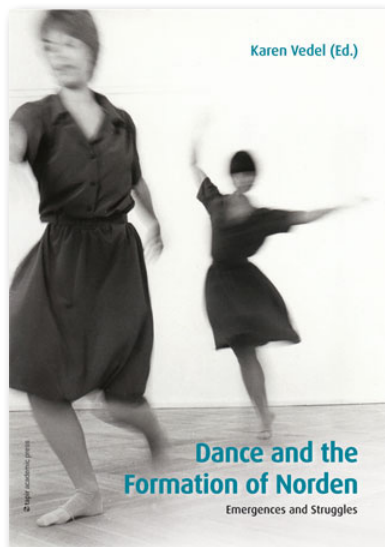


The Invention of Norden



*Book: Karen Vedel (ed.)
Dance and the Formation
of Norden: Emergences and
Struggles, Trondheim, Tapir
Academic Press, 2011*

By Hanna Järvinen

Finally, an international collection on Nordic dance *in English*. Finally, a book that seeks to discuss dance in its multitude of forms, from theatrical to popular, from traditional to contemporary, in one volume that, moreover, seeks to build bridges between these different dances through its focus on a geographical area and a shared notion of space. *Dance and the Formation of Norden: Emergences and Struggles* points to the various ways in which the idea of Norden as an imagined community, to use Benedict Andersson's (2006) term, has been actively created in the past century through dance and in all dance forms. It is truly a worthy effort on the part of the members of the Dance in Nordic Spaces project (<http://www.nordicdance.net/>).

Although like most collections of text by different authors, the chapters are of somewhat uneven quality, all the authors are to be commended for creating interesting cases. Rather than discuss dance as something that happens in space by a community, the writers discuss how dance actively creates spaces and communities. This creates interesting results, such as pointing out how genre divisions or common categorizations of dance (such as participatory versus presentational dance) are illusory or irrelevant in the practice of dancing.

Moreover, the decision not to divide the book into sections according to genre (ethnic or folk or theatrical dance) works to unify the heterogeneous subject matter. At present, as the imagined community of Norden seems to strive for a consensus about a monoculture of blonde and blue-eyed white middle-class (as argued in e.g. Hammergren's chapter, discussed below), it is good to note that these authors consider Norden a multicultural entity, a place of border crossings and cultural exchanges. They are admirably critical of hegemonic attempts at defining Nordic identities through potentially dangerous concepts like 'the people' and 'the nation', whilst simultaneously acknowledging the need of individuals to create groupings and identify with such notions.

The collection begins with Karen Vedel's introductory text to the notion of Norden and the specific theoretical framework shared by the authors, namely Pierre Bourdieu's (1995) theory of fields of cultural production. Vedel discusses ideas of north and the imagined community of Norden, built on notions of shared history. Yet, her emphasis on local differences and the actual conflicts within that history are laudable — I have rarely read as concise a presentation on this complex issue.

Perhaps the single aspect of spatiality missing from the introduction that would have strengthened the argument on the whole is *demographics*. With the exception of Denmark, Nordic countries are sparsely populated (fewer than twenty five people per square kilometre) — the only cities with more than a million inhabitants being Stockholm and Copenhagen. This creates a particular space, too, not necessarily obvious to a reader that has not resided in this part of the world — a sense of space all around one. In reference to the next two texts in particular, population density also places the work of Nordic ethnographers in some proportion to what they could achieve in their research: sparsely populated countries cannot yield the same amount of sources as densely populated ones. In view of Vedel's earlier interests (2008), this also makes the hegemony of ballet in Denmark all the more conspicuous. In turn, this made me think of the relative absence of ballet from this collection of texts: certainly, the idea of ballet as a *national* art form (in the form of all the Royal and National Ballets in the Nordic countries) could have used more unpacking, even if Lena Hamnergren addresses this in one of her case studies (pp. 187–92) and ballet is discussed in passim also in some of the other texts, notably Anne Fiskvik's and Egil Bakka's paper (esp. p. 84). Yet, ballet is but one example of how this collection of texts consistently brought to mind possible topics for further research, which I take as an indication of the importance, success, and absolute necessity of both the Dance in Nordic Spaces project and the research as illustrated here.

As Vedel notes, *Dance and the Formation of Norden* follows a loosely chronological structure, beginning from Petri Hoppu's excavations of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century collection of folk dance in the spirit of National Romanticism and ending with Lena Hamnergren's discussion on the cultural politics of dance in the Nordic countries in the past three decades. However, I find it a happy solution that the chronological overlaps both within and in between chapters dissolve any sense of temporal "progress" from the book as a whole, and it is quite possible to read the texts in any order whatsoever. This is not to say the texts do not refer to one another, on the contrary: the joint project has clearly assisted in creating this studied whole. For example, the issues of canonicity, popularity (in all senses of the word) and community are raised repeatedly, observed from different angles through the personal research interests of the given author. The result is a shifting kaleidoscope where Hoppu's discussion on canonicity now resonates with Hamnergren's, now with Nilsson's without actual need for the authors to refer to each other's chapters.

For this reason, it is a pity that the final version of the text has not been proofread by a native speaker. At times, the authors' idiosyncratic expressions or colloquialisms make the text seem less scholarly than it actually is. This is particularly the case with Mats Nilsson's chapter on Polska dancing, which actually uses "field" in the ethnographic sense, not in Bourdieu's sense (as in all the previous chapters). This makes the methodology sound weak when it is simply inconsistent with the rest of the volume. Nilsson's text might also have been improved with more concentrated focus on concrete examples of dancing as the terminological explanations — difficult even in one's native tongue — now seem rather inept. As with Nilsson's text, Hoppu's paper also contains terminological oddities, such as the use of both Finland-Swedish and Finnish Swedish to mean the particular Swedish spoken in Finland. Whereas Nilsson, a critical reader might have helped to avoid some of the more naïve phrasing, with Hoppu the order of his text could have been improved. Usually, moving the discussion from the general (here, ideas of nation and authentic culture) to the particular (examples of forms, statistics) might have clarified the author's aims. As is, Hoppu's research question seems too large for merely a chapter in a collection, spanning for a century in references on a complex issue like national canons.

By contrast, Inger Damsholt's chapter on Nordic disco dancing is a brilliant example of finding the right research question. Her use of social media in searching for informants and in her interviews is particularly commendable, although I was a bit surprised at the scarcity of informants on such a fascinating subject. Damsholt might also have spared a few words to the other types of sources (beyond reminiscences) that she obviously has used to create her view of disco in the late 1970s, and personal history could only have added to the emotional appeal of her writing.

Karen Vedel's discussion on the emergence of various organizations and national infrastructures of dance

is the only one of the book that focuses principally on contemporary theatre dance. It deliberately excludes the hegemonic form of theatre dance, ballet, which should perhaps be stated at the beginning of the piece. Vedel's text is topical in several regards, not the least in pointing out which Nordic countries offer resources for dance — Finnish dance artists have been desiring a house for the art form since 1937 (*Tanssi* 2/2010) and only received funding for the project this year and from a private foundation at that (*Helsingin Sanomat* 20. October 2011). For this reason, it also evokes the same issues as Lena Hamnergren's text later in the book. In her chapter, Hamnergren offers three case studies on cultural policy in Nordic countries vis à vis local dance communities. She, too, discusses organizations and infrastructure, and sharply questions the assumed "we" of Norden. Both Hamnergren's and Vedel's texts are important pieces of research on institutional history of dance that has thus far attained less attention than it deserves. Ballet has a notable security of state funding in all Nordic countries whilst folk dance groups are celebrated as embodiments of the national ethos. Contemporary dance has neither the money nor the nationalist rhetoric as its backing, and yet, as Vedel's discussion shows, this form, too, has managed to establish itself, here.

Dance and the Formation of Norden awakens a curiosity about how other forms of dance not yet included in this project might benefit from this kind of concentrated effort: for example, the Finnish version of tango, a popular national symbol if ever there was one, comes to my mind. As a project, *Dance in Nordic Spaces* truly does identify dance forms that have been instrumental in the creation of national dance cultures as well as in the emergence of nation states themselves. I do hope the texts of this collection will find their way outside the relatively narrow field of dance research, because the authors have revealed how dance can illuminate larger issues of nationhood and identity.

References

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