of Stockholm.

But several others were planned, among them a production of Lorca's *Blood Wedding*, and in the aforementioned information leaflet these never-to-be-realised productions are listed and described. In fact, while Bergman only lists the titles of the forthcoming children's plays that in fact were realised, all the productions planned for The Civic theatre are thoroughly described, although they never came to fruition.

According to Michel Foucault, the archive is not just a collection of items, it is a construct and discursive formation, an active and controlling system of enunciation. In this respect, it is significant that the Fairy Tale Theatre material belongs to the margins of the Bergman archive in a number of ways. The documents, which are among the oldest in the archive, were not part of Bergman's original donation of his private archive to the Swedish Film Institute that led to the establishment of the Ingmar Bergman foundation, and thus it does not belong directly to Bergman's active contribution to the legacy of his authorship as a discourse. The material was acquired later, and was found in the church in Stockholm where Bergman's father was working. Similarly, only very limited portions of this material are included in the Bergman

foundation's ongoing process of digitising the archival collection; this is of course due to priorities linked to limited financial resources, the fact that this does not constitute the most fragile or most sought-after material of the collection, but it nevertheless accentuates the status of this material as belonging to the margins of the Bergman archive.

Still it can be useful to recognise and attend to such margins in order to question and revision not so much Bergman's career (as the story of the Fairy Tale theatre fits neatly as an early example of Bergman's talent both as an artist and as an entrepreneur), but first and foremost in order to transgress the boundaries associated with what an 'auteur archive' consists of and how the material in such an archive can be read, understood, and used.

Central to much of the Fairy Tale theatre material is the question of children as a particular audience, and how to define and understand this audience. In his introduction to the new theatre in the programme for its first production, a modernized version of Hans Christian Andersen's *The Tinder Box*, Bergman states: "This children's theatre is an experimental theatre." He continues to assert his avoidance of a pedagogical message in the production, how he rather is trying to communicate to the perceptive young audience by focusing on constantly changing visual elements.

In the programme for his children's theatre adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1941), Bergman states: "How can we – the director and the actors – who are embarking on this "thorny path," with a 5-by-6-metre stage, two small stage doors, and Mendelssohn on the gramophone, salvage even a small fraction of the play for our audience? If we had asked ourselves that question from the beginning, we would probably not have invited you to watch Shakespeare this evening. We will express it differently: Why not? We are performing to an audience that is not likely to ever go and see *A Midsummer Night's Dream* unless we try to offer it to them; an audience that is not unlike an audience in Shakespeare's time, at least that's what I think: happy to let any shortcomings pass; an audience that reacts spontaneously without restraint and is openly naive."

The archival material relating to the Fairy Tale Theatre is very diverse, and even includes bus tickets and dry cleaning receipts, extensive correspondence with the Stockholm police, regarding charges of carrying out electrical repairs without a licence (of which Bergman actually was convicted in a court of law and given a fine) as well as of using underage actors without proper permission.

In addition to holdings of correspondence, photographs, and programs relating to this institution, the Bergman archive contains interesting reception material – a product of the cooperation which took place between Sagoteatern and primary schools in the Stockholm area: The reception material is produced by schoolchildren between the ages of 8 and 13 and consists of about 80 drawings or paintings, and about 60 essays (about 40 of these also contain small drawings), conveying audience experiences from five of The Fairy Tale Theatre's productions. Moreover, articles and speeches written by the young Bergman refer to and analyse the contents of these essays, examining questions of aesthetics, realism, and spectatorship.

One of the most interesting documents relating to this institution is a speech held during a meeting with politicians and representatives of the Stockholm school district after the theatre's first production. Here, the reception material is presented as a strategy to avoid the lack of success experienced by earlier attempts at establishing children's theatres in Sweden

in terms of reaching an audience. Bergman emphasises the importance of knowing what the theatre's audience – what he calls “an unknown audience”, without a voice, really want to see (and not their mothers or spokespersons), but also how they perceive a play and form opinions on what is good and what is not.

The only way to gain knowledge of this, Bergman claims, is through an intimate collaboration with school principals, as well as Swedish and art teachers.

The school children's essays and drawings function similarly to empirical micro-studies later associated with cultural studies: they reveal individual experiences and individual memories of cultural products that also are linked to social position: being children, belonging to a specific geographical area, and social class. They reveal particular modes of viewing and particular ways of narrativising oneself and one's own experiences.

The drawings may tell us something about the relationship between visual impression and imagination, sometimes by comparing them with the promotional photographs held by the archive – e.g. different visual representations of the wolf in *Little Red Riding Hood*, a play Bergman incidentally referred to as “a children's *Ghost Sonata*”. Sometimes the drawings, as well as the essays, may provide, albeit subjective and unreliable, additional information about the play. There are no photos of how Bergman chose to visually represent the three big dogs in *The Tinder Box*, the ones with eyes as big as tea cups, mill-wheels, and round towers, respectively. They are recurring in the children's drawings, however, but provide more evidence of different spectators' experience and imagination (as well as drawing abilities) than perhaps of what the dogs really looked like on stage.

To quote the aforementioned speech by Bergman, where he is briefly analysing the reception material from *The Tinder Box*: “The essays we have received and the kids we have interviewed clearly show that they are relatively uninterested in the actual story. Instead, it is clear that individual, often violent or grotesque, events are the ones that are remembered and appreciated most, without any reference backwards or forwards in the narrative. The Witch has always been popular, both in the children's drawings and in their essays.”

The enjoyment of very concrete, very specific moments are recurring throughout most of the essays: descriptions of facial expressions, specific pieces of dialogue, the way Puck in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is running around the stage, of the actors hitting each other in the head, the dance between Little Red Riding Hood and the wolf, the actors taking a bow during applause.

Several children also mention the beauty of the actors' costumes, and similarly of the scenery, e.g. the forest and the starry sky in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (“this is what the stage looks like” reads the caption of this painting).

As reception studies focusing on the significance of memories have shown, this is also indicative of how memory works, normally not being broken down into stories but into images, to paraphrase Walter Benjamin.

These descriptions of individual moments or ‘images’ and their emotional effects also accentuate spectatorship as individual experiences. For example, the essays reveal that the illusion of lightening at certain moments in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was achieved by flashing the stage lighting, using sudden shifts between strong light and complete darkness, while playing the organ – these moments are described as extremely frightening in some essays and as purely entertaining in others.

Some essays, in particular written by older children, focus on notions of realism, often linked to speech, complimenting certain actors for speaking naturally – “exactly as in real life”, as one essay states. In another essay it is pointed out that the baker in *Little red Riding Hood* was wearing a proper baker’s attire but that clearly the cake was not real. Others complain about the posture of the wolf (being too straight), and that the mother washed her clothes in an unrealistic manner, one could see that there was no water in the bucket she was using. There are also intertextual observations: a couple of the essays point out how Oberon in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* looks like the Queen in Disney’s *Snow White*.

Other essays deal more with the extra-textual experiences of theatre-going than the play itself: one essay by a 10-year-old boy spends one sentence on the play, saying “it was very good”, the rest of the essay describes the dimension of the stage and the auditorium (many of the pupils mention being surprised by how small it is), the crowd which amassed when the play was over, feeling the fresh air when he finally got out, coming home and going to bed. Other essays focus on details such as the time the play started, on waiting impatiently, and the specific location of the theatre, which entrance one should use, where in the auditorium one is seated, the price of the ticket.

Another essay by a 10-year old girl deals with social interactions, talking to the boy she is sitting next to, referring a funny scene primarily by describing how the both of them laughed together, and even mentioning telling her parents about the play after coming home and about their reactions. Other essays mention acting out characters from the play afterwards. Having fun at the theatre is mentioned along with having fun on the tram on the way home.

“The fairies were very sweet,” one girl writes, and adds: “I’ve seen one of them on the street” *Little Red Riding Hood* also featured sing-along sessions in between acts that are mentioned almost to the same extent as the contents of the play in many of the essays.

Similarly, recent ethnographic studies of memories of going to the cinema, e.g. Annette Kuhn’s influential *Dreaming of Ginger and Fred*, dealing with Britain in the 1930s, emphasise the ritual, spatial and social aspects of cinema-going as being in many ways more important than the contents of the texts the spectators were watching.

The notion of the auteur has often been associated as contrary to such perspectives, and with traditional cinema studies and is usually placed in opposition to later movements and areas of interest brought about by what is often called the empirical or historical turn, as well as the cultural turn. In the case of ‘auteur archives’, however, the notion of an ‘archive’ obviously provides auteurism with an implied empirical or historical dimension, but likewise, as the reception material from the Fairy Tale Theatre demonstrates: Just as the materials relating to this theatre reveal important aspects of Bergman’s early artistic development, aesthetic ideals, and work methods, this paper has also aimed to demonstrate the range of cultural practices perhaps seldom associated with auteurism or ‘film art’ (children’s culture, the use of art in education, the experience of spectatorship) which nonetheless can be incorporated in an ‘auteur archive’. Paradoxically, perhaps, without an institution such as the Bergman archive these cultural practices, and the voices of this unknown audience, would probably not be preserved or made available anywhere.