In the mid-1990s a group of enthusiasts, both intellectually disabled and non-disabled, began a project that one of them called a “crazy but wonderful enterprise”. As a voluntary leisure-time activity they produced Bizet’s opera Carmen. The public performance was a huge success. The local newspaper in the northern Swedish municipality where it took place described it as a milestone in Swedish cultural history. The opera had similar success on tour in Spain. When it was put on in Seville it received standing ovations in a sold-out bull-fighting arena.

Following this success, the theatre, that had by now taken the name “Ålla Theatre”, was formally established as part of the municipality services for people with intellectual disabilities. It was formally considered as one of several forms of daily activity to which all intellectually disabled people are eligible according to law. It is this formally organized artistic activity that is the focus of Sauer’s research. His main interest is to capture what the activity means for the disabled actors. More precisely, he wants to explore their experiences as expressed in their own descriptions, images and narratives, explore the context in which these experiences have grown and to conceptualize theoretically the experiences of the actors.

In an ambitious review of relevant literature, the author refers to much of the recent writings within disability studies. He structures his review by using the distinction between three different discourses, originally made by Sirnes and developed by Solvang. The first is the discourse about normality and deviance. Categorizing something as “deviant” tends automatically to include being viewed as something negative, and something to be corrected. The second discourse is one about equality and inequality (or similarity and difference). This discourse is central to the Scandinavian welfare state, where material and measurable differences in a population are a central interest.
Measurement of differences, for example through use of standard-of-living surveys, provides a basis for welfare state interventions, which typically address material and economic conditions, in the hope of correcting inequalities between groups and their larger populations. The third discourse is about “them and us”. In this discourse difference is not negatively evaluated, but rather seen as something positive. The movement among deaf people where deafness is interpreted in terms of culture and celebrated as something valuable is an example. It is possible to understand the discourses as following each other in a historical development. But at the same time, the author emphasizes, they are all present today. A person with an intellectual disability is thus seen as an abnormal deviant, user of public services and a member of a subculture at the same time. Much of the analysis is focused on how the intellectually disabled artists at the Alla Theatre deal with this ambivalence, in particular the balance between normality (in the role of being an actor) and deviance (in the role of being a user of public services).

Sauer also makes an overview of recent writings about art and disability, where he points out that artistic activities such as drama, music and dance have a long tradition in services for intellectually disabled people. However, they have usually been seen as therapeutic and rehabilitative devices, more than as artistic performance and a way for the actors to express themselves.

The method the author uses in creating his own data is qualitative and naturalistic. Three means of collecting data were used. The first was study-circles. Here Sauer is inspired by the participative research tradition, aiming at giving the persons studied an active role, focusing on the problems that they experience, and include them in the research process with the ultimate goal of leading to action to promote their interests. For 1 year a group with seven intellectually disabled artists once a month met with Sauer to discuss their situation and experiences. To facilitate the involvement with those with poor language skills, photographs taken by the participants were used in the discussions. The second source of data was participant observation. Over a period of almost 4 years Sauer visited the theatre on 44 occasions. He participated socially and openly and sometimes also in the activities. Activities were documented in field notes as well as by tape recordings and pictures. The third data source, and the one that is most systematically used in the analysis, was qualitative interviews. Of the 14 disabled actors at the theatre, 10 were interviewed as well as five non-disabled leaders. The interviews were unstructured and focused, as was the stated aim, on the experiences and narratives of the intellectually disabled actors. The data were analysed by a grounded theory-inspired stepwise coding during which, at some stages, a software programme were used.

The main result, which runs like a red thread through the analysis, is the contradiction between the artistic rationale and the administrative one. The theatre is caught between the bureaucratic thinking of the social services and the creative and active thinking typical of artistic activities. This contradiction creates an ambivalent situation for the theatre as well as for those engaged there. They are caught between a social service tradition that emphasizes the
shortcomings of their intellectually disabled clients on the one hand and the artistic way of seeing them as normal, active and creative. While the administrative rationale focuses on weakness, deviance and subordination, the artistic rationale focuses on strengths, normality and equality.

This contradiction becomes apparent in the analysis of the process that led to the establishment of the theatre in its present form. There has, for example, been a struggle over the name of the theatre. The social services wanted it be called the “Grönborg Theatre”, thereby emphasizing that it is one part of other daily activities that are located in the same area (Grönborg). But for the actors and their leaders the Ålla Theatre is a name that is closely linked to their earlier success with Carmen, thus representing their role as successful artists.

When Sauer analyses the physical environment, this contradiction arises again. He compares the traditional, standardized and boring physical environments in group homes (where most of the intellectually disabled actors live) with the flexible open space at the theatre. He notes in particular that group homes often have physical markers of the difference between staff and clients, such as separate toilets, a meeting room for staff and so on. This is not the case at the theatre, where every space is intended to be physically as well as socially accessible to all. A strong symbol for social accessibility is that the disabled artists have their own key to the theatre, which some of them use to go there to “check things out” on their own during weekends. In several interviews they mention this as an important example that they are trusted as competent and equal.

The importance of the key also symbolizes the feeling of competence and a more positive self-image that, according to Sauer’s analysis, is a strong element in the experiences of the actors. They feel themselves as actors, a feeling that developed in the work and success with Carmen, but is constantly reproduced and strengthened in their present work. They are still aware of their intellectual shortcomings and their need for help in particular situations, but it is not the dominant trait in their interpretation of themselves. The degree of work satisfaction is high. They like the creative tasks, their friends/colleagues and their leaders. This is particularly apparent in those interviews where informants compare their present situations with their earlier situations at traditional day activity centres. Sauer emphasizes the important role of leaders striving for democracy and empowerment in creating this climate and forming the experiences of the disabled workers. The situation can, according to the author, be characterized as a “cultural community”. Not primarily because of the fact that their activities are making culture, but because the foundation for the creative work is a strongly felt fellowship, shared values and a common understanding of the world outside the theatre. But the author also remarks that this is not be confused with being a subculture or a genuine empowerment movement.

This book gives an interesting and lively picture of the theatre and especially the intellectually disabled actors and their subjective experiences. It illustrates that developments towards a “them-us discourse” and disability culture, as described in the disability studies literature, are also highly relevant
for persons with an intellectual disability. But in his ambition to make this point the author sometimes seems to get carried away, lose his analytical distance and overstate his case in a simplified way. One example of that is the model where the clash between an administrative rationale and an artistic one is supposed to explain almost all of the constraints and ambivalence experienced by the actors. The author seems to overlook the fact, richly illustrated in research on human service organizations, that the bureaucratic form of organization conflicts with the need for flexibility and situational adaptations typical of many activities that involve care and other social relations. The tension between the two rationales is thus not simply a conflict between social services and artistic activities, but a conflict within the social services between administrative standardization and relational flexibility. It can also appear as a conflict between artistic activities and any administrative organization, be it social service administration or not. One of the negative consequences of this oversimplification is that other social services as such, as well as welfare policies in general, tend to become the negative, deviant creating, stereotyping, inflexible alternative against which the theatre is compared. The similarities with the theatre and other similar alternative approaches within social services are not visible.

Another way in which the author seems to lose his analytical distance is in the analysis of the empirical material. He declares that his ambition is not to look for variation in the material but to focus on what is common and typical. In doing so he misses some “negative instances”, that is indications in the material that contradict his general conclusions. One illustration is that some of the traits of social services that are criticized as negative also appear at the theatre, but are given other interpretations. It seems as if the inspiration the author claims to have received from grounded theory does not include the strong emphasis on “constant comparison” and search for “negative cases” in grounded theory.

It is easy to understand Sauer’s fascination by the theatre, its actors and the way it challenges assumptions about persons with intellectual disabilities. Becoming fascinated as a researcher is not negative in itself, as long as it is balanced with critical reflection about one’s own fascination as well as about interpretations of the empirical material. Sometimes Sauer seems to be lacking that critical distance. He is, or is on the edge of, “going native”. However, this might be the price to pay for such an engaging, lively, rich and colourful description of the theatre, and this is the most powerful impression of this dissertation.

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