

## 'All actors will rebel or they are not good actors'



*I had the chance to spend a little more than three weeks in the company of theatre director Tor Arne Ursin and was surprised to discover that theatre can be made calmly and generously. As part of an artistic residency in Norway, I took part in the rehearsals and showcasing of a documentary theatre show written and directed by Tor Arne, „Herøya 1943“. I wish I had met him at a different stage of my theatre life, as I would have learned from him a lot of things `the easy way`, instead of doing them by the `trial and error` method. Tor Arne Ursin is an accomplished professional, with an impressive journey, who doesn't ask for more than he is willing to offer. He doesn't put on the airs of a director, he doesn't have the director's suit, the director's mask, the director's gaze, the director's anger or temper, etc. He genuinely and simply uses theatre to tell the stories he considers interesting both for himself and the public.*

*Tor Arne Ursin is one of the founders of Grenland Friteater, an independent theatre based in Porsgrunn, an industrial city of Norway. The theatre was founded in 1976 and it is astonishing that it is still active after almost 50 years of existence. I was curious to find out how this was possible, so I kindly asked Tor Arne Ursin to answer a couple of questions.*

### **How and when did you come to the conclusion that theater was your thing?**

That was very early. I think I was 16. I thought I could be a world champion at anything. I was interested in a lot of things. But in the last year of high school, we made a performance together, which was the start of Grenland Friteater. And the experience of doing that and of being an actor was actually so overwhelming and so strong that I understood I wanted to go on doing that. I really wanted to be an actor. And we were

very specifically interested in issues like Grotowski would have proposed or Stanislavski would have proposed, like from the inside of acting. So, yeah, it was this experience of being an actor when I was 16, 17, which made all the difference.

### **Why did you switch to being a director?**

I had to. When we started, I was the youngest one, and maybe it was more important for me than for anybody else to keep the company together. If somebody came and said, 'Do you have a project?' then I just had to say, 'Of course I have a project'. I didn't have any project, but I just had to invent something. So I took a lot of chances and sometimes it didn't work out. But sometimes I was lucky. But this really was the reason, I had to keep the company going. I didn't really choose 100% if I had to be a director or an actor.

And I remember later on, many years later, when I talked to one of my masters, and he said directors cannot just go on and be actors. 'What do you mean?' 'I don't mean you, because you are training all the time'. So I followed the training of the plastics and the physical exercises very much in the tradition of Grotowski. And also voice work was very important for me, to work with the open voice. I think I learned a lot about that, but people don't ask me to teach these things anymore. But maybe I will do a workshop one day, because it's really the inner basis for understanding what theater is and what acting is. I think it's very important. For me, it was very important.



*Forefront, Tor Arne Ursin in „Unntak og regel”, 1976*

Well, maybe you could come to Romania and have this workshop? Grotowski is part of the curricula in most theatre schools in Romania.

Of course. Yeah!

**So what were your goals when you started the Grenland Friteater? What were your expectations?**

When we started, we were youngsters, we were kids. It was about finding a place to be free, to do our own thing, to do something which had nothing to do with the teachers or the grown ups. It was about finding our own space. This was it in the 1970s. So it was pretty much this, to do our own thing. That was the most important thing of all.



*Trond Hannemyr, Lars Vik, Lars Sørbo, Eva Danielsen and Tor Arne Ursin - 1979.*

**How did you manage to keep the Grenland Friteater alive for almost 50 years? Is there a secret recipe that you can share with us?**

One thing is that we were in a small town where there was no culture to speak of from before. So it was like an empty space, a void that we could step into. But I think we have also survived because I was not always such a strong leader. So we were like equals. And then once in a while, someone would rebel, because people will rebel, all actors will rebel or they are not good actors. And they say, `I want to do my own project` and we said, OK. And then found a way of accepting that people do their own projects and still keep the same structure. You know, very often what happens with groups like ours is that maybe there are many people in the beginning, and then when people rebel and say, "I want to do my own project",



they leave, and then there's one person or a couple left in the end. But we found a way of dealing with this. But it's not without compromise and it's not without conflict.

When somebody like Geddy (n.a. Geddy Aniksdal, actress, she joined the group at the beginning of the 80s) would rebel and say, `I want to do my own thing`, we accepted that and then she would come and say, `But can you help me to do this project?` And so it became a cooperation, an interesting cooperation for us all. And the same with Trond, who started the festival (n.a. Porsgrunn International Theater Festival, the biggest international theatre festival in Norway). I talked about this many times, but it was very strange when he came in 1994. He had not been happy for quite some time and he had back problems. But it wasn't only that. It was also that he wanted to do his own thing. And he said, `I want to do a festival, but it's going to be for my friends and not the kind of theater that you guys want.` Trond said that he wanted to do a popular, even maybe a populist festival reaching out to ordinary audiences in Porsgrunn. Then we said, OK, but then we have to make another festival, because what are we going to do with all our strange friends who make peculiar theater that nobody really wants to see? So actually, we made another festival in the winter. But we only made it for a few years because it wasn't economically possible to do it. It was just too much work. But Trond is a good example. It made a new platform for himself and it brought a new spirit for us.



*„Harde Tak“, directed by Tor Arne Ursin*

So the life of theater groups is a kind of ecosystem or a biological creature. There is no formula, but you have to listen. I should add that we came from the school of the Odin Teatret. I remember in the 80s, I once went to a lecture of Grotowski's in Italy and somebody, one of the Italians said, `Mr Grotowski, but why did you leave us? Why are you not doing theater anymore? You are the father of all these` (theatre

groups n.a.). It was very pathetic. And Grotowski was right. He said, `No, no, no. You misunderstood. I'm not the father. I'm the grandfather. Eugenio Barba, he is the father. He has a responsibility for all these groups`. And in a sense, that was true. I don't think our theater looks very much like Odin Teatret. Not at all. But we have learned so much from the Odin Teatret about, let's say, military strategy and tactics for a theater group. Now a lot of people I know have been reading about military strategy, like Sun Tzu or Clausewitz. Well, a genius approach (for a theatre group, n.a.) would be that of Che Guevara's guerrilla group. Because people like us are always sort of outsiders.

**Tell me about the bad times of the Grenland Friteater. How did you manage to get past those? I imagine that you had good times, but also bad times.**

Absolutely. Sometimes in the 90s, I didn't really know what direction to take. Some performances were absolutely not successful. Back then, of course, things could have crumbled. But it was very important that we were a group, that we were many people together and that somebody else could take the initiative and do something which turned out to be another direction or another influence. So I think the answer to this question very much relates to the question before: that if you are more than two or three people, then you manage the solidarity in between yourselves. We were always at least five ( at the Grenland theatre n.a.) and so, somebody always had a good idea. And then, of course, it always helped that we were in Porsgrunn, which is far away from everything. And so we couldn't just run away to the director down the road or to another theater group next block. We couldn't do that. We had to work with each other.

**Earlier in your career, you focused on experimental theater. How did you come to be interested in popular theatre later on?**

Well, one thing I really enjoy about working with art is that you end up... that I have ended up somewhere which I couldn't have imagined in the beginning. You set out, you prepare your boat and you set your course, but the wind takes you somewhere else. And even if you steer very well, you end up somewhere else.

There have been a lot of coincidences along my journey, like this one: in 1982, a long time ago, we were in Italy and we were doing our experimental indoor performance, which was very successful. We were in a small village in the north of Italy. And it was a festival, and they asked us, could every group please contribute with a small moment in the piazza for the last evening? And we didn't have anything. We didn't have anything for the outdoors. And then I sat down at a coffee table with a cappuccino in front of me and wrote a synopsis on the back of a napkin. This is actually true. And that was the first time I really wrote down beforehand how things should be. And then we did a small outdoor performance that lasted around 15 minutes. It was another type of language. It was a performance inside and in front of a house, so the audience was outside. And you could just see things that were happening through the windows and people going in and out of the house. But this all made up a story. And so we continued to work on this and made the little outdoor shows when we were in festivals and on tour.

And then in 1988, we worked with a British group called Brith Gof that was directed by Mike Pearson. Mike went on to become a professor at the university in Aberystwyth. And he wrote several books about performance art, which are very interesting. He worked a lot with group scores, with group choreography. And he was very pragmatic. He was not like all of the Grotowski inspired people I worked with, which were very process oriented. Mike was very much 'OK. Here we have a result. It took 10 minutes. OK. It's good, so then we don't have to wonder as much about the process'. Of course, he was also interested in the process, but he was very pragmatic. And that was a whole different approach.



*„Bessat &“, a collaboration between Greland Friteater & Brith Gof*

So working with these groups of people made it possible to work with larger groups. But time passed and nobody ever asked us to do anything outdoors in Norway. (It rains a lot in Norway, n.a) Now it's raining, for example. So there are reasons why you don't do a lot of outdoor theater in Norway. But when we ourselves started the theater festival in 1995 (Porsgrunn International Theater Festival) we had to make an outdoor show. And the local press called us up and said, 'We hear you have an idea for a new show. What's it all about? When are the rehearsals?' And I wasn't used to that, because the local press at that time was not interested in what we were doing. The performance was called 'Smugglers', and it was not very different from the outdoor performances we had been doing before, there were about violence, about murder, detective stories. So it was a lot of the same world. But maybe, the difference was that now the performance was perceived by the press and by the local audience as a local phenomenon and

that it was about the town here and about them, about the audience.

A lot of people approached us with stories (about the theme in `Smugglers`, which dealt with the alcohol prohibition in Norway in the 20s). Some said, `Hey, listen, we didn't have this type of cans with contraband liquor. They didn't look like that. They were all painted black. You cannot do this.` We had one guy who in those times had a factory for illegal liquor. I didn't know about this, but when I discovered it, I asked him to help us out. He did that and at some point I said, `You helped us so much. You should really get paid`. `No, no. It's so fun to stand there on stage and look out at all the people in the audience that I sold illegal liquor to.`



*„Smugglers“, directed by Tor Arne Ursin & Lars Vik*

**Is there a connection between experimental theater and popular theater? Do they communicate in any way?**

For me, they communicate a lot. But it was a long process of development, of doing this popular outdoor form. Our experimental and our avant garde aesthetics helped a lot, especially the pragmatic avant garde aesthetics that we learned from Mike Pearson for example, and also from other sources. And so we could work with amateurs too, we could work with people who are not really actors, and just give them something to do and put them in the framework.



I understood then that when I was very young, my shows didn't have any local theme . The first performances, although original, were based on the kind of Hollywood movie dramaturgy and aesthetics. But the stories came from the outside or from popular media. But then I understood that the story, the theme of what you should do is not that far away. You don't have to go to Africa or Latin America to find it. Maybe it's the story of the person living next door. That was incredible. So now I think that the story of the industry and of the industrial society in Porsgrunn has been a real gold mine. And then I discovered that there is not much written, not many novels or anything written about our society. So I started to look into it and see if I can do something about this. And I found at least three stories that I want to do something about, which are very dramatic.

And the first one became the performance called `Meierislaget 1933`, which was about an incident that happened in 1933. The state police, the state troopers from Oslo, who later on in 10 years became some of the worst Nazis in Norway, they came to break down a strike. They beat up people and they behaved very badly. And their leader came directly from Berlin, where he had been taught by the Nazis how to sabotage the elections that were held in March 1933, when Hitler came to power. And nobody had really ever heard about this story. The main events took place like 200 meters from where I live. Then the second story is the one that you were in now („Herøya 1943”)

**How does the Porsgrunn community relate to this kind of stories? Because you said there are dark things, where not all Norwegians are heroes, some are also traitors.**

It's OK now. This story was buried down for many, many years, especially because the company was the most important company in Norway, before the oil age. (n.a. `Herøya 1943` tells the story of the deadly US bomb attack on July 24, 1943 and the events leading up to it – the collaboration with Nazi Germany on the construction of the light metal industry on Herøya, who's activity was linked to the weapon production. ) So they were powerful and you couldn't speak against them.



*„Herøya 1943”, directed by Tor Arne Ursin. 2022*



Now everybody accepts that. When the company should have had its 100 year anniversary in 2005 they had some historians write a book about it and they discovered that story . And I talked to the people at the top of the company and they said this manuscript ended up at the CEO's desk. And he immediately said `We cannot hide anything`.

**Beyond the interest shown by the public in Porsgrunn, why did you consider it was important to tell that story?**

Well, I think it's important. We have a model of society where people are very self-content and they think it's very good to live here. Yes, maybe that's true. But this society has been made through a lot of struggles.

And so the stories that I'm telling are the dark side, they are the dark stories. But that's what people want to hear as well. They're not afraid of that. At least not now. Well, we will see with the next one. It will be about 1948, when the Labour Party cracked down on the Communist Party and really crushed them. We had a kind of McCarthyism here in Norway in the 50s and 60s. I know your story and experience in Romania is completely different and in many ways opposite. Maybe this performance will be more controversial. I don't know.

**Can theater still be meaningful for society in the Internet era, of all these devices that surround us? How can we, the theater people, make meaningful theatre that has an impact on communities, that is not only about aesthetics?**

There are many good reasons not to do outdoor theater in Norway. But it's also fantastic to do it. Actually, it takes us back to the art, to the very origins of theater. I mean, even before Sophocles or Aeschylus or Euripides. That is magic, right? You come together to celebrate a particular story at the place where it happened, more or less, and commemorate that. I think that we are a little bit blinded by the ideology of, say, Brecht and Piscator, although I love Brecht and Piscator. This idea that the theater should be critical is... of course, it can be critical. But it's also the opposite. It brings people together and that can be a kind of critique in itself. It's not that you should just do a la-di-da story, which doesn't mean anything to people, but you find the myth that brings people together in this particular place. People will then have a deeper meaning beyond the aesthetic results of what you do.

We have one colleague, one friend, who's also a scholar of classical Greek language. He has translated Sophocles and Euripides and Aristophanes, to Norwegian. He came last year to see the performance (Herøya 1943). And he said, `Yeah, this is like a Greek tragedy`. And then I said, `You think their desire to make this big factory and become wealthy is a form of hybris? And then the gods come down from above and punish them?`. `No, no, I'm not thinking of that.` He said, `I'm thinking that everybody in the audience knows this story from before, but they come to see how it is told`. And that was the way it was in ancient Athens. They would come to see how Euripides is going to tell this story, although everybody knew the story. It was popular culture.



*Anne-Sophie Erichsen & Harald Otto Dille in „Herøya 1943”*

**In relation to society, how is nowadays theatre compared to that of 50 years ago? Is it more important, or rather more marginal?**

I think that theater is more important now for the people who come to see it than it was 40 years ago. But back then it was really a crisis. Grotowski, for example, talked about all this. He said `film and television are doing what the theater used to do if you go back 150 years. So why should we do the same thing?` 30, 40 years ago, at least in Norway, there were so many old institutions and old ways of doing things. And it was really very stiff. And for example, the work that we do was unimaginable 40 years ago. So things have opened up a lot more.

But I wonder why here in Norway, why more of the interest and the attention and the money also goes to other types of theater. I love experimental theater, of course, but I also love popular theater when it is done for people who are not particularly interested in theater. I mean, the audience that came to our performance, to „Herøya 1943” they were not particularly interested in theater. There were also a lot of people who are not interested in theater at all, but they're interested in the story or in taking part in it. Yeah. And I think that makes it so much more interesting.

**What are your plans for the future? You'll finish the trilogy now, and after that?**

Well, in parallel, I'm also working on this program for residences and for talent development so that we can have young people come to the theater and then maybe take over what we are doing and do their own thing. So I'm going to work on that a lot, I think.

And then I want to work with a guy who is involved in Halloween traditions. The kids are very dedicated when it comes to Halloween. And they go as deeply into that, as they would go into some kind of a video game. So I was thinking of proposing to this guy, who is not in theatre, that we do something together and see how we can just pick up on this interest for this strange, but very popular phenomenon.

**You're open to new stuff.**

Yeah! But then I have to sit down and investigate more. I have lots of meetings with people and I have some books I have to read about 1945-1948. I have done a synopsis already, but I have to rewrite that and make a whole script and a plan for that performance. So that's what's in the near future.