

The Politics and Pedagogies of Contemporary Sámi Performance for Young Audiences

Dirk Gindt

One afternoon in downtown Kiruna/Giron in late September 2022, it is just hours before the dress rehearsal of Giron Sámi Teáhter's production of Anna Åsdell and Paul Ol Jona Utsi's cowritten play *Belážagat-Kusinerna* (The Cousins).[1] Light and sound designer Emanuel Arvanitis walks into the kitchen and explains his worries that parts of the set seem unbalanced. Set and costume designer Lotta Nilsson, who has just taken a bite of her sandwich, laughs and promises to deal with

1. In September 2022, I attended *Belážagat-Kusinerna* rehearsals at the invitation of Anna Åsdell, Paul Ol Jona Utsi, and Åsa Simma, who also granted me interviews and permission to reproduce images from the production. Other generous knowledge holders and hosts at Giron Sámi Teáhter include Emanuel Arvanitis, Ingá Máiiá Blind, Ulrika Tapio Blind, Takakehto Charles, Raija Leipälä, Michael Lindblad, Lotta Nilsson, Annika Ramström, Ingá Márjá Sarre, Laila Snijder, Jacob Willén, and Rönn-Lisa Zakrisson Påve. This article is gratefully dedicated to all of you. Research for this article was supported by the Swedish Research Council under Grant 2019–02744. The project has been assessed and approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority and adheres to research guidelines and protocols formulated by the Sámi Parliament of Sweden. There are no competing interests to declare.

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Figure 2. Sápmi, the land of the Sámi people, stretches across the Northern parts of Norway, Sweden, and Finland all the way to the Kola Peninsula in Russia. (Wikimedia Commons)

it immediately. Meanwhile, artistic director Åsa Simma and tour coordinator Ulrika Tapio Blind check the final edit of the playbill, which will be printed overnight, and proofread the Sámi translations. Producer Laila Snijder is making phone calls in her office to ensure that the tour scheduled to start immediately after opening night will run smoothly. This tour will take the ensemble through Sápmi—the land of the Indigenous Sámi people, which stretches across the Northern part of Norway, Sweden, and Finland all the way to the Kola Peninsula in Russia (fig. 2)—and to southern Sweden.[2] Raija Leipälä, the theatre's chief administrator and self-proclaimed caretaker of the ensemble, puts together an emergency kit of vitamins and supplements. By this time of year, temperatures in Sápmi linger around the freezing point, which is why everyone needs to stay warm and healthy. Backstage, technicians Rönn-Lisa Zakrisson Påve and Jacob Willén are frantically looking for a connecting device that is necessary to start one of the three smoke machines, and makeup artist Annika Ramström is busy fixing one of the wigs that has had a tendency to fall off in the middle of rehearsals. Finally, all last-minute issues have been resolved and the invited friends and family members who work as a test audience have taken their seats; it is time for the dress rehearsal to begin.

The stage is plunged into darkness. A delicate music box theme plays and evokes the atmosphere of a fairytale. Slowly, two miniature wooden houses, lit from the inside, descend from the ceiling to suggest the small community where the play is set. Downstage at house right, a metal garbage can, also lit from within, releases puffs of smoke at irregular intervals. A long curtain upon which images of a large forest are painted covers the side and back walls of the stage. Depending on the mood of the action and characters, the forest will be illuminated in bright yellow and orange colors to celebrate triumph and joy, dark green and blue to add an enigmatic touch to some scenes, and blood red in the climactic moments of the play when the main character has to wrestle with a dangerous mythological creature that lives in the woods. Migá, a Sámi man carrying a lantern, slowly enters and addresses the audience, delivering the same lines first in Northern Sámi—one of the nine Sámi languages—and then in Swedish:[3]

> Mu lea mu, ja du lea du.
>
> Ditt är ditt och mitt är mitt. Men vad händer när det inte är så enkelt? Muhto mii dáhpáhuvvá go ii leat nu álki?

2. Sápmi has been colonized and divided by historically shifting geopolitical borders for over seven centuries. The Sámi Information Centre (SI 2024a) estimates that, out of an estimated total of 80,000 to 100,000 Sámi people, roughly 20,000 to 40,000 live in the Swedish part of Sápmi.
3. Out of the nine Sámi languages that form part of the Uralic language family, five are spoken in the Swedish part of Sápmi: Northern, Southern, Lule, Pite, and Ume Sámi.

Figure 1. (previous page) The mythological creature Rovhtege (Ingá Márjá Sarre) lives in the woods, where she captures lost children to devour them. Anna Åsdell and Paul Ol Jona Utsi's Belážagat-Kusinerna*, directed by Anna Åsdell. Giron Sámi Teáhter, 2022. (Photo by Jonathan Vitblom; © Giron Sámi Teáhter)*

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Movt juohkit juoidá mii lea juohkemeahttun? Hur delar man något odelbart?

(Yours is yours and mine is mine.

But what happens when it's not that simple?

How can you divide something that is indivisible?) (Åsdell and Utsi 2022:2)[4]

Thus begins *Belážagat-Kusinerna*, a production for children and young audiences that opened on 28 September 2022 at Giron Sámi Teáhter, Sweden's oldest and only permanent professional Indigenous theatre company located in Kiruna/Giron, a mining town north of the Arctic circle.[5] My analysis of the play and production builds upon in-depth interviews with the involved artists (conducted in Swedish) to highlight the aesthetic richness, political importance, and pedagogical contributions of contemporary Sámi theatre for children and young audiences. I also highlight how Giron Sámi Teáhter anchors its plays in the Sámi people's rich tradition of storytelling.

With Sámi mythology and storytelling as a dramaturgical anchor, Giron Sámi Teáhter uses the key aesthetic elements of *yoik* (Sámi song) and *duodji* (Sámi arts and crafts) to revitalize and promote Sámi languages and culture.[6] The troupe's work nourishes pride in young Sámi audiences in their rich cultural heritage, which for centuries was suppressed by settler colonialism.

Since 2020 I have been in close dialog with the ensemble, staff, and board of directors at Giron Sámi Teáhter. I followed rehearsals of *Belážagat-Kusinerna* for a month, spent time with the ensemble and staff, shared meals and stories, and learned about both the theatre and Sámi culture. In a number of meetings with the municipality of Kiruna/Giron and representatives of regional theatre organizations I helped Giron Sámi Teáhter argue its case for further state funding. I position myself as a white scholar of European descent who immigrated to Sweden as a young adult in the 1990s. I have been living in both Canada and Sweden since 2012 and the publication of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission's final report of 2015 furthered my investment in theatre for social justice and opposition to Swedish society's often unacknowledged, unexamined, and unproblematized settler-colonial history. Because of my personal involvement, I do not write from a detached "objective" perspective. As Maōri Indigenous education scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith argues in *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* ([1999] 2012), Western scholarly principles of neutrality and false notions of distance and objectivity have contributed to silencing Indigenous peoples for centuries. Hence why it should be emphasized that this article, and the larger research project of which it forms part, are the result of a collaboration with Sámi artists, as opposed to an extraction of knowledge from them without giving back.

Sámi Performance in a Swedish Context

Swedish theatre for children and young people has long cultivated an international reputation not only for its rich aesthetics, but also for its thematic complexity and boldness.

The left-wing cultural wave that swept through the country in the 1970s as it did elsewhere in the wake of the political and social uprisings of the 1960s also left a trace on theatre for young audiences, as playwrights and directors explored politically, even existentially, challenging topics and actively

4. All translations into English are mine. Permission to quote courtesy of Åsdell and Utsi.

5. There are two other professional Indigenous companies in the Norwegian part of Sápmi: Beaivváš Sámi Našunálateáhter in Kautokeino/Guovdageaidnu and Åarjelhsaemien Teatere in Mo i Rama. In the Finnish part of Sápmi, until the early 1990s the Rávgoš theatre group used to cater to Finnish and Sámi audiences.

6. The legendary yoik artist and poet Nils-Aslak Valkeapää (1943–2001), one of the Sámi people's most important yoik artists who also has a connection to the history of Giron Sámi Teáhter, is a key personality in Sámi culture. In 1991, he was awarded the Nordic Council Literature Prize for his book *Beaivi, Áhčážan* (The Sun, My Father), a cultural history of the Sámi people that combined poetry and visual art. An accompanying soundtrack with yoiks was released the following year. Valkeapää, or Áillohaš, as he is affectionately called by the Sámi, also served as the mentor of Åsa Simma, the current artistic director of Giron Sámi Teáhter. Find his YouTube channel at www.youtube.com/channel/UCOLmyR1GJVtNTWUkDh5eu-w.

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defended the social and cultural rights of children (Davet 2011; Helander 1998). Thanks to the pioneering director Suzanne Osten, young audiences have since been exposed to artistically innovative theatre that dramatizes the effects of social issues such as divorce on children, the codependent behaviors established when living with a mentally ill parent, as well as eating disorders and suicide among young people (Brinch 2018; Helander 2010). While the representation of such issues has previously been dictated by adult creators, contemporary theatres make an effort to address their young audiences on equal terms (Lidén 2022). Since 2015, theatre for young audiences has also represented the experiences of children impacted by the European migrant crisis, giving a voice to asylum seekers and political refugees and taking an active stance against the increasing racism in Swedish society (Brinch, Gindt, and Rosenberg 2022; Grehn 2020; Haglund, Styrke, and Wiklund 2020).

As a result, "[c]hildren's theatre in Sweden can be described as a democratic form of theatre through its ability to reach a wider target group and create a future audience" (Brinch 2022:264). Sámi theatre for young audiences, however, should not be conflated with developments in the majoritarian society for a number of reasons, the most obvious being the unequal power dynamics caused by centuries of settler colonialism, the ongoing underrepresentation of Sámi people and Sámi issues in mainstream culture, and the financial precarity exacerbated by the lack of adequate support from the Swedish state.

The development of contemporary Sámi performance is intertwined with the political and cultural movement summarized by the acronym ČSV (Čájet Sámi Vuoiŋŋa!), Northern Sámi for "show Sámi spirit!" (Sandström 2020:30–31). This movement started in the 1960s and blossomed throughout the 1970s. Sámi artists began to deploy literature, yoik, performance, and duodji as critical means of decolonial resistance.[7] Literature scholar Harald Gaski explains how the Sámi people's political struggle of that period became intertwined with cultural activism:

> Sami literature first began to flourish in the 1970s, a period of increased Sami cultural and social activity when advances were made in the struggle for Sami rights and a number of important institutions were founded. At the end of the decade, the first artists' associations were formed and the first Sami publishing company saw the light of day, which meant that the threshold was lowered a bit, encouraging Sami writers to dare come forth with their manuscripts. (2011:42; see also Hirvonen [1999] 2008)

In 1971, the late actor Harriet Nordlund and the visual and duodji artist Maj-Doris Rimpi founded the first professional Sámi theatre, Dálvadis. From the company's inception, Nordlund and Rimpi attempted to create a mode of performance that was rooted in Sámi cultural traditions and expressions, while simultaneously protesting the exploitation of Sámi territories by hydroelectric, mining, and forestry industries (Persson 1997). According to cultural historian Veli-Pekka Lehtola, theatre ensembles like Dálvadis, which later developed into Giron Sámi Teáhter, as well as Beaivváš Sámi Našunálateáhter in the Norwegian part of Sápmi, and the now defunct company Rávgoš in the Finnish Sápmi (the latter two both founded in 1981), have their origins in the Sámi emancipatory project.

From the beginning, Sámi theatre has been offering young artists the opportunities to negotiate identities, explore culture and history, and take control to foster positive self-representation on their own terms. This process of self-determination actively opposed representation from the colonizers' point of view, which had long been the case in literature, documentary films, anthropometric observations, and photographic documentations (Lehtola 2009:437–45).[8]

Sámi performance for young audiences developed organically when the members of Dálvadis and, later, Giron Sámi Teáhter, made plays specifically addressing young people, which they toured

7. Similar processes of decolonization, in which the performing arts play a central role, can be observed in other settler-colonial contexts such as Canada and Australasia in the 1970s (Balme 1999:22–23).

8. Lehtola notes that the ČSV movement was influenced by Indigenous activism in North America, but also cautions against conflating histories and contexts. Lehtola also dismisses the false claims of Nordic colonialism having been less aggressive than other colonial powers (2015:23–26).

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to primary and high schools. Today, these efforts span across spoken drama such as *Belážagat-Kusinerna*, audio plays for radio theatre done in collaboration with the Swedish Educational Broadcasting Company, and Gïella čirkuš, or Language Circus, where young audiences learn Sámi, facilitated by teachers, clowns, and acrobats. Together, all of these initiatives make vital contributions to the unfolding process of decolonial activism that encompasses not only the Sámi people's right to their lands and natural resources, but also tells their stories on their own terms, celebrating cultural legacy, fostering cultural identity, and promoting Sámi languages.



Figure 3. Karin (Ingá Máiiá Blind; right) and Migá (Paul Ol Jona Utsi) try to hide the old gákti*, which Sunna-Márjá (Ingá Márjá Sarre; left) has thrown into the garbage. Anna Åsdell and Paul Ol Jona Utsi's* Belážagat-Kusinerna*, directed by Anna Åsdell. Giron Sámi Teáhter, 2022. (Photo by Jonathan Vitblom; © Giron Sámi Teáhter)*

Processing the Loss of Áhkku

Anna Åsdell not only cowrote *Belážagat-Kusinerna* but also directed it. Coauthor Paul Ol Jona Utsi played one of the three main characters and composed the music. Åsdell has rich acting experience in spoken drama, musical theatre, and radio theatre. She joined Giron Sámi Teáhter in 2009. *Belážagat-Kusinerna* was her first major directing project. Utsi is a professional music instructor and composer with a degree in musicology from Luleå University of Technology. Beyond being a composer and arranger, he is also a highly skilled yoik performer and was a member of a Sámi rock band. In 2013 he was invited to become an actor at Giron Sámi Teáhter, where he is a musician and language coach. *Belážagat-Kusinerna* marked his debut as a playwright.[9] I first met Åsdell and Utsi in September 2021, when *Belážagat-Kusinerna* was still in the planning stages.

Performed in both Northern Sámi and Swedish, *Belážagat-Kusinerna* is the story of two young teenagers, Karin (played by Ingá Máiiá Blind) and her slightly older cousin Sunna-Márjá (Ingá Márjá Sarre), who fight over their late grandmother's *gákti*, the formal Sámi coat or regalia. Sunna-Márjá, who is spoiled because her father is the head of their Sámi village, hides her insecurities behind a cocky demeanor. She wants to throw out the gákti because it is dirty and its colors have faded.[10] This upsets Karin who identifies her grandmother, or *áhkku*, with the garment and, as a result, feels as if the beloved woman herself is being thrown into the garbage.[11] Karin rescues the gákti and determines to have it mended. Her key ally in this quest is Migá (played by Utsi), an eccentric who spends his days rooting through other people's trash to see what it tells him about them (fig. 3). For example, when he fishes out an empty lactose-free milk carton and a hair dye bottle, he deduces that the person living at that particular address must be lactose-intolerant and

9. Both Åsdell and Utsi have collaborated with other artists across the North Calotte, including the Tornedalian Theatre, which is located in the Torne Valley at the border of Finland and Sweden and is known for its musical productions presented in Swedish and Meänkieli, the Finnic language of the Tornedalian people that is recognized as an official minority language in Sweden.

10. Sámi villages are administrative units that regulate reindeer herding. Nowadays, less than 5,000 Sámi people living in the Swedish part of Sápmi are members of a Sámi village and thus registered reindeer herders (SI 2024b).

11. In Northern Sámi, *áhkku* is the nominative case for grandmother while *áhku* designates the possessive case (grandmother's).

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Figure 4. Migá (Paul Ol Jona Utsi) tries to ease the twist between the two cousins Sunna-Márjá (Ingá Márjá Sarre; left) and Karin (Ingá Máiiá Blind; right), who fight over their late grandmother's Sámi regalia. Anna Åsdell and Paul Ol Jona Utsi's Belážagat-Kusinerna*, directed by Anna Åsdell. Giron Sámi Teáhter, 2022. (Photo by Jonathan Vitblom; © Giron Sámi Teáhter)*

red-haired. He attempts to iron the gákti with the wheels of a broken toy car; he makes it worse by accidentally setting it on fire with an electronic device that he has found in a garbage can. Karin realizes that she needs professional crafts artists to help her fix the gákti.

Setting out to find them, she meets a seamstress who uses her mushroom-shaped hat as a needle cushion and her belt as support for an oversized pair of scissors. The seamstress maneuvers these to great comedic effect as she, through exaggerated gestures with long and thick needles, fixes the holes in the gákti. Karin also visits a pair of unconventional twins who are dry cleaners wearing white wigs and lab coats and who become overexcited once they realize that it is each other's birthday. After successfully managing to bring out the shiny colors of the gákti again—magically restoring the vibrant colors (by exchanging the damaged garment for a new one from inside their washing machine; fig. 4)—the twins gladly accept Karin's offer to pay them with (used!) balloons that Migá had previously found in the garbage. A grumpy crafts artist, who turns out to be Migá's sister, knits a Sámi shawl for Karin, revealing in the process that she was a close friend of áhkku. On the last station of her journey, which is reminiscent of a coming-of-age story, Karin seeks out the mythological creature Rovhtege, who lives deep in the forest, to help her weave a traditional Sámi belt, the final missing accessory. When Karin returns home, her cousin Sunna-Márjá realizes how jealous she is of the mended gákti and demands it back, claiming it was hers to begin with. To resolve the conflict, Migá appoints himself as judge of the situation and arranges for a competition where each of the cousins has to pull on one sleeve until one of them manages to get ahold of the gákti (fig. 5).

Belážagat-Kusinerna is a Sámi adaptation of Spanish playwright Alfonso Sastre's *El circulito de tiza o Historia de una muñeca abandonada* ([1962] 1993; The Little Chalk Circle or Story of an Abandoned Doll). Written in verse form, Sastre's play depicts how a spoiled rich girl, Rosita, abandons her broken doll, which is found and repaired by Paca, the daughter of Rosita's family's cook. After Rosita attempts to reclaim the now-restored toy, a conflict between the two girls arises as to who is the rightful owner of the doll. A balloon seller and rag picker draw a chalk circle and organize a contest in which the doll is placed in the middle and the two girls have to pull on one of its arms until the rightful caretaker gets hold of it. The version of Sastre's play, upon which Åsdell and Utsi based *Belážagat-Kusinerna*, was a Swedish translation and adaptation (Sastre 1978),[12] which in turn was translated into Sámi by Lars Miguel Utsi in 2021/22. Sastre's play is itself an adaptation of Bertolt Brecht's *Der kaukasische Kreidekreis*, conceived during WWII and first performed in 1948. Brecht, in turn, took inspiration from a 13th-century Chinese play by Li Hsing-tao and the Bible story of the Judgement of Solomon. Giron Sámi Teáhter performed a Sámi adaptation of Brecht's play in 2019 under the title *Gutnagierdu-Cirkel av aska* (Circle of Ashes).[13] In their explicitly

12. Swedish translation by Francisco J. Uriz and Ingvar Boman, adaptation by Carsten Palmær.
13. *Gutnagierdu-Cirkel av aska* was based on a script by the Sámi poet, playwright, and dramaturg Niilas Holmberg and staged by the Finnish director Laura Jäntti.

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Figure 5. A pair of overexcited twin dry cleaners (Paul Ol Jona Utsi and Ingá Márjá Sarre) manage to restore the vibrant colors of the gákti. Anna Åsdell and Paul Ol Jona Utsi's Belážagat-Kusinerna*, directed by Anna Åsdell. Giron Sámi Teáhter, 2022. (Photo by Jonathan Vitblom; © Giron Sámi Teáhter)*

political version, the historical frame of the story was provided by the Continuation and Lapland Wars.[14] The child left behind by the German governor's wife was raised by a young Sámi woman. At the end, the argument over which of the two women was the legitimate mother of the child became a metaphor for who was the true caretaker and custodian of the land and charged with protecting it for future generations instead of exploiting it. During the famous chalk circle scene organized to resolve the conflict, it took less than a second before the governor's wife triumphantly grabbed the baby. This scene was a harsh comment on how the Sámi people's rights to their lands and resources have been consistently ignored for centuries by the four settler-colonial nation states—Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Russia—that divide their territory.[15]

Belážagat-Kusinerna remains closer to the happy ending and productive conflict resolution prescribed by Brecht and Sastre. Karin willingly relinquishes the gákti because she is afraid it might rip, ruining all of her efforts to restore it. But in a twist, Migá decides that she is the rightful owner and awards the garment to her. Several lessons have been learned: Karin realizes that she has inherited the inner strength and determination of her áhkku, while Sunna-Márjá recognizes her privileges and decides to start sharing with her cousin, thereby laying the

14. The Continuation War (1941–44) was fought by Finland and Nazi Germany against the USSR and was followed by the Lapland War (1944–45) between Finland and Nazi Germany. The retreat of Nazi troops from the USSR and Finland via Northern Norway led to the temporary evacuation of the population, including the Sámi people, from their homes. Upon their return after the war, people were faced with the immense destruction inflicted by Nazi soldiers on Sápmi, which included the bombing of buildings, roads, and bridges, as well as the mining of territories. The physical and economic reconstruction took until the 1950s. Due to the ensuing Cold War politics, members of the Eastern language group of the Skolt Sámi in Soviet territories were never able to return to their homeland (Lehtola 2020).

15. While Sweden has ratified the 2007 UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, it refuses to commit to the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention from 1989 (ILO 169), which recognizes the right of self-determination for Indigenous peoples and insists on their right to prior, informed, and free consent over any industrial interventions that affect their lands, waters, and natural resources.

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foundation for a long-term friendship. Migá, in the play's final speech, repeats the question from his opening monologue about how to divide the indivisible.

Christopher Balme's notion of syncretic theatre is helpful here to tease out the multifold layers of the dramatic adaptations of the chalk circle and its cultural translation into an Indigenous context. Balme defines syncretic theatre as

> a conscious, programmatic strategy to fashion a new form of theatre in the light of colonial or post-colonial experience [utilizing] the performance forms of both European and indigenous cultures in a creative recombination of their respective elements, without slavish adherence to one tradition or the other. (1999:2)

Syncretic theatre is thus not a question of simply copying Western dramaturgies, but designates a strategic borrowing, while cultivating a specifically Indigenous stage language that, in *Belážagat-Kusinerna*, is designed to be intelligible and appealing to both Sámi and non-Sámi audiences.[16] Both as script and stage production, *Belážagat-Kusinerna* builds on a deliberate intercultural importation of Western dramaturgies and combines these with elements that are deeply rooted in Sámi culture: yoik, specific musical instruments, duodji, mythology, and language. While these five elements are specific to this particular production and should thus not be seen as exhaustive, I suggest that they have value for a deeper understanding of what makes Sámi theatre for young audiences distinct and critical.

As part of its syncretic endeavors, Giron Sámi Teáhter invites intercultural collaborations with Swedish artists and theatre institutions. For *Belážagat-Kusinerna*, significant creative contributions were made by light and sound designer Emanuel Arvanitis and set and costume designer Lotta Nilsson, both of whom have previously worked with the Sámi theatre company. In other words, Giron Sámi Teáhter constitutes a welcoming space that encourages mutual and respectful relationships in its quest to decolonize and Indigenize the performing arts in a Swedish context. Productions explore and critique the history and ongoing legacy of colonial power structures and, at the same time, offer a means to stimulate and reaffirm dramaturgies and modes of performance that are based on Sámi oral history, song and music, visual art, and language and are grounded in Sámi spirituality and epistemologies.

An important dimension of Indigenous-led theatre for young audiences is in making room for culturally diverse identities and stories and staging these in a respectful way that avoids the reproduction of settler-colonial projections of stereotypical, essentialized, or falsely romanticized Indigenous characters (Fitzsimmons Frey 2016). To this day, the Sámi people are severely underrepresented (or mispresented) in mainstream culture, even though important changes have occurred since the early 2010s thanks to the combined efforts of Sámi movie makers, authors, visual artists, arts and crafts artists, and performing artists (Gindt 2022:274–76). Karin and Sunna-Márjá are three-dimensional teenage characters trying to compensate for their insecurities. Sunna-Márjá acts tough and hangs out with hip friends, while Karin withdraws into her rich imagination. Both

16. For examples of Indigenous adaptations of canonical Western plays see Nlaka'pamux playwright and actor Tara Beagan's *Miss Julie: Sheh'mah* (2008) and Algonquin playwright and director Yvette Nolan's *Death of a Chief* (2008). By reclaiming Eurocentric classics by August Strindberg (*Miss Julie*) and William Shakespeare (*Julius Caesar*) respectively, these artists tease out the inherent racist language and imperial attitudes permeating white, Western theatre history. By rewriting characters as members of Indigenous communities, they give a voice and visibility to an underrepresented community and grant the characters the complexity that is usually accorded to white characters in realist drama. Audiences are forced to reflect on whose stories are worth telling and presenting onstage—and whose are not (Solga 2012). Often, such representations also entail struggling with internalized colonial values and models of governance that abuse power (Nolan 2015:78; see also Knowles 2007; Simmonds 2016). Finally, they also allow artists to embrace the creative tensions of intercultural theatre and performance. Beagan argues: "[O]ur stories are relevant to one another; indigenizing the canon is the most obvious way of demonstrating to both First Nations and non-First Nations folks that we are irrevocably intertwined" (in Solga 2012:242).

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young women grow and learn lessons along the way. The various crafts artists that Karin meets on her journey (impersonated by Sarre and sometimes Utsi) are deliberate theatrical hyperboles that help evoke the magical atmosphere of a fairytale world. They make big and nervous gestures, use funny voices, and talk in an exaggerated way. The two cousins, on the other hand, are realistic characters anchored in Sámi culture where Sámi languages are taken for granted. At no point do they need to explain, let alone justify or defend, their culture to an outsider. This obviously affects the acting style of Blind and Sarre, who stay in a more realist tradition when portraying the cousins. The same holds true for Utsi's take on the character Migá who, for all of his eccentricities, is in fact the central educating force pointing Karin in the right direction.

In an interview, Utsi explained how Sámi culture always needs to be elucidated for outside audiences. This can result in pedagogical amplifications that hinder creating a complex dramatic character. This becomes painfully obvious in productions where Utsi is cast as a reindeer herder:

> And it is my role that always, in every play since 2013, I'm a reindeer herder. And it always happens that a little bit of that slips in. I'm never a reindeer herder who is standing in a grocery line or I'm never a reindeer herder who is eating dinner and chatting at the kitchen table, but I'm always a reindeer herder who practices their profession and this should be somewhat educational. This is not at all representative of other occupational groups that we represent onstage, so [...] we are excessively pedagogical, you could say, and address those who do not understand. (Utsi 2021)

Similarly, Giron Sámi Teáhter's artistic and managing director Åsa Simma laments the constant need to explain Sámi culture for a majoritarian society that has very little knowledge of Indigenous people or Nordic settler colonialism:

> When I think about how many Swedes I've educated about the Sámi, I get quite tired. I think this is the task of the National Education Agency, not mine. Why should I have to explain that you shouldn't say [the extremely pejorative] "Lapp," why you should say Sámi? That's why I've made a turn now, to stimulate our own artists' own expertise, to be able to independently mount a production. (Simma 2021)

One of the main challenges for Giron Sámi Teáhter is to create a larger, stable creative team that allows for long-term contracts and thus the training and education of not only Sámi actors, but also playwrights, dramaturgs, directors, set, light, and costume designers, and technicians. As Simma says:

> We are used to someone coming in from outside. I myself have never experienced being directed by a Sámi, so I don't know what it feels like. But this is what I want to create for our theatre. There are so many cultural codes in a culture. When I'm with Sámi, I know exactly when the invisible language starts, and it's very difficult when you [don't possess that knowledge], it's something else when there are new cultural codes. (Simma 2021)[17]

After finishing her education at Tuukkaq Teatret in Denmark,[18] Simma joined Dálvadis in the early 1980s and soon after became the coartistic leader of that company. In 1998, she put her acting

17. Simma is the managing and artistic director of the company, which also employs a Swedish producer, a Sámi technician, a Sámi administrator, as well as a part-time tour operator and coordinator, a national theatre advisor, and a Sámi language researcher. All the actors have freelance contracts due to the precarious financial situation. More often than not, the assembled ensemble for each production is genuinely intercultural as many plays include both Sámi and Swedish characters/actors.

18. Tuukkaq was an avantgarde theatre affiliated with Odin Teatret and the first performing arts school for Indigenous people in Europe. While it primarily attracted Greenlandic Inuit artists (and became the precursor to the National Theatre of Greenland/Nunatta Isiginnaartitsisarfia), there were also Indigenous students that came from Turtle Island and, in the case of Simma, from Sápmi (Andreasen et al. 2019).

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career on hold and worked as a dramaturg at the International Sámi Film Institute (Internašunála Sámi Filbmainstituhtta) in the Norwegian part of Sápmi. In 2015, she was appointed by the Sámi Parliament of Sweden (Sámediggi) as the artistic director of Giron Sámi Teáhter, and has since worked consistently towards establishing the theatre as a hub where young Sámi performing artists learn and develop their craft as they stage Sámi narratives.

The need to tell one's own story on one's own terms is underscored by Utsi, who explains that his own and Åsdell's Sámi background helped them conceive the play and its characters without falling into the trap of excessive pedagogy or self-exoticization. In an interview conducted when Åsdell and he were fully emerged in the writing process, he emphasizes the need of cultural knowledge and competence to achieve accurate representations onstage:

> But in this case, me and Anna are both Sámi, we have both worked for a long time and understand each other and have seen these things. And that means that there is less risk of this kind of thing happening, unless we suddenly realize that we have to explain something pedagogically, and it may happen since it is a children's play. [...] But in general, it is good, already at this stage of the process, that we are much more deeply rooted in Sámi culture and we carry that knowledge. [...] The most important thing, from the very beginning, for a script is that it is written by people who are very knowledgeable and then fill in the characters. (Utsi 2021)

Yoik and Sámi Musical Cultures

When Karin first rescues the gákti from the garbage can, the faint voice of an old woman yoiking can be heard through loudspeakers. In a later scene, Karin consults a shawl knitter who starts humming the same melody; Karin immediately recognizes the yoik and is excited to learn that her áhkku and the shawl knitter were friends. Áhkku, it turns out, created the yoik many decades prior when she and her friend were in the mountains tending a reindeer herd that was being threatened by bears. Migá, the shawl knitter, and Karin reenact this scene, starting with a rhythmic and slowed-down shadow play to evoke being in nature and empathizing with the anxious herd, which can sense the approaching danger. Migá pulls the fur hood of his coat over his face to impersonate the bear. Movement and song become increasingly pronounced, enhancing the Indigenous elements of this extended scene, which segues into a rhythmic choreography during which Migá and the shawl knitter envelop Karin in a large-sized, transparent piece of silk and burst into a three-part-harmony yoik composed by Utsi. Light effects designed by Arvanitis help to hide Karin, who disappears entirely behind the cloth, eventually reemerging wearing a delicate silk Sámi shawl (fig. 6).

Yoik (in Northern Sámi, *luohti*; in Southern Sámi, *vuelie*) is an ancient mode of musical expression that is achieved through activating a specific part of the vocal cords, related to the Indigenous chanting traditions of Turtle Island and Mongolian and Inuit throat singing. Utsi, who composed the music and yoik for *Belážagat-Kusinerna*, says, "I've heard yoik since I was little. I was raised with Sámi as my first language, before I learned Swedish. And within that upbringing, yoik and Sámi music were always present." Utsi further notes that, while yoiking was taboo a few generations back because of Laestadianism,[19] the increased revival of Sámi traditions since the 1990s has brought yoiking back:

> By revival, I mean that more Sámi embrace their origins and more Sámi stop feeling ashamed, perhaps, to speak Sámi, reclaim their language, revitalize the language, revitalize the yoik. And the yoik becomes one of the standard-bearers. The discrete part of the culture, the art form that is uniquely Sámi and distinguishes itself. It becomes a very important standard-bearer that is used everywhere, in the same way that Sámi crafts are. [...] So the yoik,

19. Laestadianism is a pietist Lutheran movement that was established in the 19th century by the Swedish Sámi minister Lars Levi Laestadius, who, along with his followers, preached temperance specifically and opposed any "sinful" behaviors more generally, which included yoiking (Lehtola 2004:38–39).

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Figure 6. Enhancing the fairytale atmosphere of the play, Karin (Ingá Máiiá Blind) is enveloped by a delicate transparent piece of silk textile and eventually reemerges with a stylized Sámi shawl. Anna Åsdell and Paul Ol Jona Utsi's Belážagat-Kusinerna*, directed by Anna Åsdell. Giron Sámi Teáhter, 2022. (Photo by Jonathan Vitblom; © Giron Sámi Teáhter)*

> I think, is very important for the performing arts. [...] But I suppose it has been integrated into almost everything—dance, crafts—the yoik is everywhere. For the Sámi people it is important; it becomes a symbol. (Utsi 2021)

Gaski emphasizes the musical and literary dimensions to yoiking that must not be understood as separate entities (1999:5). Yoiking is storytelling that fulfills a social purpose:

> It is integral to the Sami sense of community, making the subject of a yoik a part of the society. The yoik is a way of remembering—it connects a person with the innermost feelings of the theme of the yoik, and may thus communicate between times, persons, and landscapes. (1999:3)[20]

In *Belážagat-Kusinerna*, the yoik helps Karin become increasingly empowered by her emotional connection to áhkku.

Yoiking also formed part of pre-Christian religious ceremonies performed by Sámi shamans (*noaidi*) (Gaski 2011:33). Nordic settler-colonial politics, with the help of the Lutheran church, sought not only to erase Sámi languages, but also to undermine Sámi religious rituals and performances, including yoiking and playing the sacred drum (Christoffersson 2016; Stoor 2016). The late actor and yoik performer Inga Juuso, who took up yoiking at a time when it was still regarded as sinful and performing it in public was a criminal offense, once explained the importance of yoiking:

> I yoik wherever I am so yoiking acts more as medicine for me. [...] I don't know why but yoiking removes bad feelings and relieves you if you feel troubled. This is one of the reasons

20. This collective dimension is further highlighted by the fact that it is not the composer of a yoik who is seen as its owner, but rather the person, animal, or natural element that the yoik addresses (Gaski 1999:5).

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why I don't want the young people to forget yoiking. This is also one reason for my yoiking, that it should be preserved for the future because it is part of our culture. (1998:144)

Further enhancing the Indigenous musical elements of *Belážagat-Kusinerna*, Utsi made use of a variety of Sámi elements to create culturally specific melodies and sound effects. One of the most striking was the use of a hand percussion instrument made of the bones of reindeer, goat hooves, and elk teeth.[21] The instrument was shaped like a chain. Not only did it create a unique sound during the shadow play, it also helped to tie the production to the land. In her work with BIPOC communities and narratives, New Zealand–based theatre director and critic Dione Joseph has suggested the notion of a cradling dramaturgy as a means to articulate "how different environments, specifically native lands, contribute to the development of land-based Indigenous narratives and performance" (2019:133). Joseph uses this concept to identify "a dramaturgy of the people and the land shaped by connections to the ancestors, the land, and the experience of the world that is unique to Indigenous people" (138). Without conflating cultural or historical contexts, I believe that the idea of a "cradling dramaturgy" is as valid for the Sámi as for Indigenous peoples in a North American or Oceanic context. The Sámi see themselves as custodians who take care of the land for future generations (Kuokkanen 2007:32–43; Lehtola 2004:28–29). The performative and musical art of the yoik, coupled with the materiality of instruments that are from the reindeer, which is the keystone animal in Sámi cosmology and economy, constitute *Belážagat-Kusinerna*'s "cradling dramaturgy."

Material Culture and Sámi Identity

Giron Sámi Teáhter is unable to employ a permanent ensemble at this point. A range of directors and playwrights work on the various projects, each with their own style. Nevertheless, at the heart of each production is a narrative that stimulates social progress. Artistic director Simma says: "There's a lot you can change with a narrative. I feel very strongly, having worked as a dramaturg, that the audience needs recognition, that is, they need to recognize themselves in what you are doing onstage" (Simma 2021).

In *Belážagat-Kusinerna*, there are a number of moments of recognition for young audiences: the death of a grandparent; rivalry between siblings, cousins, or friends; or the emotional attachment to an object that at first seems irrational but eventually leads to a deeper insight about the transmission of intergenerational memories, values, and cultural expressions. In Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, the maid Grusche and the governor's wife Natella fight over a real child, while in Sastre's adaptation, a rich and a poor girl quarrel over a doll, an inanimate object that nevertheless can create a strong emotional bond for a child. In Åsdell and Utsi's play, Karin and Sunna-Márjá both lay claims to a gákti, the formal Sámi garment that comes in many regional designs with shapes, colors, ribbons, and embroideries that convey information about the wearer's social and marital status (Lehtola 2004:12–14). In the play, áhkku owned a gákti from the Čohkkiras/Jukkasjärvi region in Sápmi, designed by Christine Utsi Pittja. Blue (signifying the moon) was the prominent color of the gákti, which also had a red neckline with a touch of yellow and a thick red stripe above the hemline.

While an item of clothing may not carry the same emotional gravitas as a baby or even a doll, the gákti nevertheless serves as a catalyst for Karin to learn more about her grandmother's life. She realizes that she has inherited many character traits from her beloved áhkku, including her kindness

21. Giron Sámi Teáhter and its predecessor Dálvadis have a long history of devising their own instruments based on Sámi culture and Sámi relations to the land. In a Dálvadis production, *Čuovgga čiehka* (8 Minutes from the Sun; 1987), then coartistic directors Norman Charles and Åsa Simma designed a string instrument made out of the crown of a moose. In 1996, for a production called *Noaidi* (The Shaman) choreographer and dancer Ola Stinnerbom recreated a genuine Sámi drum made out of birch wood and reindeer skin and sinews, as it was once used by shamans before Lutheran missionaries either burned them or took them to ethnographic museums in the late 17th and early 18th centuries.

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and fearlessness. Actor Ingá Máiiá Blind skillfully portrays the transition of Karin from a shy girl who allows her cousin to push her around to a confident person realizing her own strength by taking pride in her cultural and family legacy. As the play's central material signifier, the gákti carries additional meaning. Young audiences learn that this garment marks Sámi identity; they learn about the accessories needed to complete the regalia, including a fringed scarf and a woven belt. Duodji, Sámi arts and crafts that fulfil both a practical necessity and have an aesthetic dimension, communicate traditional knowledge and play a key role in teaching young audiences about their culture. Duodji items—objects and utensils, embroideries and textile designs—distinguish themselves as both artistic and political, another example of how cultural and decolonial labor are intertwined (Guttorm, Lundström, and Marakatt-Labba 2010).

Sámi Mythology and Storytelling

Historically, the Sámi's rich oral traditions of storytelling, mythology, and yoik are kept alive by transmission across generations through Sámi arts for young audiences. Of course, storytelling and performance are intertwined in many Indigenous cultures:

> Indigenous peoples have passed down wisdom orally through expressive and performative arts since time immemorial, which is why even the theatre of today is not "new," but rather an extension of ways of knowing and living in the world that predate the writing of scripts. Theatre is an exemplary medium to honor Native traditions because, like oral narratives, it both requires and creates community. (Darby, Mohler, and Stanlake 2020:7)

Åsdell emphasizes how oral traditions transmit Sámi knowledges and immaterial cultural legacies:

> It's a fine tradition that I hope will live on, even if you think to yourself, "God, I've heard that one a thousand times! The same story." Now I'm glad I got to hear the same story because then I know it. Because you need to hear it quite a few times in order to know it. So it's a way of conveying knowledge...conveying everything possible, an idea of the world, quite simply. (Åsdell 2021)

In the same interview, Åsdell emphasizes her opposition to stories that victimize the Sámi and shares her desire to instill "a little hope and a little desire and joy" in young Sámi audiences:

> I would very much like to convey to our young people and children that we are good enough. [*Laughs*] That we can be happy and proud of where we come from [...]. I think mainly of young people. A vision of the future, an attempt not to paint it pitch black, that there can be hope and positivity. (2021)

Åsdell further underscores how theatre can comfort and reassure young Sámi audiences. Their culture will survive in spite of the many threats it has to face, including the legacies of settler colonialism, global climate change, and ever-expanding industrial exploitation. Åsdell is aware of the politics of settler colonialism and Giron Sámi Teáhter has indeed staged multiple productions dealing with topics such as forced dislocation, racial biological abuses,[22] and the loss of land (see Gindt 2022 and 2023). With *Belážagat-Kusinerna*, however, the ambition was to expose young audiences to the beauty of their oral, musical, material, and immaterial culture in the hope that these young people would be drawn into and recognize themselves in the narrative; that they would leave the theatre with a renewed sense of confidence in the Sámi people's future.[23]

22. In 1922, Sweden inaugurated the State Institute for Racial Biology, which remained active until 1958. Consumed with fears of degeneration and stirred by Social Darwinist ideologies, "scientists" from this institute subjected Sámi people (as well as Finnish, Tornedalian, Romani, Jewish, and Baltic people) to a variety of humiliating anthropometric observations and documentations, with the aim to establish the "Nordic man" as the pinnacle of evolution (Hagerman 2015).
23. *Belážagat-Kusinerna* was performed on 23 occasions in fall 2022 and 10 times in fall 2023, attracting a total of 2,355 spectators, many of them age 10–15. Information courtesy of Giron Sámi Teáhter.

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In the climactic scene of her attempts to mend *áhku* gákti, Karin confronts Rovhtege, who is a key figure in Sámi mythology. Rovhtege (or Luhták), as the shawl knitter explains to Karin, is a mythological creature who lives deep in the woods, captures children who have lost their way, and devours them: "Rovhtege har sugit blodet ur dem med sitt järnrör. Resten kokar hon i en gryta och sörplar i sig" (Rovhtege has sucked the blood out of them with her iron straw. She boils the remains in a stew and slurps them) (Åsdell and Usti 2022:34). Migá warns Karin and tells her that at least two children have already gone missing close to Rovhtege's hut. Nevertheless, his affirmation, first in Swedish and then repeated in Northern Sámi, assures Karin that Rovhtege creates "världens vackraste vävda bälten [...] [m]áilmmi čábbámus boahkániid" (the world's most beautiful weaved belts; 35). This proves too tempting for Karin to resist.

She grabs her lantern and walks determinedly towards the forest, alleviating her fears by humming her grandmother's yoik, which the seamstress taught her. As she ventures deeper into the forest—an illusion achieved through light projections—Karin hears the cries of small children who urge her to return home. Suddenly, her lantern goes out and the stage is plunged into darkness. A thumping electronic beat mixed with a recorded sample of Utsi throat singing makes the stage floor and spectator stands vibrate. A blood-red spotlight slowly cuts through the smoke covering the ground of the forest, as an ominous creature slowly slithers towards Karin (see fig. 1).

Karin does not see Rovhtege until the creature stands up and, in a high-pitched voice, announces: "Mii leat vuordán du. Vi har väntat på dig" (We have been waiting for you; 37). Karin is confused as to why Rovhtege uses a plural pronoun to refer to herself and, ever so politely, introduces herself and her wish for a woven belt. Rovhtege, it turns out, hears a cacophony of voices coming from the trees that threaten to overpower her. She can barely contain her excitement over the prospect of fresh human flesh. She pretends to grant Karin the favor of creating a belt, but as she is weaving, she makes increasingly disturbing slurping sounds.

In performance, actor Ingá Márjá Sarre takes great pleasure in teasing out the scariness of Rovhtege as she tries to lure Karin closer, greedily sniffs around her, and tells the dissonant voices heard over the loudspeakers to shut up. Even I as an adult felt shivers run down my spine as Rovhtege-Sarre exclaimed: "Det var längesen vi hade ett barn på besök. Är du hungrig? Oj, vad vi är hungriga. TYST MED ER! JAG VET!" (It's been so long since we had a child visit us. Are you hungry? Oh, how hungry we are. QUIET DOWN! I KNOW!; 38).

Rovhtege belongs to the family of giants who play an important part in the Sámi creation story. She is related to Stállu (or Stállo), an ogre who is a sworn enemy of the Sámi and abducts children to eat them, or forces young women into marrying him. Coppélie Cocq found that these stories are based on oral traditions that were written down in the early 20th century by Johan Turi (1854–1936), one of the first Sámi authors to also write in Sámi (Cocq 2008:81). In these tales, Stállu represents the dangers posed by settlers. In many scenarios, Stállu is outsmarted by the Sámi. Telling stories about how the Sámi overcome the threats posed by Stállu thus becomes a celebration of Indigenous resistance and resilience (105).

In *Belážagat-Kusinerna*, Rovhtege tries to trap Karin with the ropes that she uses to weave the belt, but the young Sámi woman channels the courage of her late áhkku to break loose and turn the tables: "Min áhkku var inte rädd för björnar. Jag tänker inte heller vara rädd. Jag tänker bli som hon. Hon finns i mig, son lea mu siste!" (My áhkku wasn't afraid of bears. I don't plan on being scared either. I'm going to be like her. She lives on inside of me; 40). Suddenly, the giant finds herself tied to a tree with her own ropes and lets out an inhuman scream that is echoed by an amplifier. She begs and pleads with Karin to set her free. Eventually, the young woman agrees—on the condition that she receives the belt. Circling back to Åsdell's ideas quoted above: the hope, desire, and joy inspired by the scene is captured in the excitement and joy of seeing a young Sámi woman overcome her fears and display her strength vis-à-vis a seemingly invincible giant creature.

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Promoting Sámi Languages

The intercultural dimension of Giron Sámi Teáhter is enhanced by the fact that many productions, including *Belážagat-Kusinerna*, are bilingual to appeal to both Sámi- and Swedish-speaking audiences. Gaski emphasizes the relationship between language and cultural identity:

> Language is, in addition to being the main means of communication between peoples, at the same time a very personal issue; it demonstrates our belonging to culture, geography, social class and level of cultivation, or cultural sophistication. For a lot of people, not knowing one's own indigenous language feels like a big loss and imperfection, and thus contributes to the psychological aspect of the identity question connected to language competence. (2013:115)

One of the most invasive practices dividing the Sámi people from within and alienating them from their language and culture was the implementation of two legal paragraphs in the early 20th century: the 1913 Nomad School Act and the 1928 Reindeer Grazing Act. These laws marked the culmination of a divide-and-conquer politics and gave the Swedish state and government agencies the power to decide who would count as Indigenous and who would not. The children of nomadic reindeer herders were separated from their families and forced to attend (either permanent or ambulant) residential nomad schools (*nomadskolor*), where they received a low-quality education. In addition to being subjected to humiliating anthropometric observation by pseudo-scientists from the State Institute for Racial Biology (located in Uppsala and active between 1922 and 1958), they were prohibited from communicating in their own language. Administered by the national Lutheran church, the nomad school system was not abolished until the 1960s. At that point, the children of Sámi communities who were semi-settled and made a living through agriculture, forestry, or fishing—that is, Sámi whom the state stripped of their Indigenous identity—were sent to Swedish state-run schools in order to be assimilated into "Swedishness" (Fur 2016; Huuva and Blind 2016; Lantto 2015; Lindmark and Sundström 2016; Oscarsson 2016).[24] As a result of these destructive social policies, many Sámi lost their language and cultural roots. Today, only 4,677 reindeer herders are registered in the Swedish part of Sápmi; 49% of these are women (SI 2024b).

Today, the Act on National Minorities and Minority Languages in Sweden (Government Offices of Sweden [2000] 2009:724), first implemented in 2000 and revised in 2009, identifies Sámi as a national minority language, along with Finnish, Meänkieli, Romani Chib, and Yiddish. The act is supposed to guarantee the rights of national minorities and the Sámi people to use their own language when in contact with administrative authorities, legal courts, or elderly care; the act emphasizes the need for public institutions to support the minority languages. Of particular relevance in our context is Section 4 addressing cultural rights:

> The Language Act (2009:600) states that the public institutions have a particular responsibility for protecting and promoting the national minority languages. The public institutions shall also generally promote the national minorities' possibilities of retaining and developing their own culture in Sweden. Children's development of a cultural identity and use of their own minority language shall be promoted specially. (Government Offices of Sweden [2000] 2009)

The Swedish National Agency for Education, the administrative authority for the public school system, includes in the official curriculum for both primary and secondary education the learning objective for students to receive "knowledge on the culture, language, religion, and history of the national minorities (Jews, Romani, the Indigenous Sámi people, Sweden Finns, and Tornedalians)"

24. Similar processes of "Fennicisation" and "Norwegianisation" happened in the Finnish and Norwegian parts of Sápmi (Lehtola 2016; Ryymin 2005).

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(Skolverket 2022a:13, 2022b:6). This vague phrasing fails to specify what, let alone how much, knowledge should be taught. As a result, individual teachers decide—based on their own understanding and interest (or lack thereof)—whether students receive any education on national minorities and the Indigenous Sámi people. This systematic underrepresentation of Sámi history and culture in high school curricula guarantees a collective amnesia among the Swedish majority when it comes to the history of Nordic settler colonialism. This knowledge gap is vigorously counteracted by Sámi artists, activists, cultural workers, politicians, and scholars who provide the labor that the national government fails to take up.[25]

Giron Sámi Teáhter forms part of this decolonial labor force and the dedicated work of the company to integrate Sámi languages into its productions cannot be underestimated. Multilingual performances form a crucial part of the theatre's syncretic aesthetics, politics, and pedagogy. Åsdell and Utsi maneuvered this challenge swiftly as all three characters speak both Northern Sámi and Swedish interchangeably. For Swedish-speaking spectators, it is still easy to follow the dialogue, even without surtitles. For example, a key idea might be repeated in both languages or a question might be posed in Sámi, but through the Swedish answer, the entire audience can follow the dialog. Sámi-speaking audiences can garner an additional appreciation, which manifests itself in scenes that make half of the audience chuckle or laugh out loud during an exchange in Sámi, while the other half remains silent or looks confused. Moments like these are a valuable reminder to the majoritarian society that they are not the primary target audience.

Artistic Quality and Passion despite Financial Precarity

Sámi theatre for young audiences prioritizes five key elements: yoik, music, duodji, myth and storytelling, and Sámi languages. During my research stay in Giron/Kiruna, I was struck by the passion and dedication manifest during the entire rehearsal process of *Belážagat-Kusinerna*. The important artistic, pedagogical, and decolonial work at Giron Sámi Teáhter is conducted within a political context that severely underfinances Sámi performance. A report published in 2022 reveals that the state offers a meager 18 million Swedish kronor—or 1.8 million euro—as annual support to Sámi cultural institutions. This support is especially small in comparison to the neighboring Norway, which awards nine times the amount to Sámi culture (Bokstad 2022:18).[26] If we only consider the Swedish part of Sápmi, Giron Sámi Teáhter's tours need to cover 225,000 square kilometers, expenses for which swallow a significant part of the budget. Åsdell succinctly articulates this financial precarity:

> It's boring to talk about money, but that's often where it ends up. Because it costs money to produce theatre and it costs money to tour. There need to be means to create and means to go out and simply present it. So you can get around and perform everywhere. (Åsdell 2021)

25. Umeå University is a leading institution and offers entire study programs in Sámi languages and culture. Many local Sámi organizations offer language courses. In addition, the Sámi Parliament of Sweden (Sámediggi) has developed special language programs. Inaugurated in 1993, Sámediggi is a democratically elected congregation that represents the Sámi people and their political interests. However, it is simultaneously a Swedish government agency with no authority to establish its own laws and instead bound to implement the decisions made by the Swedish Riksdag (Sámediggi 2021).

26. One of the most prominent stumbling blocks caused by this severe underfunding is the stubborn refusal by the Swedish Riksdag to anoint Giron Sámi Teáhter the status of a fully state-financed National Sámi Theatre. Since 1994, members of Giron Sámi Teáhter have been working to become a national theatre institution, which would increase their state funding and in turn allow for the creation and training of a permanent ensemble, an increased production schedule, and an even more ambitious touring schedule (Gindt 2022:284–88). In 1993, Norway gave Beaivváš Sámi Teáhter in Kautokeino/Guovdageaidnu the status of a national theatre for Sámi performance (Lehtola 2009).

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This financial precarity affects not only touring, but also rehearsal and production processes. Giron Sámi Teáhter has a performance space, dressing rooms, offices, a kitchen, and storage, but no shop for building sets, costumes, etc. With no soundproof studio, Utsi had to finished many of his instrumental and vocal recordings during late evenings when rehearsals were finished and traffic noise lessened. Costume designer Nilsson was forced to sew and spray-paint in the temporarily vacant office of the producer who was on a business trip to Stockholm. These two examples illustrate the financial precarity under which Indigenous performance is created in Sweden.

In November 2021, in a highly performative Solemn Service held at Uppsala Cathedral, Archbishop emerita Antje Jackelén apologized on behalf of the national Lutheran Church of Sweden for its complicity in colonizing the Sámi people. The same month, the Swedish government announced its plans to conduct a national Truth Commission to investigate and document the abuses committed against the Sámi people, with a final report scheduled for December 2025. Despite these initiatives, the Swedish state remains shockingly tightfisted when it comes to financially supporting Sámi culture, especially in comparison to other circumpolar countries. It is time for the state to demonstrate its sincerity by creating the financially stable conditions that would allow Sámi performance, whether for adult or young audiences, to thrive.

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