

# RESHAPING HORIZONS OF HOPE— Theatre of the future

## Summary of the panel discussion

Based on the key note speaker :  
Anta Helena Recke

Panelists:

Michelle Orenius, Geoffrey Erista, Silje Eikemo Sande and Wanjiku Victoria Seest

Commentator: Eva Englund: Senior Adviser (Culture) at the Nordic Council of Ministers

This summary gathers together thoughts from the online discussion *Reshaping horizons of hope – Theatre of the future* arranged on 18<sup>th</sup> May 2021. The event was organized as part of the #StopHatredNow week – [www.stophatrednow.fi](http://www.stophatrednow.fi) – and in collaboration with the New Theatre Helsinki initiative and the Ministry of Education and Culture Finland. The discussion was part of the official program of Finland's presidency year in the Nordic Council of Ministers.

The panelists participating in the discussion were senior adviser in engagement **Silje Eikemo Sande**, actor **Geoffrey Erista**, writer-dramaturg **Michelle Orenius** and actor **Wanjiku Victoria Seest**. The panelists discussed the kinds of processes of change that are needed in the Nordic performing arts field in order for theatre to be more diverse and inclusive. The discussion also featured the panelists thoughts on director Anta Helena Recke's keynote *Judgment, Power, and Participation in German Theater* presented as part of the #StopHatredNow week. The discussion was moderated by choreographer-artistic director Sonya Lindfors and commented by Senior Adviser (Culture) at the Nordic Council of Ministers Eva Englund. From this summary, you can as well find comment texts on the theme from free writer-teacher Hanna-Leena Helavuori, stand-up comedian-performance artist James Lórien MacDonald and director-pedagogue Davide Giovanzana.

The discussion *Reshaping horizons of hope – Theatre of the future* can be found in full through this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SUCIUVoibMI>.

The panel discussion continues the three year project *An Inclusive Cultural Sector in the Nordics* led by the Norwegian Arts Council and initiated as part of Norway's presidency year in the Nordic Council of Ministers in 2017. The project's aim is to identify challenges and find

ways to create a more inclusive cultural sector. Many useful tools and documents were produced as part of the project and they can be found here: <https://www.kulturradet.no/nordic-dialogues>.

A lot has already been done, but, as we hear from the panelists, it's simply not enough. The process of creating and demanding equity and inclusivity in the Nordic cultural sector – and in this case specifically in the field of performing arts – requires long-term commitment, an ongoing dialog, and collaboration that challenges the already existing (and new) power structures that may arise.

For the upcoming years 2021–2024, the Nordic Council of Ministers has published its new co-operation programme on culture policy *Art and culture – driving force for sustainable development in the Nordic region*. The cooperation programme sets the goal to attain a gender-equal and inclusive art and cultural life that is accessible all throughout the Nordic region.

In order to reach this goal, it is essential for art makers, policy makers, and funders to continuously challenge blind spots, and sustain courage and willingness to take risks while creating a more diverse structure within the Nordic arts field.

Editors

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**Michelle Orenius** is a writer and a dramaturg from Helsinki. Born in Bangkok and raised in the capital region of Finland she is currently studying at the degree programme of dramaturgy and playwriting at the Theatre Academy of the University of the Arts Helsinki. Before her current studies she studied art history and worked all-around from publishing zines to facilitating an open space festival. At her current study community, she amongst other students created a petition to include anti-racist strategies into the curriculums of Finnish art schools. In her artistic work she is currently interested in new and forgotten ways of storytelling, exploring drama's potential and all the emotions during the process of creating and while witnessing art.



Photo: Joonas Möttö



**Silje Eikemo Sande** has been working with subjects relating to inclusion and diversity in arts and culture for over a decade. Silje is based in Norway. She holds a Master in Cultural Studies, and in addition she is educated in Cultural Management. Between 2017 and 2020 she led the Nordic Initiative *An Inclusive Cultural Sector in the Nordics*, which engaged a large number of cultural organisations and artists in a dialogue on creating a safe and inclusive cultural sector. She is currently holding a position at Kulturtanken – Arts for young audiences – working with increasing participation from all children and youth in arts and culture.

# THE PANELISTS

Photo: Laura Malmivaara



**Geoffrey Erista** is an actor, dancer and live art maker of Sudanese-Ugandan descent based in Helsinki, Finland. In the spring of 2020, he received an MA in Acting from the Theatre Academy of the University of Arts Helsinki. Before studying at Helsinki Theatre Academy, he

worked on his acting skills in Finnish amateur theatres such as Kellariteatteri and Ylioppilasteatteri. There, he worked with Finnish theatre directors like Ossi Koskelainen and Akse Pettersson, among others. He has been performing in contemporary dance productions of Zodiak – Center for New Dance, in dance pieces choreographed by Anna Maria Häkkinen, Sonya Lindfors and Mikko Makkonen.

**Wanjiku Victoria Seest** is a Kenyan born actor and freelance performing artist, now based in Copenhagen, Denmark. As a member of ACT Denmark since inception in 2015, founded by Michael Omoke under the shared motto of 'Multiple Cultures sharing a Stage', she has participated in *For Colored Girls* (2019), *An enemy of the People* (2017) and *Merchant of Copenhagen* (2016) under the directorship of George Mungai (Kenya) and the late Dr Shirley Bassfield Dunlap (USA). Earlier productions include *Michezo ya Wafalme*, a Swahili rendition of *The King's Pleasure*, *Three African Sisters*, Robert Pris nominee short film *Mukwano* and several other film and theatre works in her over 15 years on the scene.

She is passionate about storytelling and expression, drawing directly and indirectly from her own experiences, where the Stage/Screen becomes the Medium and Herself, the vessel. She is currently working and co-writing on various original projects, both solo and collaborative, dealing with an array of themes close to heart.



Photo: Dagmara De

**Sonya Lindfors** is a Helsinki-based choreographer and artistic director who also works with facilitating, community organizing and education. In 2013 she received an MA in choreography from the University of the Arts Helsinki. She is a founding member and Artistic Director of UrbanApa, an inter-disciplinary and counterhegemonic arts community that offers a platform for new discourses and feminist art practices. UrbanApa facilitates workshops, festivals, labs, mentoring and publications among other things.

Lindfors's recent stage works *We Should All Be Dreaming* (2018), *COSMIC LATTE* (2018) and *Soft Variations* (2019) centralize questions around blackness and otherness, black body politics, representation and decolonial dreaming practices. On a larger scale Lindfors's time is divided between her own artistic work, educational work and working as the artistic director of UrbanApa. In all her positions she pursues creating and facilitating anti-racist and feminist platforms, where a festival, a performance, a publication or a workshop can operate as the site of empowerment and radical collective dreaming. Lindfors has been awarded several prizes, the latest of which being the international Live Art Anti Prize 2018. During the season 2017–2018, Lindfors was the house choreographer for Zodiak – Center for New Dance.



Photo: Janne Mikkilä

**Michelle:**

There are a couple of organisations in Finland where you can study theater that are highly valued. Earning these degrees can prove that you have been practising and bring some safety, but there are other roads to the field. The conversation about what aesthetics or movement we value is recent, but for example city theatres that we have are still mostly white.

**Wanjiku:**

In Denmark as an artist of colour you get invited to the setting that has been decided from a homogenic point of view and you are invited on a condition. There is a willingness to persist the old power structure that has already been there.

**Geoffrey:**

Finland is way behind. All the big theatres are repeating the heteronormative western stories. Most of the narratives are told from the white male perspective and this is a really narrow view of the world. It doesn't give a true picture of reality. Non-white people are usually not regarded as ordinary citizens.

**Sonya:**

We all agree that art and theatre are important. It tells stories about life, what should we strive towards, what is important, what is a good life, who is a Finn. Who are the Nordic people. Theatre can build these stories about us and them: Who are the 'us' and who are 'them'. We need to discuss these topics.

**Silje:**

The struggle is the same in all Nordics, it is hard to get to the existing institutions. The inclusion has been on the political agenda for some time, but every year we come back to the result that there is still not any diversity on the stage.

**Michelle:**

I think that the richness of the world is left unexperienced if we don't let different stories to live side by side. I think there is a lot of hate and discrimination in this world. These stories and representations have an effect on it.

**Wanjiku:**

Everybody's story is different. When in Denmark the Shakespearean characters became culturally diverse, the audience also became more diverse. They were brought together. It is a necessity for human evolution.

**Geoffrey:**

The stereotypic stories can't give a whole picture of a country. Different stories shape our understanding of reality. New audiences will come to see the narrative that is relevant to them.

**Silje:**

If diversity needs to be received, we must develop long-term strategies and build competence with time in order to achieve structural change.

The long-term strategies are really vital for the learnings of this project, because diversity and inclusion are part of a developing continuous dialogue.

## The dialogue

We need to have a dialogue between equals with the focus on art. Challenging and reshaping the old structures requires continually challenging blind spots.

## Setting the agenda

There is a need to set an agenda where you can create room for diverse projects through innovation and diversity. It has to come together with administrative, political, economical and artistic solutions as well as with funding structures.

## Long term projects

Creating room for more perspectives by working on issues of diversity and co-creating with new groups in the long term to expand horizons and narratives.

## Self-reflection

On the institutional level there is a need for self-reflection. Looking critically at the structures that hinder inclusive strategies.

## Acting locally

It is important to act locally and contextually if you are an institution. Going out and assessing the resources, and inquiring on the interests and local networks.

## Allowing takeovers

There is a need to establish networks which work directly with the creative community and audience. Opening the space up for the ideas and allowing takeovers. Expansion of networks.

## Recruitment processes

The representation needs to be in all areas of the institutions through the recruitment process, not only on the stage but also behind it at every step of the process. It allows us to make use of the backgrounds and competences that were blind spots in the institutions.

## Keeping the knowledge up to date

You need to continuously work with diversity to update your knowledge. Because it changes all the time and it is embedded in political and cultural structures and discussions.

## Guidelines

Making guidelines on how to improve diversity within a space and to create room for this to blossom within the institution.

## What tools can we give to the New Theatre Helsinki that has the goal to establish a new, intercultural theatre house?

### Michelle:

There are a couple of organisations in Finland where you The new house brings a lot of opportunities for safer space, for different stories, time and space to reflect on what is happening now.

### Silje:

Funding should not be given to already existing institutions, but should be initiated for new practices and innovations within the diversity field. People should come with their innovative ideas to the new place and not try to sell the idea to institutions that are not willing to take risks.

### Geoffrey:

That should be a place where people can experience differences and also a place where they can think differently. Where you can feel at home, dream and be able to be free for all kinds of sensations, something new. Something outside of the norms from what has already been offered by other mainstream theatres.

### Sonya:

It is really important to come together to dream. It brings so many questions. What is the theatre house? How does it look? What kind of stage is it? Where is it in the city? What are the ticket prices? What time are the performances? Are there care for kids? What languages are spoken? Whose plays are paid? The question of money and resources is important to repeat. In order to do something that hasn't been done yet, we are learning and we need more resources than normally. New theatre needs more resources than ongoing city theatre because you are trying to reinvent the ways of working. There is all that different pools in different directions that need to be taken into consideration trying to imagine an inclusive, anti-rasict, feminist, intersectional, equal theatre. What would it be like?

**How does the Nordic Council of Ministers comment on all of the dreams that panelists brought up? How can they become possible?**

Finland is this year's president of the Nordic Council of Ministers. This cooperation is set up in order for Nordic countries to cooperate on areas of common interest. Those questions are also appropriate for this conversation: what are our common obstacles and challenges? I've been listening to this conversation from the Nordic point of view. Ministries have put forward their new strategy programme: *Art and culture – driving force for sustainable development in the Nordic region for 2021-2024*. It is looking at culture as a driver for change. The prioritised areas are green initiatives of the cultural sector, promoting competitive nordic cultural sector, working for socially sustainable and inclusive cultural sector in the nordic and promoting diversity and democracy. What has been discussed here is at the very core at least of two latter areas. Cultural scene can never be competitive if it doesn't relate to how society looks. When it comes to social sustainability, inclusive art and cultural life it is essential that everyone can take part.

The basic premise of Nordic cultural cooperation is that everyone will have equal opportunities to participate and exert influence. A gender-equal and equitable art and cultural life that is free from discrimination and accessible to everyone, contributes to a sense of belonging in the Nordic society, but requires new and structural efforts and systemic changes. The Co-operation Programme therefore places emphasis on diversity and inclusion regardless of socioeconomic background, ethnicity, disability, migration status, age, or other status. Empowerment of indigenous peoples and national minorities will also be emphasised.

Ministers are aware and ready to take measures. These challenges concern audiences, the artists and career opportunities, funding, power structures and these different mechanisms for recognition and selection. It is important to acknowledge all of those challenges on a policy level. We need to have long term strategies and keep the dialogue alive and up to date with the facts.

*Eva Englund: Senior Adviser (Culture) at the Nordic Council of Ministers*

## Taking a risk to go beyond tokenism

There is a clear desire for the theatre – namely, the public, mainstream theatre – to do better in order to better represent the society in which it is situated. How can a state or city theatre be considered a vital place for societal dialogue, when the society on its stages (and working behind the scenes) routinely excludes and tokenises swaths of the local population? Another impression from the panel *Reshaping horizons of hope – Theatre of the future* is that there is no one place to make this change, but that commitment from many aspects of the theatre industry is needed, and these will have effects on each other.

One place is in arts education. In Finland, artists are not typically considered professional unless they have graduated from one of two nationally recognised academies. This naturally creates a bottleneck, where the students admitted to the school this year will be representing the entire Finnish society some 10 years down the road. Michelle Orenius, herself currently a student of performing arts, brought up the challenges faced in arts education, noting that she was a part of the student-led initiative to require arts universities to include anti-racist teaching in their curriculum. She brought up that the discussion around this initiative already introduced big, important questions about what the institution actually values, and indeed questions about the need for a particular education in order to be considered a professional at all. This is theatre we're talking about: acting, directing, designing, writing. These things can be learned – and mastered – by *doing*. All that is needed is the opportunity, space, and recognition that creativity is not a finite resource to be controlled.

Wanjiku Victoria Seest (DK) made excellent points about lingering attitudes that often persist when institutions work to become more diverse: that one feels as though one has been

invited to represent a group of people, and “invited on condition... you are invited, and could be *uninvited* at any time.” Instead, Seest recommends working to make sure that a theatrical collaboration remains “a blank space”, ready for everyone to contribute truly equally. Geoffrey Erista echoes this, thinking about how to make room in spaces where room is historically not made; how to be a black Finnish actor who is not in a project as a political statement, or who is not being included just so that a point can be made about being inclusive. Sonya Lindfors blasted apart this tokenistic way of thinking: “we have this fantasy of meritocracy... but in my mind, in the future if you have no competence in anything other than the white Western canon, you're not competent.”

Finally, I would also make note of Silje Sande's (NO) excellent point about the reluctance of institutions to take risks on non-white artists. Somehow, they are seen as a greater risk artistically and financially, and even program makers with good intentions will fall into this trap. Wanjiku also comes close to this point when mentioning how a typical excuse for not being radical about reflecting a society's diversity is that the audiences outside the capital cities “wouldn't understand”, as though the theatres haven't built their identities on a long history of challenging normative thinking in the public.

It was a privilege to be an audience to such a rich, high-level discussion of problems in Finnish and Nordic theatre relating to racism and diversity, by young professionals with a wide array of experiences and specificities to bring to the table.

*Jamie MacDonald*

*Stand-up comedian and performance artist  
Helsinki*

## Beyond hashtags – towards true action and accountability

"If you don't count you don't count"

Fatigue and frustration. Why do we have to repeat the same issues? Why do so many disparities persist?

Art and cultural policy makers don't identify the complex problems related to racism and diversity. There is a lack of understanding and sensitivity of racism and the discrimination against all minorities. Consequently, antiracist activities in the cultural and art institutions are far from being normalised. Anti-racism is not fully embraced by Nordic countries.

It is no more enough just to raise voices against racism, inequality, discrimination. Governments need to act. Cultural and art institutions need to act and to be held accountable for their words and good intentions. Sara Ahmed, a queer feminist scholar, has noted that statements of commitment to antiracism often take form of a question: "How can we be racist if we are committed to equality and diversity?"

Let's do our maths and compare the good intentions and rhetoric with the cruel facts. The culture policy statistics should provide adequate, intentional and sustained data to push ahead and monitor the change.

We need information on how anti-racist measures and actions are rooted in everyday practices in the art and cultural

institutions, in their recruiting, in their boards, and repertoires. This statistical data and reporting obligations will put necessary pressure on change.

We need policies and interventions. We need sustained strategic funding programmes and investments on art organizations and communities securing more inclusive representation.

It is not the question of filling the diversity quota and diversity wash. We are dealing with involvement, relatedness, belongingness and togetherness. Tangible activities and organised and managed change.

We must acknowledge that we don't know enough. Anti-racism is not just new information, but a continuous process and practice of unlearning together with a long list of actions and interventions.

*Hanna Helavuori*  
a free writer and teacher  
former director of TINFO (Theatre Info Finland)  
Helsinki

We need to understand where the power lies and who controls it. Without unfolding who has the power, who decides (on the content and on funding) no structural changes will happen. Who has the power to decide what is theatre and what is not? Who has the power to decide what is culture and what is not? Who has the power to decide who is “professional” and not? Who has the power to decide who participates in fashioning the Finnish/Nordic culture? These decisions of exclusion or inclusion are not only based on merits. It is a myth that those who are talented are acknowledged. There is a selection that has nothing to do with merit but is structural.

New Theatre Helsinki aims to represent the international performing artists living in Finland but not represented on the institutional theatre stage. For instance, a way to diminish the importance of the work of New Theatre Helsinki is to consider its members half professionals – maybe because part of our educational background comes from other educational institutions than TeaK or Näty (the two universities in Finland offering university level education in performing arts), or, perhaps, as we are not part of Finnish theatre families – or for some other reason. This is a way to diminish the impact and value of the work of New Theatre Helsinki by labelling its

members as amateur (without any proper reason). In this way, the authorities are not acknowledging their own responsibilities for the lack of actions towards a more inclusive society. And it becomes a personal problem (if we are professional or amateur) instead of focusing on structural discrimination present in the society (and which they, as representatives of the society, preserve by not doing anything).

What we are doing must not be considered as charity. We need to be treated as equal partners. It is not a favor that the authorities are doing to us, but it is a dialogue that society must initiate.

In addition, we are trying to do something that does not exist. So we are experimenting with something new, something that the society is demanding and that authorities don't have an idea on how to respond to this need. (In that sense we are even doing the job that the authorities are not doing.) This requires even more resources than what is usually given to cultural and sociological projects.

But “diversity” or “inclusion” (interculturalism) seem to be optional and not a priority. There is the fear with the announced post-pandemic recession that the budget cuts will prevent initiating any further projects towards a more diverse and inclusive society.

Diversity is something that should be understood as a way to come together. It is not a tool. Tools are strategies to implement concrete actions to secure a society that is based on diversity and inclusion. Therefore the discussion with authorities and institutions should concern what kind of tools/strategies are necessary to implement. This would help to direct the discourse on power, money and transparency in decision rather than vague promises of "respect".

It is important to create a safe space where people who have been left invisible have the possibility to present, see, hear and experience their stories. Theatre should be the safe space of imagination, of potential where society and humans can think and re-think about themselves. But, if there is a structural discrimination present in the structure, theatre is amputated from its potential to imagine, and becomes a mere representative of the normative discourse present in the society. The structural discrimination (such as homogeneity of theatre leaders or actors, homogeneity of the technical staff working in the theatre, homogeneity of the performance's makers, cost of the tickets, accessibility) are not "things" outside the stories displayed on the stage, but they are part of the content. In this perspective the context defines the content.

And then we need new stories which are dealing with these problems. Who can write these stories? Who can tell these stories? And how should they be told? In the traditional way? In the institutional theatres, or should we find new ways to display these new stories?

How to create a safe space for dreaming where the structural discrimination is not enforcing normative discourse?

*Davide Giovanzana*

*Director, pedagogue and researcher*

*Helsinki*

Michelle:

Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity  
(collection of essays, various authors)

Geoffrey:

Queen and Slim <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8722346/>

An Inclusive Cultural Sector in the Nordics (2017–2019): <https://www.kulturradet.no/nordic-dialogues>

Art and culture – driving force for sustainable development in the Nordic region  
(2021–2024): <https://pub.norden.org/politknord2021-708/#>

Director Anta Helena Recke's keynote Judgment, Power, and Participation in German Theater (2021): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GpY6jdLC9Vk> .