

Recent Senior Theatre Activities in Sweden

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Introduction

In Sweden senior theatre is a growing movement. Nowadays many have the time and stamina to engage in cultural activities after retirement. Sparsely populated with 10 million inhabitants, Sweden stretches from Lapland in the North to Skåne in the South, a distance of about 1500 km. It has a history of local, regional and national activities within the cultural field, especially in the area of choir singing, countryside games as well as workers theatre. In recent decades the theatre tradition has begun to spread to the senior community.

A Senior Theatre Committee

A Committee on Senior Theatre was created by The National Swedish Association of Amateur Theatre (ATR) in 1993. The initiator was Maj-Britt Ahlin, a legendary representative of amateur theatre in Sweden. The work of the Committee was revived in 2009 after a “dormant” period.

The mission of the Committee is to promote good scenic art for older theatre amateurs, to make use of the experiences of old people and to provide continuous possibilities for personal growth and development for the elderly.

The committee is responsible for the arrangement of a **SeniorTheatreForum** every other year. Representatives of senior theatre groups from all Sweden meet biannually for three or four days at these forums. The Program includes theatre performances, work in progress appetizers, workshops (on various subjects, e.g. impro, mim, voice...) as well as meetings with legendary actors and vision-talks. It is arranged by the committee in collaboration with a local host. Since the event is arranged in different parts of Sweden, the ambition is also to provide some local “colour” to each summit. Last year, in Östersund 2015, a Samish “Jojk” demonstration was given by a member of the Samish community. The intent was to show how you can give a “gestalt” to a phenomenon through song. In Kalix, in 2011, the program included a visit to the local Summer Scene on an island in the Kalix river, where many countryside games describing local history are presented by amateur groups in the community.

Nordic guests are invited to participate in these Forums, and participants from Norway and Denmark have been present and provided valuable input. Next Forum will be arranged in the southern part of Sweden in September of 2017.

Course in Reminiscence Theatre

Another recent initiative of the Swedish Senior Theatre Committee is related to Reminiscence theatre (Theatre of Memories), based on the work done by Pam Schweitzer from the United Kingdom. It is a method where participants use their memories to create theatre. The process can be stimulated by "memory activators" such as photos, texts, clothing, songs, etc. (i.e. artefacts loaded with memories). The content of the theatre performance is created through improvisations around the memory material. A three day educational activity for instructors-to-be will be arranged in Stockholm in February 2017. This initiative will be carried out together with DATS in Denmark. Target groups are activity leaders who meet older people at institutions (e.g. residential homes), but also in the open community, e.g. at libraries and associations of retirees. Leonie Hohental-Antin, actor, director, teacher and author from Finland will be engaged as instructor. She has a long experience from applying this method for groups of elderly people. Her doctoral thesis was entitled "Taking permission – Elderly people as theatre makers".

Meeting Memories

Meeting Memories (Möten med minnen) has been a three year national project in Sweden run in collaboration by the Alzheimer Society of Sweden, the Dementia Association and the Swedish Dementia Centre during 2013 - 2015. 88 museums in Sweden took part in the project, which was inspired by the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York. The project aimed at developing a method of adapting and providing guided museum tours for people with dementia and their families. Many museums now continue to provide such adapted, interactive tours after the termination of the project. One of these is the Drottningholm theatre, built in 1766, a museum and also one of the world's oldest active theatres.

Experiences from performing at institutions for the elderly in Stockholm

A grant from the local community of the City of Stockholm has made it possible for the Senior Theatre group "Höstprimörerna" in Stockholm to perform at institutions where old people live. Among the residents are people with somatic illnesses, as well as dementia and other cognitive disorders. The program has included dance, poetry, theatre, music, short stories from old times, sing-a-long sessions etc. The experience can be summarized in a few keywords: keep it short, include music, vary the contents, do not be afraid of the unexpected.

Task force on accessibility

Recently, in connection with the biannual meeting of ATR in May 2016, a Task force on accessibility and performing arts was created. Accessibility is not exclusively related to people of old age, but reduced sensory and motor functions are frequent among them. Many suffer from impaired vision, impaired hearing and reduced mobility functions. Some also have impaired cognitive or mental functions, e.g. dementia. It is essential to make cultural activities accessible for all, irrespective of disability and/or age. This is valid for the actors on stage as well as the audience in the theater.

The area of work of the task force is presently being identified. It spans from disseminating knowledge about legislation to practical tips and good examples. The future aim is to give support to local amateur groups when it comes to providing an accessible theatre for all.