L’Image du Sápmi

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Summary

The birth of modern Sami theatre in the 1970s and 1980s is the clearest example of how new Sami art forms arise in response to contemporary influences and needs. Sami never had any tradition of theatre, apart from certain rituals. Nevertheless, theatre has become a hallmark of Sami arts. Sami theatre arose separately in each of the Nordic countries: Dáladis in Sweden, Rávgoš in Finland, and Beaivváš in Norway. Beaivváš Sami Teáhter eventually came to be the Sami ‘National Theatre’. In this article Veli-Pekka Lehtola examines the kinds of situations that gave rise to Sami theatre, and what kinds of issues were included in its discourse with Sami society from the 1970s to the 1990s. The often controversial discussion of its own mode of expression and the discovery of a Sami theatre language was particularly instrumental in the development of Beaivváš Sami Teáhter that he focuses on in his article. The discussion revolved around what role the theatre should have in Sami political battles, such as finding ways of building Sami identity or as a mirror of a multicultural society.
Staging Sami Identities
The Roles of Modern Sami Theatre in a Multicultural Context
– The Case of Beaivváš Sami Teáhter

The birth of modern Sami theatre in the 1970s and 1980s is the clearest example of how new Sami art forms arise in response to contemporary influences and needs. Sami never had any institutional tradition of theatre, apart from certain rituals. Nevertheless, theatre has become a hallmark of Sami arts. Sami theatre arose separately in each of the Nordic countries: Dálvadis in Sweden, Rávgoš in Finland, and Beaivváš in Norway. Beaivváš Sami Teáhter eventually came to be the Sami ‘National Theatre’.

During the 1980s, the Sami theatres took different modes of expression and directions in each country, but all what they had in common was that theatre both reflected and created Sami identity on many levels. Through art, it built common experiences for the Sami of today. Even just the use of Sami language on stage meant a lot to ordinary Sami since that the theatres drew from Sami traditions.

Of even greater importance was that Sami theatre seemed to be better than other art forms at reflecting contemporary issues and conflicts; from the very beginning, it was even seen as a political art form. Just as Sami radio and film had done, it was able to surmount all kinds of hurdles: intergenerational obstacles, language barriers between the minority and the majority, and the national borders dividing Sápmi, the Sami homeland.

Through theatre presentations one may examine historical and social events in which the public are involved. Theatre is deeply rooted in the social reality of its time, engaging the audience by creating ‘possible realities’, building alternative ways of thinking about events taking place in society. The purpose of theatre is to offer different scenarios that may strengthen or tear down society’s view of itself or of the world. In this sense theatre may be a very critical art form, but it may also provide new alternatives for developing both individual and national identity. Though, of course, it is clear that theatre discourse always leaves more questions than answers.

Because the relationship between audience and actor is informative and reciprocal, the stories, depiction of people, and identities presented in
a theatre production may also be examined as reflections of subconscious needs of the society and of the spectators, which is a primary ingredient of the program being presented. The theatre practitioners are part of the society whose hopes and needs they attempt to uncover. The favourite presentations of the public reflect something fundamental about the discourse between the theatre and the audience. At its height is a story that the public wants to see again and again: a story that is set for the audience in a certain time and a certain society.

In this article I will examine the kinds of situations that gave rise to Sami theatre, and what kinds of issues were included in its discourse with Sami society from the 1970s to the 1990s. The often controversial discussion of its own mode of expression and the discovery of a Sami theatre language was particularly instrumental in the development of Beavvás Sami Teáhter that I will focus on in my article. The discussion revolved around what role the theatre should have in Sami political battles, such as finding ways of building Sami identity or as a mirror of a multicultural society.

The Beginnings

Jokkmokk in Northern Sweden, 1971. People had come from far away to the traditional market. Something new was in the air: market people called out to come watch the theatre show being performed mainly in the Sami language. The theatre troupe, founded by Harriet Nordlund and Maj-Doris Rimpi, who had grown up in the small village nearby, had taken its name from Jokkmokk's marketplace, Dálvadís. The play they created, Vi skall leva vidare (We Shall Survive), which was based on the work of the Sami poet Paulus Utsi, should be regarded as the world premiere production of modern Sami theatre.

Most of the Sami in the audience had never seen theatre before. The topic presented was the conflict between Sami and the national majority, Swedes, over land rights and the construction of dams on waterways. On the stage, young Sami portrayed both sides. Right from the beginning the audience shifted uneasily. As the clashes between the Sami and the authorities continued, an older man clad in Sami dress rose, saying, "Stop, stop this instant!" He rushed angrily toward the stage and began yelling at the actors portraying the Swedish authorities: "You have already stolen enough from us! Get out of our land!" It took a while to convince the excited spectator to see that it was only a play, performing something.

Afterwards, Harriet Nordlund, who directed the play, interpreted the situation thus, "In the early days of Sami theatre there was not any kind of mutual 'agreement' between the performers and the audience that this
was a show, play acting, that the staged performance was an attempt to portray something else. Everything we said could have been thought to be our own words. The audience accompanied the unfolding of events on stage by heckling the actors or by leaving - right across the stage, of course. It was never possible to predict how a performance might end. It was a true encounter of actors and audience members, in the deepest sense."5

The episode bolstered Nordlund's belief in her work. "It is the job of the theatre to get people to look at their own situation and react to it. That is like Dario Fo's approach, as well, to set reality on the stage and talk about it." People were amazed and intrigued at hearing Sami being spoken on stage. The topic was a familiar one to the audience, especially since dam building on the waterways was causing much anxiety and displacing many people in the parts of Sápmi in Sweden. The incident also had an impact on the performers. "Our genuine desire to tell a story bound us together more powerfully than is ever possible as professionals"6, Nordlund added.

The Dálvadis Theatre was one opening in the revitalization of Sami culture, which has also been called the 'Sami renaissance'. Along with media and politics, the arts had a prominent role and alongside traditional arts such as music, duodji (Sami handicrafts) and literature, new art forms began to arise that had previously been unknown: modern fine arts, photography, film, and theatrical arts. Theatre was the expressive artistic medium that not only went beyond merely reflecting a new identity of the Sami, but created it as well. It took a stand on social issues and also drew from Sami mythology and history.

Dálvadis Theatre also strove to reach non-Sami audiences, therefore music, joik, and voices were important, just as much as the dramatic language made up of movement, gestures and visual elements. The theatre staged bold openings: the drama Dalviniegot (Winter Dreams) in 1981 was the first show to be entirely adapted for a natural stage. On the stage which was built on lake ice, as many as 120 people acted, told stories, served coffee and kept a fire going in a goahti in the midst of twelve scenes. In the performances of Dálvadis, theatrical techniques characteristic of aboriginal people were highlighted: animal costumes and masks, ancient spirits, as well as a considerable amount of movement, physical exercise, music and traditional dance.7
Dálvadis was the first Sami theatre group, established in 1971. It took a stand on social issues, but also drew from Sami mythology and history. Selinbeimo 1984. Jorma Puranen in 1986.

On the Finnish side of Sápmi, the birth of Sami theatre, in Rávgos, 1981, occurred in a less dramatic fashion. Author Eino Guttorm, supported by a grant from a municipal cultural committee, gathered a group of Sami to present his own original texts. On opening night there was no dancing, joiking, singing, nor mythological figures on stage. A satirical comedy called Lubkkar Ante robkos (Lukkari – Antti’s prayer) was folk theatre relying on speaking. The audience which consisted of people from the Upper Deatnu region laughed, because the events and characters were familiar snatches from daily life.

Guttorm was a master at constructing scenes in which hypocrisy and double standards clashed with reality. The humour was founded on situational comedy and an amusing play on words in which the Upper Deatnu dialect came into its own. Although Rávgos Theater later went on

The plays of Rávgos, in the Finnish side of Deatnu River, based on familiar characters, situational comedy and the themes of local Sami community. The play writer Eino Guttorn on the right. Photo by Harry Johansen. Archive of Lapin Kansa.
to tour Karasjok, Kautokeino, and Jo’kkemokk, its home ground was the shores of the Deatnu River; its subject matter was that local community, its language and spectators. As it continued, in addition to comedy, it also tackled serious topics, such as mental illness and family violence. However, spoken theatre became the trademark of Rávgoš, where a table at center stage represented visuality.  

The new turn in the development of Sami theatre was taken during the Áltá dispute in the Norwegian part of Sápmi, that culminated in January 1981 in the greatest social conflict in the Nordic countries since World War II. It provoked intense discussions and caused many Sami to ponder their own identity. A direct result of the Áltá struggle was that Sami – both organizations and individuals – began to debate their own position and demands. Politics also became a visual performance activity, being built into dramaturgy through characteristic audio-visual means of expression.

According to Niillas A. Somby, it became a conscious tactic of the demonstrators to stage their protests as performative events: “In addition to words and text, we wanted to present our cause symbolically. For example, pitching a traditional Sami tent at the National Parliament in Oslo was a visual and a symbolic presentation.” Somby’s observation corresponds to the interpretation of drama scholar Martin Esslin: “Protests and large political gatherings, by their very nature, are produced dramatic events, which have a prearranged structure, posters and emblems specifically designed for the event, and rehearsed slogans.”

Artists participated prominently in this discourse. As early as 1978, in the village of Máze a group of young artists who had gathered to make a political impact also launched a renewal movement in Sami fine arts. In Kautokeino, as well, the Sami decided to show their power through the performing arts. In the winter of 1980-81, a group of idealistic young people founded a theatre group they named Beaivvás Theatre. Their original aim was to create one play, but the success of their rock opera, Min duoddarar (Our Fells), led to the permanent establishment of the theatre.
The situations staged in *Min duoddarat* were typical of national theatre: they portrayed the conflict between the Norwegian Government and the Sami over mines being excavated on the tundra. 11 Åslat (Ingor Ánttë Áilo Gaup) represented the traditional hero, whose eyes are opened when he sees the Sami suffering injustices and who takes up unarmed opposition. Mons (Ammun Johnskareng), on the other hand, was a more radical rebel whose readiness to extreme action is seen in the opening scene. Happily joking, he rips to pieces a barricade set in place by the authorities. In contrast to this idealized pair of leading characters the Norwegians were presented in the roles of an arrogant and ignorant mining engineer, a selfish girl Solveig, and a ridiculous tourist.

The play *Min duoddarat* unified ‘us’ in the same way as the social struggle in Áltá had done, and it gave reflective people a mutual feeling of unity and solidarity. It was precisely this capacity of drama to make people directly experience their own identity and fortify it that made the theatre a political art form, right from its beginning. In principle, all drama is naturally political, because it either reinforces or weakens the code of behavior of a community. 12

Watching the play was a certain kind of ritual, in which events of earlier years crystallized into clear situations and images. The Sami sitting in the audience might reflect solidarity toward the Sami characters on stage, whom they agreeably endowed with a certain idealistic heroism and even arrogance toward authorities. The feeling of unity among the Sami was enhanced by being able to display their power, besides in the political struggle, also on stage, completely by means of this newly tested art form.
Representing Ourselves

Concerning the roots of Sami theatre, it has been thought that the shamanic tradition, which has widespread among aboriginal peoples, was a phenomenon that functioned by a powerfully ritualistic and common 'script'.\(^{13}\) Shamanistic rituals of aboriginal peoples have been interpreted as fundamentally dramatic performances.\(^{14}\) However, the nature of a Sami shaman's performances, except for drumming, remains shrouded in shadow. His seance does not seem to have been particularly visual and even his clothing was apparently more modest than, for example, that of his Siberian colleagues.

Historically, it seems obvious that among the Sami there were no kinds of theatre customs or such things as theatrical dance traditions, such as what is known from many other aboriginal peoples. This has prompted some to see the development of modern Sami theatre as the blazing of an untrodden path. According to them, Sami theatre has "the kind of freedom to choose and seek their own ways of expression that a folk rarely has."\(^{15}\)

Sami theatrical practitioners, however, have a different opinion. According to them, their _muittalandáidu_ - art of storytelling - and the joik tradition represented Sami theatre in its finest colourful performances. For example, a storytelling performance could have been a 'one man show', consisting of preconceived drama and alternating with spontaneous improvisation. The occasion shaped the group's common experience, closely involving the storyteller's relationship to the listeners.

The oral tradition included the basic elements of theatre: performer, listener and words. In tales and myths, there was a lot of dialogue, surprising twists and dramatic situations.\(^{16}\) The question probably is one of defining the characteristics of theatre. Joachim Fiebach states, "In societies with no written tradition fully developed theatre appears even when an individual tells a story or sings a hymn of praise using facial expressions, vocal emphasis, gestures and movements. At the same time, he creates a special space and a certain physical bond with the spectators and defines the limits of that space."\(^{17}\)

Sami actor, Sverre Porsanger, emphasizes that storytelling to the Sami is the simple and natural mode of expression that no other technique surpasses: "Electronic devices don't work in the freezing cold, books are heavy to carry and you can't see to read them in a _låvva_ (tent). Higher education is not needed for storytelling. Imagination can be visualized with storytelling. In order to make theatre it needs only one who tells and one who listens."\(^{18}\)
At the root of the Dálvdís and Beaivváš Sami Teáhters’ examples, as important parties in the birth of modern Sami stage art, is the societal situation: the plays seemed to respond to the immediate feelings and needs of both theater practitioners and audience. This is especially clearly seen in the Beaivváš Sami Teáhter’s first production: the painful social dispute was ‘created anew’ on stage, as if ritualistically, and as though being settled in a new way by presenting it from the Sami point of view.

The development of the theatre can be seen as a part of the Sami ‘identity project’, in which ethnic and national identity was being built in politics, media and the arts. In that way it resembles the traditions of storytelling and joking that not only reflected the world view of people close to nature, but also propagated Sami identity. For example, the tale of the marauders, in which ofelaš, the pathfinder, leads the foes of the Sami into a death trap, reinforced solidarity of Sami among themselves: by creating the difference from ‘them’, ‘our’ values and meanings became emphasized.

At the same time, the question was one of participation in the making of interpretations concerning Sami. The right of a people to self representation is seen by aboriginal groups as a very important activity for strengthening identity. The picture of Sami from outside was recognized as inadequate and often stereotypical, but through the schools it began to have an impact on Sami self perception as well.

The Sami’s perceptions of themselves were not necessarily ‘truer’ than that of outsiders either, they were also representations, but they now had the possibility to influence the interpretations made about them. Thus, Sami theatre had also a certain interpretive role which enabled the Sami themselves to tell about their own culture and way of thinking. The play Min Duoddarat II toured widely to all the Nordic Capitals.

This role as mediator, nevertheless, included other elements besides telling outsiders about the situation of Sami. Linked to it was the desire to demonstrate their own know-how and, thereby, also raise Sami self-esteem. The desire to perform and appear on stage also had its practical side: by demonstrating Sami competence to the decision makers, Sami theatre could ensure their future.

From Lapp caravans to Sami self-representations

Sami had for centuries been depicted in literature, and early on visually as well, beginning with drawings and later with photographs. The first dramatical presentations of Sami to Europeans were probably the so-called Lapp caravans, from the beginning of the 1800s, in which small groups of Sami - obviously at the expense of European businessmen
The Sami were "exhibiting" their culture in the so-called Sami caravans that toured in the European cities from the beginning of 1800s to 1930s. A group from Finnish Sami area, led by Juhani Jomppanen (standing behind on the left) from Inari, travelled from Helsinki to Berlin and Königsberg in 1910. Archive of the author.

- toured the large cities with their reindeer, 'exhibiting' genuine Sami culture.

Thomas Andersson, a Southern Sami from Sweden was evidently the first Sami to use the institution of a Lapp caravan for his own benefit by organizing his own shows. Andersson was also a pioneer of another visual tool, photography. Ethnographic photography replaced drawings as a means of depicting Sami in the first half of the 1900s. A third means of representation came into use in 1903 with the first film presenting Sami culture.

Even in movies the view of Sami conformed to outside interpreters, and often Sami only had a walk-on part or were extras. In fiction films they were stereotypical characters, such as noaidis (shamans), drunken fools, or self sacrificing women of the wilderness. In documentaries Sami were seen very ethnologically, relics from the past. Sami's own interpretation and thus ethnographic accuracy in the films gave way to the imaginations and intentions of the directors.

By way of the Sami Renaissance, beginning of the end of the 1960s, Sami began to participate more and more in the making of interpretations concerning themselves. Stage art and audio-visual methods began to bring about powerful changes in Sami arts and performance culture in the 1970s. Also, films and television programs made by Sami themselves project a new kind of image of the dynamic Sami culture.
A Sami stage language?

During the 1980s, the Sami theatres in the Nordic countries travelled different paths in their modes of expression as well as in their administrative resources. Rávgoš Theatre, on the Finnish side, performed folk plays in which speaking and the tones of local Sami dialects were central. That is why it did not gain much favour outside the Outakoski area. With waning resources its voice eventually grew silent toward the end of the 1980s, producing only few plays later.

Dálvadis Theatre underwent a change in style when Åsa Simma took over its directorship in the 1980s after Nordlund. The theatre had begun to receive support from the government, making it easier to carry out its productions and tours. The three years with the Inuit Tukak Theatre and her marriage to a North American Indian, Norman Charles, influenced in Simma's way of making theatre. It contended more and more abstract expression based on using of masks, movement and mime. After the national governmental support declined Dálvadis Theatre began to fade.¹⁹

Due to the success of Beavváš Sami Teáhter, Kautokeino, Norway became known as the ‘capital of Sami theatre’ in the end of 1980s. The two successful versions of Min Duoddarat made this theatre a significant phenomenon and it still continued to function as an independent theatre. Beavváš began receiving permanent governmental funding in the beginning of 1987, in the framework of a probationary period during which Beavváš Sami Teáhter’s abilities of succeeding as a regional theatre would be assessed.

However, the government funded Beavváš’ activities with a decidedly small sum (about 4.7 million Norwegian crowns), much less than the smallest Norwegian regional theatre. The probation period was marked by many administrative conditions that illustrated the difficulties of making the change from amateur based theatre to professional.³⁰ Artistically, the 1980s were, nevertheless, fruitful times, which culminated in the theatre discovering its own artistic language – ‘Sami theatrical expression’.

In the 1980s, developing an own stage language was based on the idealistic idea that one could only use material produced by the Sami themselves, who were really the only ones who could tell about Sami culture. The main problem was that there were neither Sami playwrights nor manuscripts. Topics had to be found from Sami traditions and Sami literature, which were also rare. The group often adapted poetry and short texts into larger works by joining them together with music.

One particular ‘own expression’ of Beavváš Sami Teáhter was found in 1985 in a production called Vaikko čwodi stalu (Even if 100 Spirits). The director Knut Walle got the idea from a painting by Arvid Steen
depicting 1000 years of Sami history through mythological figures. The spectacle was performed using masks, joiking, music and authentic historical sources. The evil spirits besetting the Sami were marauders, missionaries, kings and tsars, drunkenness, punishment for rebellion (Guovdageaidnu Uprising of 1852), Norwegianization, Germans from World War II, modern lifestyle and modern times. 21

The drama’s topic, narrative manner, and especially its visual aspect made Vaikko čuodi stálu a classic among theatre pieces, being performed as three versions afterwards. At the same time it provided a base for the expression seen in the following decades, particularly in mythological productions, musicals and children’s plays. From the beginning, Beaivváš Sami Teáhter used Sami visual artists as set designers, especially Aage Gaup.

To mention other examples of classics, the musical show Luohti gomuwoda salas (Joik in the Lap of Space, 1988) offered, in addition to superb musical talent (rising superstar Mari Boine Persen), impressive dance performances (Jens Klemet Stueng and Solveig Leinan Hermo) in a visually stunning setting. The children’s play Máidnasat (Sami fairy tales, 1989) moved the show into a new visual environment, outdoors and onto the frozen lake ice. From the natural stage, already used by Dálvadis for one of its shows, came in the course of the 1990s, the full measure of Beaivváš Sami Teáhter’s characteristic visuality.

Joik in the Lap of Space in 1988 introduced a rising star, Mari Boine Persen (with the drum), whose music was combined to impressive dance performances of Jens Klemet Stueng and Solveig Leinan Hermo. Archive of Beaivváš Sámi Teáhter.
The ‘Sami way’ of making theatre became an ongoing topic of discussion in the following decades. The founder of Dálvadis Theatre, Harriet Nordlund, staged openings with Beaivváš Sami Teáhter. While directing the classic play Varraheajat (Blood Wedding 1989) based on Spaniard F. G. Lorca’s text, Nordlund, for the first time, set Beaivváš the question of whether Sami theatre should really only treat Sami issues based on Sami texts. The director preserved the Spanish nature of the play quite well so that choreographer Juan Ortega, and flamenco guitarist, Francisco Xavier, were able to carry it through in their own style.

Nevertheless, the director made a compromise by setting the play partly in Sápmi, so that at the wedding meal the characters enjoyed dried meat and sang joiks to the flamenco. Despite that, the show raised questions about the ‘Sami nature’ of Beaivváš Sami Teáhter. Nordlund responded, “Do we hold strictly to tradition, at all costs, or do we follow the example of the bride in this play, who broke with tradition and fled? I don’t believe that either of these is the solution. There must be another way, and together we must find it. Lorca’s text gives us a kind of walking staff, and this wanderer’s staff is a gift to the Sami”.

The ways that other aboriginal theatre groups worked also provided points of comparison for Sami theatre. In one interview an actor in Beaivváš Sami Teáhter commented on the Inuit Tukak Theatre of Copenhagen. In his opinion Tukak managed to create a distinctive artistic language using ancient symbols, music, dance and rites. But he also said that it was created outside of Greenlandic society: “They are world famous and tour many countries, but in the villages of Greenland, in their own country, they have no strength, because there is no one there who would have seen their productions.” Implicit in that statement was, of course, the conviction that Beaivváš Sami Teáhter would continue for Sami audiences and in Sami villages, despite national borders.

In the same way, Beaivváš struck a balance between the mode of expression of the two other Sami theatres. Many tours taught them to avoid too much speaking, – there are great dialect and language differences between regions of Sápmi, not to mention the language problems with the national majority populations. Then again, the strong feeling of the theatre as a continuation of the storytelling heritage prevented Beaivváš from venturing too far into the visual and mime. The contact between performers and listeners had to be preserved.

The theatre practitioners always stressed that Beaivváš was not ‘Kautokeino’s theatre’, but the Sami National Theatre, with the mission to support the identity of all Sami, regardless of borders. With the help from the media, especially Sami radio, Beaivváš Sami Teáhter succeeded
in bridging the borders even better than Sami politics, which had launched general Sami cooperation as its ideological platform. Its tours reached the parts of Sápmi in Finland and Sweden, and recently even extended into the Russian side. Beaivváš Sami Teáhter has been seen as a significant contribution to the Sami identity in individual villages such as Olmmaivággi in Norway or Vuohéču in Finland.

Hamlet in the Theatre on the Ice

In 1991 the Norwegian Government began to support Beaivváš Sami Teáhter as a permanent theatre company and two years later it received the status of a Norwegian national institution, like the National Theatre (Nasjonalteatret) or the Norwegian Opera (Det Norske Opera). However, funding for the theatre still did not surpass the level of the smallest regional Norwegian theatre.24

The establishment of a full-time theatre director position clarified the uncertain administrative picture. Haukur J. Gunnarsson was chosen as director for the first six year period (1991 - 1996). His successors were Alex Scherpf (1997 - 2002) and Harriet Nordlund (2003 - 2006), the theatre’s first permanent Sami director. Gunnarsson returned to the helm of Beaivváš at the beginning of 2007.

When Beaivváš Sami Teáhter became professional the number of its productions increased impressively. As an independent group and during

Greetings in 1993 was a story of the results of a suicide in a Sami community. It was a monologue played by Mary Sarre. Archive of Beaivváš Sámi Teáhter.
the period of probation, Beaivváš had produced a total of nineteen shows, but in the six years while Gunnarsson was director, the number of opening nights doubled. During the period of the first three directors, from 1991 to 2006, there were 59 opening nights in all. The increase in productions was one reason that Beaivváš Sami Teáhter’s character or ‘look’ began to change but, more correctly said, it began to take on more multi-dimensional tones, reflecting the diversity of Sami and the whole world.

The change in the Sami theatre in the 1990s is seen as it becomes difficult to interpret the productions as purely a reaction to Sami national challenges or as a forum to discuss Sami identity. Starting from Gunnarsson’s term as director, Beaivváš Sami Teáhter branched out into the whole diverse field of theatrical production. Gunnarsson highlighted the importance of the role of Sami writers, but also acknowledged that the Sami’s own written output – and through it Sami thematics – could not possibly suffice to provide all the material. Therefore, Beaivváš began to present many classic works, from Bertolt Brecht to Anton Chekhov.

Gunnarsson wanted to leave the contrasting situation between Sami and the national majority populations in the background and to direct the view toward problems within Sami society. Collaboration, especially with script writer Inger Margrethe Olsen, proved fruitful. Her plays often dealt with sore points of Sami society, such as homophobia (Eeralágán - Different, 1992), or suicide among Sami youth (Dearvuodat - Greetings, 1993).

Olsen also treated the mechanisms of Sami society’s internal violence situated historically in the drama Skoavdajji (Bogey Man, 1994), which was a tale of family violence and rape guised as a horror story. The drama’s ghost was a woman who had died as a result of being abused by her husband. It was clear that the shows of Olsen and Gunnarsson sparked strong reactions, because the subjects they dealt with were too sensitive for many people. Once again, discussion turned to the role and significance of the theatre.

Thinking about identity may be pleasant, too. For example, in the play Boairesbártit (Bachelors, 1995), directed by Harriet Nordlund, relations between men and women were brought out in a mixture of Japanese folk comedy and Sami storytelling. The cabarets performed as cafe theatre, which became common especially during Scherpfi’s term, became a popular ‘series’ that examined local and world events.

History clearly began to dominate in the 1990s, especially in the works of Sami writers. Their works examined the social history in Sápmi (Gumpegoddi - the Wolf trapper, Prinsen of Lappland - Prince of Lapland,
Okto - Alone), political history (Eatni váibmu vardá - The Suffering of Mother’s Heart), the impact of the war on Sami society (Kiögg kå’kke / Giegat gubk ket - The Cuckoo’s Call, 1994) or the traumatic recent Sami history (Internáhtta - Residential School, 2003).

While directing Narukámi (Narukámi, 1991), using Japanese stage technique and Sami actors, Gunnarsson built a new visual expression featuring, in addition to music, stylized movement and pantomime. On the other hand, the visual faces of Beaivvás Sami Teáhter began more and more to shape the creative framework of the northern environment, that is, the use of nature as an integral part of the staging and even of the drama.

Narukami was a minimalistic piece combining Japanese stage technique and the skills of Sami actors. Toivo Lukkari was playing the main role of the Shaman who is lured by the daughter of the Rain God. The poster from the archive of Beaivvás Sámi Teáhter.

The ice theatre show, Sezuan (The Good Person of Sezuan 1991), was produced as a collaboration of many northern theatre groups. In it, Bertolt Brecht’s alienation process acquired entirely new colours: the critical interpretation of the wretchedness of the human condition was set in an arctic community and was presented in an outdoor performance in freezing cold temperatures. The artist Aage Gaup designed all the sets on ice. The staging illustrated the play’s theme: a ‘good person’, who has gotten ahead in the world by taking on a second shape, is examined in the Arctic environment instead of China’s city of millions.
Later, shows presented on snow and ice became a feature of Sami theatre. *Völundda mualitus* (The Story of Völund 2000) based on the epic poem *Edda* continued the series of monumental outdoor shows. The climax was a collaboration between Beavváš and Kiruna’s Sami Theatre, which presented Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and later *Hamlet* in an ice Globe Theatre with a stage of snow and ice on the shores of Jukkasjáväri Lake. The theatre was built from ice after drawings of Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre.

Classic works of world literature underwent many adaptations in the 1990s. In addition to Anton Chekhov, Nikolai Gogol and F. G. Lorca, Beavváš brought to the stage an adaptation of the Bible’s *Job*, who prevailed over difficulties with God – a woman! Another, Ludvig Holberg’s *Jeppe paa Bierget* (*Jeppe of the Hill*), in which the mishaps of the lead character seemed written especially for the bravura of the ‘grand old man’ of Sami actors, Nils Utsi.

In versions directed by Scherpf, William Shakespeare’s characters from *Romeo and Juliet* to *Macbeth* rushed around the Sami stage – as clowns! In place of the Capulet and Montague clans, Sami sports clubs fought bloodily with one another – or at least tried. That is to say, nothing would come of the battles, because the opponents were a bunch of crazily dressed, awkwardly moving, shrilly speaking and boxing clowns that always missed each other. Once again, Beavváš Sami Teáhter was in the newspapers amid arguments over what Sami theatre should become.

As a counterbalance to the classics it was customary for ‘aboriginal’ Sami theatre to present musical shows based on works by well-known Sami artists. These united joiks and electronic music, didgeridoos and synthesizers, performing concerts of joik and dance under the northern
lights, as well as bringing music into pubs and cafes. Another enduring form were the children’s plays, in which Sami myths and the storytelling tradition continued to hold a firm position. On the other hand, the play *Ronja rievvärnieida* (*Ronja, the Robber’s Daughter*, 2002), based on the book by Astrid Lindgren, suited the Sami stage so well that it became one of the favourite pieces in the history of Beaivváš Sami Teáhter.

**Diversity as a resource – concluding remarks**

Like other new art forms, such as film and fine arts, Sami theatre arose in the 1970s and 1980s from the need to shape powerful social changes. Theatrical art was a means of dealing with difficult issues, by shaping them into performances that were healing to the society and cathartic, at least to some extent. From the beginning, the relations between Sami theatres and their audiences were close and intense. This indicates that the theatre was able to extract stories out of contemporary conflicts that were relevant to the public.

Beaivváš Sami Teáhter had a central role in the 1980s, even in political terms, concentrating on subjects and thematicsthat were mainly bound to the building of ethnic, national identity. Also, the theatre struggled for Sami identity and self-image. Drama of a national character commented on the social situation of the Sami by building contrasts to the larger national societies as well as by emphasizing the differences between their own languages and traditions and the national population. Seeking a special ‘Sami way’ to produce theatre, Beaivváš preferred to take inspiration from the circles of other northern cultures or aboriginal peoples, rather than choose classics of world literature, which were seen as representing colonialist cultures.

The drama *Varrabeajat* (1989) may be seen as a watershed in a way that Sami issues now began to be treated as more general human questions of existence in this world. The Sami political position began to be put aside. The repertoire grew, as did also the scale of topics and views. This stemmed partly from outside reasons, such as administrative development and expansion of activities. It was also a matter of a more general phenomenon taking place in Sami society and in other types of Sami arts. The thematics that had earlier been examined only in the light of the Sami identity, began to move to other topics, such as women’s issues and motherhood in the work of woman poets, or multicultural interpretations in Paul Anders Simma’s films.

One may say, in this regard, that Beaivváš Sami Teáhter consciously began to examine its multicultural nature. Unlike the example of Rávgoš Theatre, which was a quite local phenomenon, Beaivváš had forged
general Sami identity, right from the beginning. It was not satisfied to tell only the stories of Kautokeino reindeer Sami or even Norwegian Sami. Its shows touched on the history and traditions of all of Sápmi.

This ubiquitous nature was also apparent in the theatre’s composition and language. Beaivváš Sami Teáhter’s acting troupe was multi-ethnic right from the start. Its members were, on one hand, Sami from different parts of Sápmi – including Finland and Sweden – and on the other hand, Norwegians from as far away as southern Norway. Yet, the distinction between localism and the Sami in general erupted in debate over such things as how much the theatre’s director should pay non-Sami working in a Sami theatre.

The problems of building a common Sami identity were also outlined in the frequent criticism about how ‘poor’ the Sami language was spoken on stage. In some cases the question may have been a case of actors having learned Sami, but were not fluent enough to speak it with native capabilities. However, the greater reason was probably a certain local pride in one’s own phrasing, that was felt to be ‘more correct’ than the dialect of other areas. Another explanation for the ‘language argument’ may also be that, in general, ordinary Sami spectators were perhaps not able to comment on the fine points of theatrical art, but they certainly felt to be experts on the speaking of the Sami language.

In its relations toward the national majority populations, Beaivváš Sami Teáhter had its own role as ‘ambassador’ of Sápmi, as an intermediary or interpreter. That goes back to the dual role that has been a special feature of Sami theatre, and Sami art in general \(^{25}\). Although its primary goal was to strengthen the Sami languages and the Sami identity, it attempted, at all times, to keep in mind non-Sami spectators as well. That was shown in its tours, which often included the capitals of the Nordic countries in addition to Sami areas. At the same time, it was clearly reflected in the stage expression, in which both music and visuality had a prominent role.

Thus, Beaivváš Sami Teáhter always spoke ‘with two mouths’ in its productions. The Sami did not feel that the dual role was contradictory, nor did they complain about its duality. Biculturalism is always associated with the maintenance of a certain overlapping discussion. This type of double communication was a familiar tradition for the Sami, already from colonial times. To illustrate, the irony of the famous Sami writer, Johan Turi, contains multiple levels of meaning, allowing Sami listeners to receive a completely different story tale than outsiders.

By the same token, they spoke in a different manner depending on the listener or vice versa: the listener understood the spoken words
in a different manner according to their own background. What the Sami had said about their own language and identity, meant, for the listening members of the national majority population, a new kind of interpretation of the northern minority or aboriginal folk. In the national capitals, Beaivváš Sami Teáhter’s role was again different than in Sápmi. It provided a new representation of the Sami as well as attempting to display the Sami’s competence – also to policy makers.

Its balancing between different borders indicates that Beaivváš Sami Teáhter was adept at changing Sami multiculturalism into a resource. In the era of Sami folk nationalism, when only the Sami’s own traditions and discussions seemed worthy of discussion, Beaivváš Sami Teáhter’s approach gave rise, in the 1990s, to a hybrid. Hybridism or transculturalism began to be seen as a resource, not merely as a melting of influences. The main idea is to emphasize the vitality and creativity of the transcultural process, in which new cultural phenomena result in the birth of active, spontaneous energy.  

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Notes

3 Interview with Harriet Nordlund.
4 Interview with Harriet Nordlund.
5 Interview with Harriet Nordlund.
6 The play was performed three times, and the audience numbered around 600. Interview with Harriet Nordlund. The songs, written by Paulus Uusi with music by Lars W. Sveuni, later became a very popular piece and are still performed.
7 Selinheimo 1984.
8 Esslin 1980, 30-33.
9 Niillas A. Somby. Personal communication. See also Birringer 2000, 187-188.
11 It was decided to eliminate any direct connection to the Alta Conflict by alienating the events of the Kautokeino Uprising in 1852, but finally the play was nearly identical with the Alta Conflict. In the end only the personal names remained of the original idea: Aslak and Mons were the names of the leaders of the Kautokeino Uprising.
12 Esslin 1980, 30-33.
13 Selinheimo 1984.
14 See Kister 2004, 62.
15 Nordic Theater Committee member Lasse Dehle at the Jokkmokk theatre seminar in 1985 according to the journal Klassekampen 4. 2. 1985.
16 Selinheimo 1984.
17 Fiebach 2005, 133. Haukur J. Gunnarsson has established the affiliation of the storytelling tradition within the sida: "foruten underholdningsverden hadde fortellerkunsten også en pedagogisk funksjon, idet den formidlet kunnskap om naturen og åndevederen, om jakten og kunsten å overleve i et ugiestimift klma. Fortellinger om slekterns historie og forfedrens og formødrens dårer var også en inspirasjon for de unge." Gunnarsson 1992.
18 Interview with Sverre Porsanger.
19 "Samisk kultur og utdanning". NOU 1987: 34, 87; E. g. Interview with Svein Birger Olsen.
20 In addition to Government funding Kautokeino municipality supported the theatre at first with 300,000 Norwegian crowns. With its permanent establishment Beavivås Sami Teather limited company was founded. After Svein Birger Olsen's term as its first director, the directorship was shared among three people (Knut Walle, Sverre Hjelleset and Kurt Hermansen), each responsible for their own area. After these, Ann-Jorid Henriksen was director until the first 'official' theatre director was chosen.
21 Interview with Leif Isak E. Nilut and Sara Margret Oskal. Some of Beavivås Sami Teather's founding members believe that Vaikko ñodí stíln will surpass Min Dsoolddar in importance and in its contribution to the expression of Beavivås Sami Teather.
23 Interview with Sverre Porsanger.
24 Government funding rose slowly. In 1992 it was 7.6 million Norwegian crowns.
25 Thomas DuBois has offered similar interpretation about two audiences of Saami art when studying the film Pathfinder by Nils Gaup: "In order to accomplish their work, revitalist artists [like Gaup] must create products which to some extent play to two politics at once, politics on either side of the asserted cultural boundary. First, the work must be directed toward designated outsiders - the larger, seemingly culturally homogenous polity seeking to assimilate the community into itself. - At he same time, however, a revitalist artist's work should, and indeed must, play to the 'inside' audience - the community of people willing or able to assume the cultural identity now valorized." DuBois 2000, 257-258.
26 Darby 2002, 61; Birringer 2000, 174-175.
Sources

In addition to the following sources, I also used the archives of Beavivás Sami Theatre and conducted extensive interviews with members of the theatre in summer 2004. I have not listed these separately.


Nordlund, Harriet 1990: "Utredning om samisk teater". Kiruna: Kiruna kommun. (Unprinted)


Schuler, David Dwight 2004: *East of the Sun and West of the Moon: Cultural Environments and the Beavivás Sami Teáhter*. A thesis submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Colorado.


