

“Minda. The girl at the pharmacy.”**An educational programme on sexual assaults. A challenging theme at Sverresborg Trøndelag Folk Museum/ Museums of South Trøndelag - Trondheim, Norway**

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In 2008 Sverresborg Trøndelag Folk Museum made an educational programme on sexual assaults/ sexual abuses based on a true story from 1888 about the young girl Minda. In this paper I will like to introduce Minda's story and make a presentation of the educational programme. Then I will like to discuss why a traditional open-air museum should present *sexual assaults* as one of the topics in its programme? Is this really a task for an open-air museum and why? How and why was this challenging? How can a true story from the past be important to people today? What connections can be made between the past, the present and the future?

Can a museum contribute to make people, and especially youth, reflect on subjects as responsibility, personal boundaries, prejudice and sexuality? What did the young people actually learn? Did the educational programme change their attitudes or did we on the contrary contribute to strengthen their prejudices?

Minda's story

An October morning in 1888, a girl is found lying outside the pharmacy at the city square of Trondheim. She's unconscious and clearly intoxicated. Two witnesses could tell that her clothes were in a rather disorderly fashion. Minda was brought to the police station. The police examination tells that Minda explained that when she was passing the pharmacy last night, waiting for her aunt to finish work, she met a young man inviting her inside, telling her that a friend of her was waiting there. In the pharmacy there were three men – a photographer, a lieutenant and a pharmacist and no friend of hers. She was offered something to drink, which she commented tasted peculiar. After this she remembered nothing. There was no medical examination and the case was dismissed due to lack of evidence.

Her mother and aunt reacted intensively on this, demanding to know why the Head of Police didn't pursue a further investigation. Minda was only 14 years old and she had most likely been raped inside the pharmacy! Trondheim's left-wing newspaper, “Dagsposten”, printed a story about Minda

and how her case got dismissed because she was a girl from the working class, as opposed to the men in the pharmacy, who belonged to the upper class. This led to a riot among the people in Trondheim outside the home of the Head of Police. The right-wing newspaper "Adresseavisen" angled it differently, indicating Minda was a prostitute, not an innocent girl, due to the fact that Minda wasn't a virgin. Witnesses verified that she had had sex before the incident in the pharmacy. Minda's story became a part of the class struggle in the end of the 19th century.

Minda's case was brought to the court due to the riot and the lieutenant was imprisoned for three weeks.

It seems that Minda led a promiscuous life after this. She didn't get a work and had to live with the shame and the blame. In 1894, only 20 years old, she stepped on to the emigrant ship Juno, with a ticket to Chicago – and, we expect, a new life. We know that she got married there and also bought a ticket for her sister, so she could emigrate to the U.S.A.

The educational programme for the 9th grade

The main aim for this educational programme was to strengthen the museum's role in society and to show how historical incidents can be relevant today. We wanted to show young people that sexual abuses are not just a part of *their* everyday life, but have happened in the past as well. It makes the museum more meaningful to them – they hopefully realize that they can learn something from the museum. We wanted to give young people the courage to tell adults or the police if they are witnesses to or victims of sexual abuse. We also wanted to have our visitors to take an active part in the interpretation, reflecting and discussing difficult questions and not only watching.

"Museum theatre" was chosen as a method because the museum had experienced from another project that this was an effective method to connect with an audience, and create a connection between today's audience and a story from the past. It is also a way of making the museum more real, a place where one can get an experience that activates emotions, which again can be applied to one's own life and situation today. Activating emotions stimulate deep learning. "We must shape museum theatre so that it is part of the world, can be assimilated into visitors' experience, and be used to build on their future experience." (Hughes, Catherine: Museum Theatre. Communicating with Visitors Through Drama. Portsmouth, NH, 1998. p. 118)

Museum theatre also gives the audience a choice of different degrees of involvement. Especially when it is based on challenging themes, such as sexual abuses, the audience should have the opportunity to take a distance whenever necessary.

Catherine Hughes writes: “Drama and museums can provoke and motivate the desire to learn. Because of all of this, I believe museums need theatre in order to be more accessible as social institutions, more effective as educational institutions, and more honest as cultural institutions.” (Hughes, Cathrine,1998, p.18)

Through the performance we brought Minda’s case to the court. The prosecutor and the defender acted in a 2008-setting, while the witnesses acted in a 1888-setting. The manuscript was true to the historical sources – the statements from the involved parts in 1888 and the newspaper reports. As part of the museum theatre, an audio voice – a young woman “Camilla” who was raped in 2006 – told her story.

At the end of the performance , the audience had to judge if the men in the pharmacy were innocent or guilty. They had to show a sign – blue or yellow - guilty or innocent.

After a short break, the pupils were divided into 4 groups - girls in 2 groups and boys in 2 groups. The teachers were not allowed to take part. The actors, who were young people in the twenties, left their role-characters, took off their theatre costumes and changed to their private clothes. The male actors talked with the boys and the female actors with the girls. The pupils had to state the reason why they had voted innocent or guilty and there were interesting discussions about their situation today – personal boundaries, responsibility, prejudices and sexuality. Then all the pupils, the actors and the teachers were talking together and made a common conclusion.

The classes had to do some compulsory preparations before they came to the museum and they had to do some work after returning to school as well. *(The first part of this paper is based on Mariëlle Malmo: Minda. The girl at the pharmacy in European Insights – from the International Theatre Alliance (IMTAL) 2008. Mariëlle is a museum educator at Sverresborg Trøndelag Folk Museum and one of the responsible persons behind this project)*

Was this really a challenging theme - how and why?

Why did a traditional open-air museum in Norway present sexual assaults/abuses as one of the topics in its educational programme? Is this really a task for an open-air museum?

When planning the project, a bachelor student was involved to interview people in the museum staff, politicians and others about the museum’s role in society . One of the curators said: “Our museum should present tangible heritage: buildings, historical milieus and artifacts. Museums should not involve in our time – other institutions should work with sexual abuses.” (*Ormset, Marie:*

Ta fortida til hjelp. Tankar om museets samfunnsrolle med utgangspunkt i "Mindaprojektet", Høgskolen i Telemark, avd. for allmenne fag, 2008.)

But in fact the Minda -project took place in a historical milieu. The performance was performed in front of a pharmacy – one of the vintage buildings - in the part of the museum interpreting urban history. We did not use artifacts in the interpretation, except costumes worn by the actors - similar to clothes worn by people in town at that time. The story was a true story from Trondheim – and indeed a part of the *intangible* heritage. Therefore the project fulfilled the aims of our museum. I think the main objection had to do with the topic – sexual abuses. This was too challenging for some museum colleagues – therefore they simply reacted by ignoring the project. They didn't come to watch the theatre and they didn't ask about it or make any comments on it. The museum director and the board said YES. This is a task for the museum - open-air museums also have to present the difficult, unpleasant, marginal and taboo stories. Therefore I think this project was really challenging because it started a new debate in the museum on what is really the aims of an open-air museum?

Why isn't it enough to present old buildings, how people lived in the past and their everyday life? I think it isn't enough any longer because times are changing – museums have to be important for their visitors today. The gap between the audience and the history of the 18th and 19th century is widening. Young visitors can't recognize much of what they see in the museum any longer because their lives and their surroundings are completely different. Museums have to use their historical knowledge in new ways and to compare the past and the present, to be important contributors and institutions for the future. Why do we close our eyes for the fact that sexual abuses in one way or other, might or most likely have happened in some of the vintage buildings - before the buildings were moved to the open-air museum. How can we use the buildings and their interiors and artefacts to ask new questions and to make visitors more engaged in cultural heritage? I think these are interesting questions for museums today.

We had expected a lot of discussion and debate in the newspapers. We thought indeed we would reach beyond the regional newspaper and the local radio station. There were some presentations in the media, but there were no debate actually. We were disappointed because we had hoped to have a discussion about museums and their role in society. And we really thought it was important even on a national level. A feature article in the regional newspaper about the project didn't lead to any reaction at all. (*Mariëlle Malmo/Ann Siri Hegseth Garberg: Minda – piken på apoteket, Adresseavisen 9.mars 2008*). On the opposite, a feature article discussing Halloween led to a lot of debate and reactions – and an exhibition about underwear from the last 200 years got a lot of national publicity!

How can this be explained? Are sexual abuses too usual that newspapers find it quite uninteresting? A museum working on such a topic – isn't this challenging at all?

We have experienced that, even if there was too little publicity in the mass media, we managed to inform a lot of people about this project and when we are mentioning the Minda –project, people know it and have heard about it. When Norway celebrated The Year of Cultural Heritage in 2009, "Minda " was focused as one of the national projects and the museum was also nominated to the prize for the best educational programme in Norway in 2008.

Could we do any harm?

Starting out the Minda -project our main challenge was how we could cope with reactions in the audience? There would most likely be some pupils or teachers there who had been exposed to sexual abuse. Could we do even more harm to these victims? How could we be prepared? These questions were discussed with other museum colleagues from Norway who were working with controversial themes in their museums as part of a national museum programme. This programme aims to have a critical look at museums and to challenge traditional ways of interpretation concerning both the content and the means. Our colleagues were also warning us about reactions in the audience and asked if we were competent to solve such problems. I think, they were doubtful if we were able to carry out the project at all.

There was an IMTAL (International Museum Theatre Alliance) conference in Belfast, Northern Ireland in the autumn of 2007 with the title "Challenging Museum Theatre – Controversial themes, new audiences". There we got a lot of positive feedback from colleagues from Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand working with museum theatre. They believed in us and gave us a lot of energy to go on.

The most important feedback and help came from different organizations and centers working against incest and sexual abuse in our town. The museum educators responsible for this project, had meetings and discussions with professional expertise in psychological effects of sexual abuse and the experts all told the museum to go on. They thought it was very positive that a museum wanted to work with such questions. We could reach young people in another way than they are able to do and they taught us what we had to do in different situations. "Victims can't be more offended than they already have been", they said, " you can't do any harm. If a person is raped – a museum theatre about rape can't do more harm than the rape itself!" We also met some victims and one of them said: "Sexual abuse really should belong to a museum – it should belong to the past – not to the present!" We also had professional expertise lecturing for the museum staff and the actors.

As part of the programme all the pupils got telephone-numbers to several organizations working with abuses and the teachers had been taught to inform their pupils that it was possible to leave the educational programme whenever they felt it was necessary. Not all the teachers had done their job. Through the blog on the homepage a young girl wrote: “ I suppose that I should not have been there today – but my teacher didn’t inform me about the topic.” She gave a lot of positive feedback to all the actors and thought they were fantastic.

A few pupils of totally 3000, left the performance, but we are not sure if this was due to the topic or if there were other reasons. We think the project was carried out in a safe setting and we have not had any critical reactions neither from teachers nor parents.

Working with the manuscript and the reflection booklet, the museum educators also were working closely together with representatives from the target group - 8 pupils from the 10th grade. These young people influenced the project in a positive way. They gave us a lot of inside information about young people – what they are interested in, how they talk together, their language and their opinions on sex and gender. They were watching the exercises; they were reading the material and they gave us response. Through this cooperation with the pupils and their teacher we also felt safe that the project would be a natural part and an important contribution to the curriculum.

What was the challenge for the actors/museum educators and the pupils?

Can a museum contribute to make people, and especially youth, reflect on subjects as responsibility, personal boundaries, prejudice and sexuality?

After the performance the pupils had to discuss in groups. Every reflection group was led by two actors/group leaders. As a rule, we had two girl- and two boy teams. The pupils were asked to comment on the performance to make us see what they had understood and what they wanted to know more about. Then they had to argue for or against the question of guilt. Were the three men in the pharmacy guilty or innocent? About 1/3 of the pupils argued for their innocence and 2/3 thought they were guilty. Then they had to tell why they had voted the way they did and now the pupils usually started to argue with each other. Why are the men guilty? The lieutenant changed his explanation, he partly confessed he was to blame, Minda was too young, she was forced to drink, she was unconscious, there is a difference between saying “yes” or “no” even if you are promiscuous. Why are the men innocent? Minda was not reliable and she couldn’t remember anything, her past –

she had had sex with strangers earlier; it was difficult to know if there had been a *rape*; the men didn't know Minda was 14 years old, the men are innocent as long as there is no evidence.

The discussions showed that there is no easy way in cases concerning sexual abuses/assaults. This was a very important part of the programme because the pupils had to reflect about their everyday life as much as Minda's story. They were able to realize the link between the past and the present. Some of the pupils thought this was quite challenging because they were not used to talking seriously about sexuality, personal boundaries and so on. They were laughing and said a lot of things they didn't really mean, but when the actors/group leaders were talking about the topics in a serious way, the pupils soon understood what were expected of them. It seems to be very successful that the actors/group leaders were young people and not teachers. The pupils could speak freely and they were allowed to use their own words talking about genitals and sex.

They were discussing a lot of questions: How many sexual assaults lead to a riot today? How do we react when we hear about these types of assault, or read about them in the newspaper? What is an acceptable behavior today? What is concerned being immoral of a young girl's behaviour? What about a young boy's behaviour? If there is a party and a girl gets drunk and she has sex with a boy she doesn't like at all, whose fault is it? Some pupils thought the girl was to blame, because she was drunk. Some also said that if a girl is raped, then she has chosen to be together with people with a bad influence on her. It is her own fault if she is raped. A girl who has had sex with several boys gets raped – who is to blame? There is of course no correct answers, but It was extremely challenging for the actors when some pupils had attitudes which the actors characterize as frightening and quite gloomy. Sometimes they were quite shocked at the pupils' attitudes. Therefore they had a debriefing section every day after the sessions to discuss how to cope with these challenges. The actors realized that they had to start asking questions : "Do you really mean this?" and to make comments as " I don't think you show much empathy now! " If the group leaders quite clearly took a stand, then the pupils had to reflect more about the questions. Or did they just answer what they considered as a correct answer? If the pupils were silent or if everybody was of the same opinion, the group leaders thought it was challenging too. The discussions revealed that the pupils didn't know much about what Norwegian law says about sexual harassment. There was a lack of knowledge and through this programme we tried to give them some more information and knowledge.

At the end of the day all the groups were gathered with their actors/group leaders and their teachers. The group leaders had a summing-up and gave the pupils feedback. If some pupils showed too little empathy and had a lot of prejudices, the leaders expressed their concern about it. In the opposite, if pupils had positive attitudes and were reflected, they were praised.

The boys and the girls were encouraged to give each other advices. Here are some of the suggestions that were given:

- "I think the girls should be less concerned with their own bodies." (9th grade boy)
- "We think the girls must rely more on us." (9th grade boy)
- "The boys have to stop calling girls whores." (9th grade girl)

Their conclusion were: "If you don't say yes(to have sex), then you say no"

What did the young people actually learn?

Did the educational programme change their attitudes or did we on the contrary contribute to strengthen their prejudices?

This is very difficult to say. You can't change people's attitudes during some hours, but you can give them more information and knowledge. And you can make them reflect on their own attitudes. Gjertrud Røe Hammeren , working on her thesis, has interviewed some girls who participated in the educational programme. The girls said they thought this programme was important because it dealt with a topic of immediate importance. To be a judge in the trial was very engaging, they said. They were referring to trials today concerning rape and sexual assault and one of them said: "As most of the cases today involving rape, there is a lack of evidence". 50% of the girls in the study said they had learnt something new. That doesn't necessarily mean that their attitudes were changed, but most likely their attitudes on sexual assaults/abuses were challenged and most likely it was a contribution to the pupils' self-reflection. (*Hammeren, Gjertrud Røe: Minda anno 2008. Hva tenker Mindas jevnaldrende om Minda-saken 120 år seinere? (In her thesis she deals with: What do girls at the same age as Minda think about this incident 120 years later?)Tverrfaglige kulturstudier, NTNU, 2009*)

I think that "Minda – the girl at the pharmacy" is a good example of how museums can be relevant for their visitors today. It's important to help the visitors see the link between the past, the present and the future and to make visitors reflect about their own lives. I think it will be very important for museums during the next decades to ask questions - questions where there is no exact truth.

Museums have to rethink their role in society.

(*Garberg, Ann Siri Hegseth, Hesjedal, Marita og Malmo, Mariëlle: Minda – piken på apoteket. Rapport nr.4 -2009, Sverresborg Trøndelag Folkemuseum. (More information about the project in*

this report (in Norwegian)