

Sexuality and power relations in theatre organizations

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Introduction

Sexual harassment has been so common in my work environment that I earlier almost did not reflect on it as strange. It just was there all the time, as a law of nature.¹

This statement from a female actor at a theatre in one of the biggest cities of Sweden indicates that sexuality and sexual harassment is something that is tightly interwoven in the working environment of theatres. Also in Norwegian theatres sexual harassment seems to be relatively customary. A survey conducted among the members of the Norwegian Actors' Equity Association in 2010 indicates that sexual harassment is much more widespread in organizations for theatre, film and drama production than in Norwegian work organizations more generally. Still this is an aspect of the organization culture that is spoken very little about.

The aim of the paper is to explore several aspects of the theatre world and theatre organizations that can shed light on the relatively high degree of sexual harassment among actors. The paper has two main parts. In the first part we present and discuss the method on which this paper is based and we present the main findings from the survey. In the second part we introduce three aspects of the theatre world and theatre organizations that we want to explore as possible interpretations to the relatively high degree of sexual harassment reported in the survey. The first aspect deals with the increased competition for jobs in the sector due to some structural changes. The second aspect is about the tradition of charismatic authority within the theatre world in general and in the management of theatre organizations in particular. Finally, the third aspect points to some special characteristics of the work of actors, not least the intimate character of their work and the exposure of the body on stage.

Definitions

Before introducing the methodology, we will pay some attention to the term sexual harassment and how this can be operationalized. The term sexual harassment is equivocal, and gives a lot of connotations. In harassment research as well as in everyday work in preventing harassment one tries to distinguish what may be defined as harassment, and what is to be defined as (innocent) audacity. Making such a distinction is problematic but often necessary, especially in legal contexts, such as enforcement of occupational safety and health regulations.

This has caused an ongoing debate trying to distinguish sexual harassment as a *legal* concept from sexual harassment as a *psychological* experience of the victims:

¹ "Sexuella trakasserier har varit så vanligt i min arbetsvardag att jag förr nästan inte reflekterade över att det var konstigt. Det bara fanns där hela tiden, som en naturlig."

<http://sverigesradio.se/sida/gruppsida.aspx?programid=3437&grupp=10329&sida=2>

Whereas legal definitions need to take the legislatures and judicial decisions into account, the phenomenological experience of harassment is determined solely by the experience of the victim (Nielsen et. al. 2010:253).

In psychological studies of sexual harassment it is most common to focus on the phenomenological experience of the victim and his or her interpretation of it. In the literature, the term unwanted sexual attention is often used (Nielsen et. al. 2010). In line with this, it is important to distinguish between unwanted sexual attention and (wanted) sexual attention. While (wanted) sexual attention denote positive experiences that equal parts both have an interest, unwanted sexual attention denote negative, unsolicited and unilateral attention. Unwanted sexual experience can therefore be characterised as sexual harassment (Frøberg and Sørensen 1992). Unwanted sexual experience may further be separated in to three subcategories: verbal (sexual jokes and comments on employees body, dressing and sexual life), physical (contact) and nonverbal (staring and displaying pictures). Sexual harassment can therefore be defined by four conditions: Behaviour that can be interpreted as sexual and unwanted, which is experienced as negative, and which lasts, and/or has consequences over time (Einarsen et. al. 2007).

Method

In the spring of 2010 Telemark Research Institute conducted a quantitative study on sexual harassment among Norwegian actors (Kleppe 2010). The study was done in cooperation with the Norwegian Actors' Equity Association and all the members were invited to participate in a large survey. In this section, we will present and discuss the methodology and the results of this survey.

Sexual harassment as a phenomenon has been a subject for research since the late 70s (Wiener and Gutek 1999). A wide range of studies have been conducted, but nonetheless there has been an absence of studies using valid assessment and estimation methods in representative samples (Nielsen et. al. 2010). There are several methods of measuring sexual harassment and researchers uses different methods. The questionnaire might be different; some studies use a single-item question about selflabeled exposure to sexual harassment, other studies use an extensive list covering a wide range of potential harassing behaviour. With regards to representation and generalisation, some studies use representative samples while others use convenience samples, often with low response rate. The predominance of focusing on women in such studies is also an issue when it comes to generalizeability. All of these factors has made it difficult to make good comparisons and therefore to state whether sexual harassment in some occupation (e.g. among actors) are more frequent than in other occupations.

In Norway, there has recently been a large research project on bullying, harassment and destructive leadership in Norwegian working life, under the leading of professor Ståle Einarsen (Einarsen et. al. 2007). One part of this study focused particularly on sexual harassment. The basis for this study a thorough methodological work published in the Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment and Trauma (Nielsen et. al. 2010). The Einarsen study was based on a survey sent to a random sample of 4500 employees that were drawn from the Norwegian Central Employee Register by Statistics Norway (SSB). A total of 2349 respondents answered the questions about sexual harassment and were therefore included in the survey (Nielsen et. al. 2010).

Our study on actors and sexual harassment was methodologically based on the Einarsen-study. The same questions and the same response options have been used. This makes us able to compare the results from our study of actors with the study of the Norwegian population in general. It also gives us a solid methodological framework.

The study of sexual harassment among actors was designed as a digital survey sent out to all members of The Norwegian Actors' Equity Association with an operative e-mail address. This was 945 out of 1114 members. Out of these 945 members, 536 persons answered the survey which gives us a response rate at 57 %. When comparing the respondents age and gender with the whole population, we found compliance. This indicates representativity. In part one of the survey, the respondents were asked to report on experiences within the latest six months. First, they were asked if they had experienced sexual harassment in general, that is from their own point of view, then they were asked to report whether they had experienced different incidents that may be defined as unwanted sexual attention. This part of the survey used the same formulations and the same questions as the Einarsen study.

In part two, the actors was asked if, when, how often and from whom they had experienced different incidents that could be defined as unwanted sexual attention throughout their whole career. In addition to this, the actors were asked some questions concerning social life at their workplace, and questions concerning if and how they had reported harassment. In addition to this they were asked some open questions on harassment which we have included in the qualitative analysis. The answers to the open questions are the empirical basis for the analysis in the second part of this paper.

Sexual harassment of Norwegian actors

Norwegian actors experience sexual harassment to a much larger extent than employees in other occupations. This was the main finding of the survey. When asking if the actors had been subjected to sexual harassment during the last six months, 5 % of the actors answered "a certain extent", 0,4% answered a "high degree". The similar number for the population in general was 1,1% to "a certain extend" and 0,1 on a "high degree" (see table 1)

	Employees in general			Members Norwegian Actors E A		
		Certain extend	High degree		Certain extend	High degree
	N	percent	percent	N	percent	percent
Total	2349	1,1 %	0,1%	477	5 %	0,4 %
Share women	25	80 %	50 %	24	79 %	50 %
Share men	25	20 %	50 %	24	21 %	50 %

Table 1: Self-reported sexual harassment. Question: During the last six months, have you been subjected to sexual harassment?

Behaviour	Study	Frequency [%]					Frequency [%]					Frequency [%]				
		Total [N=General: 2349, Actors: 476]					Men [N=General: 1009, Actors: 232]					Women [N=General: 1115, Actors: 295]				
		Never	Once	2-5 times	>5 times		Never	Once	2-5 times	>5 times		Never	Once	2-5 times	>5 times	
Unwanted comments about your body, clothing or way of living	General (BBRG)	89,2	5,5	4,2	1,1		87,6	6,4	4,4	1,2		90,5	4,5	4,1	0,9	
	Actors (TRI)	77,5	9,3	10,6	2,5		89,2	3,9	6,0	0,9		70,3	1,2	13,5	4,1	
Other unwanted verbal comments with sexual content	General (BBRG)	92,0	3,6	3,2	1,2		93,0	3,9	2,2	0,9		91,0	3,3	4,2	1,5	
	Actors (TRI)	77,8	7,2	11,6	3,4		87,6	3,8	6,4	2,1		70,4	10,5	15,3	3,7	
Picture or objects with sexual content, which you experienced as undesirable or unpleasant	General (BBRG)	96,3	2,5	0,9	0,3		95,9	2,5	1,2	0,3		96,7	2,5	0,7	0,2	
	Actors (TRI)	94,7	3,4	1,7	0,2		97,0	1,7	1,3	-		92,2	5,4	2,0	0,3	
Being the object of rumours with sexual content	General (BBRG)	97,9	1,3	0,7	0,2		97,4	1,4	1,0	0,2		98,4	1,1	0,3	0,2	
	Actors (TRI)	90,9	4,2	3,8	1,1		88,8	4,7	4,7	1,7		93,5	3,7	2,4	0,3	
Sexual charge staring or glances, which felt uncomfortable	General (BBRG)	95,6	2,0	2,0	0,4		97,1	1,4	1,1	0,3		94,2	2,5	2,8	0,5	
	Actors (TRI)	83,5	5,5	8,5	2,5		91,8	2,6	4,3	1,3		77,4	7,8	11,8	3,0	
Unwanted telephone calls, text messages, or letters with sexual suggestions	General (BBRG)	98,3	1,0	0,5	0,2		98,4	0,7	0,7	0,2		98,1	1,2	0,4	0,2	
	Actors (TRI)	90,1	3,6	4,6	1,7		94,0	1,3	3,4	1,3		87,8	5,1	5,1	2,0	
Unwanted physical contact with sexual suggestions	General (BBRG)	95,9	2,1	1,4	0,6		97,8	1,0	0,7	0,5		94,0	3,1	2,1	0,7	
	Actors (TRI)	85,6	6,8	6,6	1,1		94,0	1,7	3,9	0,4		78,5	11,6	8,2	1,7	
Unwanted sexual approaches that you experienced as uncomfortable, but which did not contain promises of rewards or threats of punishments or sanctions	General (BBRG)	98,2	0,9	0,6	0,3		99,1	0,5	0,2	0,2		97,3	1,3	1,1	0,3	
	Actors (TRI)	91,5	4,4	3,2	0,8		96,1	1,7	1,7	0,4		89,1	5,8	4,1	1,0	
Unwanted enquiries/demands of sexual services with promise of rewards	General (BBRG)	99,5	0,3	0,1	0,1		99,6	0,2	0,1	0,2		99,5	0,4	0,1	-	
	Actors (TRI)	97,2	1,9	0,8	-		99,1	0,4	0,4	-		95,6	3,1	1,4	-	
Unwanted enquiries/demands of sexual services with threats of punishments or sanctions	General (BBRG)	99,7	0,2	0,0	0,1		99,7	0,2	-	0,2		99,8	0,2	-	-	
	Actors (TRI)	99,1	0,6	0,0	0,2		100,0	-	-	-		98,0	1,7	-	0,3	
Sexual assaults, attempts at rape, or actual rape	General (BBRG)	99,5	0,05	0,0	0,05		99,1	-	-	0,1		99,9	0,1	-	-	
	Actors (TRI)	99,6	0,4	-	-		100,0	-	-	-		99,3	0,7	-	-	

Table 2: Frequency of sexual harassing behavior divided by gender and as total.

When reporting on specific incidents that may be defined as sexual harassment, we see an even clearer picture. 45% of the respondents claimed that they have experienced one or several such incidents over the last six months. Among employees in general, only 18% report that they have experienced this. Among the actors, 28% claim that they have experienced *two* or more incidents, while 8% of the employees in general report the same. Looking closer at the incidents reported, we find that actors are more exposed to all kinds of unwanted sexual attention. Reporting on verbal harassment such as “Unwanted comments about your body, clothing or way of living”, the share among actors is 11,7 percentage points higher than among employees in general. Reporting on nonverbal harassment such as “Sexually charged staring or glances, which felt uncomfortable”, the share among actors is 12,1 percentage points higher than among employees in general. Physical harassment such as “Unwanted physical contact with sexual suggestions” are reported 6,5 percentage points higher among actors than among employees in general.

When it comes to gender differences, women are more exposed to sexual harassment than men. 34% of the male actors have reported exposure to one or several harassing behaviours within the last six months, 53% of the women have reported this. If we compare gender differences among actors with gender differences among employees in general, female actors are also relatively more exposed than women in other occupations. While the share of male actors in average is 2,46 percentage point more exposed to all behaviours related to sexual harassment, the share of female actresses are 9,75 percentage point higher in average for all such behaviours. (See table 2 for the entire list).

When we look at other characteristics such as age, marital status and occupation we also see some differences (table 3). Young actors are more exposed than elder actors. More than 50% of the actors under the age of 40 have been exposed to one or several harassing behaviours within the last six months. Married actors (32%) experience harassment less often than cohabitants (45%) and unaccompanied (54%). Concerning the different work types the actors are engaged in, we find that actors on screen (52%) are generally more exposed to harassment than actors on stage (44%). We also find that actors in institutional theatres (46%) are more exposed than actors in free (independent theatre groups?) dramatic groups (42%). Considering gender differences, we find a particularly high level of exposure to sexual harassing behaviour among actresses working with film (72%).

In part two of the survey, the respondents were asked who the sexually harassing behaviour came from. In this part the timeframe was not 6 months, but their entire career. The answers indicated that other actors are responsible for most of the harassing behaviour. 31,6% of those who have experienced some kind of sexual harassment during their whole career, reported that other actor were responsible for this harassment. Other colleagues such as technical crew, and administrative employees also in charge of an extended amount of sexual harassment (15,4%), while the audience also represents an harassing group (15,4%). In particular many actors experience “Unwanted telephone calls, text messages, or letters with sexual suggestions” addressed from the audience. 59,3% of such harassing behavior came from the audience (see table 4).

When looking at harassment from a superior person, we find that 21% of those who reported to be subject of one or several harassing behavior had experienced this from a director. 8,2% had experienced this from the theatre manager, while respectively 2,2% and 2,8% had experienced this from a casting agent or a film producer.

	Exposed	(n)	Total	Women	Men
Main occupation					
Actor, inst theatre	107	233	46 %	57 %	36 %
Actor, free dramatic art	86	203	42 %	47 %	36 %
Actor, television	43	83	52 %	66 %	38 %
Actor, movie	36	70	51 %	72 %	37 %
Age					
<29	42	82	51 %	60 %	40 %
30-39	97	193	50 %	56 %	43 %
40-49	41	94	44 %	54 %	33 %
50-59	22	64	34 %	48 %	26 %
>60	13	44	30 %	39 %	19 %
Marital status					
Unaccompanied	77	143	54 %	59 %	48 %
Married / reg. partner	54	170	32 %	46 %	16 %
Cohabiting	74	163	45 %	59 %	30 %

Table 3: Who has been exposed to sexual harassing behavior?

Addressed by who	Theatre manager	Director	Actor	Caster	Film producer	Other colleague	Audience	Other
Unwanted comments about your body, clothing or way of living	7,6 %	25,8 %	32,0 %	3,7 %	2,3 %	14,7 %	8,3 %	5,5 %
Other unwanted verbal comments with sexual content	7,6 %	21,1 %	35,3 %	2,7 %	1,0 %	17,3 %	9,7 %	5,2 %
Picture or objects with sexual content, which you experienced as undesirable or unpleasant	6,1 %	16,3 %	20,4 %	0,0 %	6,1 %	20,4 %	2,1 %	28,6 %
Being the object of rumors with sexual content	5,8 %	9,1 %	45,5 %	0,8 %	1,7 %	17,3 %	10,8 %	9,1 %
Sexual charge staring or glances, which felt uncomfortable	5,4 %	18,6 %	33,7 %	1,2 %	4,3 %	20,5 %	10,9 %	5,4 %
Unwanted telephone calls, text messages, or letters with sexual suggestions	1,0 %	3,8 %	10,7 %	0,0 %	1,0 %	7,8 %	59,3 %	16,5 %
Unwanted physical contact with sexual suggestions	8,4 %	19,0 %	39,3 %	1,4 %	2,3 %	16,7 %	8,8 %	4,1 %
Unwanted enquiries/demands of sexual services with promise of rewards	17,1 %	50,0 %	12,8 %	1,5 %	5,7 %	4,3 %	0,0 %	8,6 %
Unwanted enquiries/demands of sexual services with threats of punishments or sanctions	16,0 %	60,0 %	16,0 %	0,0 %	4,0 %	0,0 %	0,0 %	4,0 %
Sexual assaults, attempts at rape, or actual rape	11,1 %	16,7 %	27,8 %	0,0 %	5,6 %	11,1 %	5,6 %	22,2 %
Average	8,2 %	21,0 %	31,6 %	2,2 %	2,8 %	15,4 %	11,7 %	7,1 %

Table 4: Frequency of sexual harassing behaviour during their whole carrier divided by whom which addressed the harassing behaviour.

The actors who had experienced some kind of harassing behaviour was also asked if, and to whom, they had reported this incident. A striking result was that only 3,7 % of those who had experienced some kind of sexual harassment had reported this to either the direction (2,8 %) or the union official (0,9%). None of the respondents had been in contact with the personal safety representative, even though such a representative exists in all the institutional theatres in Norway. Besides keeping quiet about it (22,6%), most of the actors told one or several of their colleges about such incidents (56,9 %).

In the end of the survey we asked the respondents whether they believed that actors had a greater acceptance for sexual harassment than employees in other occupation. 44,6 % gave a positive answer to this, while 33,8 answered “maybe”.

The survey gave us a good overview of the actual situation concerning sexual harassment among Norwegian actors. However the quantitative data told us little about *why* this is so

much more common among actors than among employees in general. Based on the qualitative answers in the survey as well as other relevant studies, we will present three possible explanations of why this is so.

More competition for acting jobs

Structural changes in the sector have led to increased competition for acting jobs. Firstly, this is a result of radical changes in the labor market for actors over the last few decades. Until the 1990s, the Academy of Theatre (Oslo National Academy of Arts) was the only educational institution for actors in Norway. The number of graduated actors from the Academy of Theatre fitted almost perfectly to the number of actors that the theatre institutions needed. This meant that if you completed the acting education at the Academy of Theatre, you were almost certain to get a job at one of the theatre institutions (Bjørkås 1998, Aslaksen 2004, Mangset 2004). In the 1990s, Norwegian youths started to travel abroad in order to take Education Programs for actors. At the same time, alternative educational programs for actors were developed in Norway. In total, this has led to a situation with a much higher number of trained actors than the number of available jobs in the sector. Therefore, Norwegian actors today face a tough competition (Mangset 2004). However, it is important to emphasize that the number of jobs also has increased. Opportunities to work in advertising and film have increased quite a lot in the same period, but not as much as the number of trained actors (*ibid.*).

Secondly, as the number of graduated actors has grown, the hiring practices at Norwegian theatres have also started to change. Until recently, permanent positions have been the main employment practice at the theatre institutions. The permanently employed actors have formed an artistic ensemble, but the working conditions and welfare of the actors have also been an important legitimization of this employment practice. Today, the tradition with an ensemble of permanently employed actors is under pressure and changing. Increasingly, theatre institutions apply short term contracts when they hire actors for their productions (Røyseng 2007). This means that the actors more or less continuously are in a situation where they search for jobs and roles.

The increased number of graduated actors and the changing employment practices is also reflected in the membership of the Norwegian Actors' Equity Association. In 1994, 34% percent of the members were. In 2008, freelancers represented 72% of the membership (Kleppe et al 2010:13). The majority of actors in Norway therefore must compete for contracts of various time limits in different parts of the industry.

Several of the informants in the survey are pointing to increased competition as an important factor for understanding sexual harassment in the theatre world. One informant who has not experienced sexual harassment herself/himself points out that increased competition may have led to more sexual harassment in the sector:

I have not experienced this as difficult in my time, (I'm not active any longer) but it may well have changed the past few years. I can imagine that when the market is getting tougher (and it has) such attempts on power abuse increase².

² All quotations are translated from Norwegian by the authors.

Another informant claims that the situation for actors means that it has become more difficult to speak up when you experience unwanted sexual attention:

As an assistant director at a theatre production at one of the theatres in Oslo, I experienced, there was a young female actor on a short term contract who was asked directly by the director if they could start a sexual relationship. She rejected, and as a consequence he refused to instruct her for the rest of the rehearsals. She told me what had happened, and together we talked to the employee representative of the production - another female, but more experienced actor, she was also hired on a short term contract. She told us that she didn't want to cause any problems, so she would rather talk with one of the permanently employed actors in the play. The permanently employed actor went to the theatre manager and told him what had happened. After that nothing more happened. The director in question has a reputation for trying to pick up female actors and acting students. When I tell you this story it is because it tells something about the fair of causing problems when you are not permanently employed, and this is interesting at the moment when the theatres want to reduce the number of permanent positions.

Following many of the comments, situations that can affect casting are especially exposed to sexual harassment or play with sexuality. One of the informants tells that sensuality and sexuality is an advantage when you meet directors or theatre managers who in practice represent gatekeepers to relevant jobs:

I feel that when I am going to meet with the directors / theatre managers, I increase my chances of getting a job if I make myself as pretty, charming and sexy as possible. This is when the directors and theater managers are male. This is something I feel more and more the longer I'm in the business.

Another actor tells us that she has refused to use her sexuality in order to get more jobs, but that she have been told that it would have been advantageous for her to do so:

In my acting career, I have deliberately refused to move into situations of this kind, even though I am very well aware that it would have given me more jobs. I've also been told by several (surprised) directors, who have noticed that I am not responsive to this subject that I differ from the majority. They've told me that it would help my career!

According to these quotations it seems to be a relatively common understanding that sexuality can be a helpful part of the casting process. But at the same time you can never be certain whether it is a tool or a trap. One informant underlines that the communication between the actor and the theatre manager or director seldom is explicit when it comes to the outcome of a sexual affair:

A theater manager / director do not need to say or promise a reward. If he tries to pick you up, the "victim" automatically thinks that if she rejects him, he will not cast her or recommend her to others. And when things are not verbalized, you cannot accuse him afterwards either.

More fundamentally the actors' willingness to play with their sexuality in the casting process can be interpreted as a result of one fundamental aspect associated with the acting career. The only way to make a career is to get roles, preferably leading roles. To act on stage is what being an actor is about. A female actor from the largest theatre in Norway – The National Theatre – also a fictional writer, Anna Bache-Wiig underlines the fact that actors always fight for a role, means that they might be willing to put brackets around some causes they would be fighting for in another situation:

For years I thought that we happily played shows with broken bones and with a fever of forty, because we could not be replaced. Now I have understood that it is because we basically know it's the opposite. We can be replaced, and that is why we play anyway, so no one else can take our role, for without our role, we are nothing. (...)Am I willing to fight, to sacrifice anything for my rights, my professional integrity, because of my working conditions, for my life, in short, am I willing to sacrifice anything for more power? No. At least not as long as it is a role that is at stake. If I run the risk of a role, it can basically be the same (Bache-Wiig 2009:10).

Based on our data it is possible to claim that increased competition may have led to more sexual harassment in the theatre world. Still some of the quotations above imply that sexual harassment is not only related to structural changes in the theatre sector. When the informants point to the casting process as situations that are potentially exposed, they also point to an aspect of the theatre world that is much older than the increased competition the last few decades. In the next section we will therefore move on to discuss an important aspect of the organization culture of theatres – the charismatic authority.

Charismatic authority

The survey has revealed that most of the sexual harassment that actors experience is conducted by superiors or coordinate colleagues. In the previous section it has also been pointed out that casting processes are especially exposed for sexual harassment. It is reasonable to claim that charismatic leadership and the informal culture that is closely associated with it are important aspects if we want to understand the high numbers of sexual harassment in the theatre world.

In our previous research we have interpreted the theatre world as a charismatic world (Røyseng 2007, Kleppe et. al. 2010). Following Weber, charisma can be defined as

a certain quality of an individual personality, by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader (Weber 1968:48).

Artists are often considered as charismatic persons – they are accorded extraordinary artistic talents that mean that they have the possibility of creating great art (Bourdieu 1993, Mangset 2004). The theatre managers at Norwegian theatres are all recruited on the basis of their artistic careers either as actors or as directors. Getting the position as theatre manager means significant artistic recognition. Their legitimacy as theatre managers lies in their artistic recognition.

Selecting a repertoire and a cast is often understood as the main responsibility of the theatre manager. In this process the theatre manager is at liberty to seek advice from the staff, but there are no formal structures that require him to involve anybody. However, during the 1970s most Norwegian theatre established an “artistic council”. The artistic council was supposed to give the theatre managers advice about the selection of repertoire, cast, employment of artistic personnel and artistic decision making in general. But according to our previous studies, the artistic council does not have much influence. It is rather considered to be a kind of Mickey Mouse organization. It has no formal decision-making authority (Kleppe et al 2010, Røyseng 2007).

Following our previous studies there still are ways to influence the theatre manager. When the actors are asked what they can do to make their opinion heard, they talk about informal channels: “You have to make friends with the right people”, one of the actors from our previous study (Kleppe et al 2010) claims. “If you play ball with the king, then it works”, says another. The last quotation indicates that the theatre manager is seen as a monarch. A similar view is expressed by another informant:

It is in a way a very feudal system, one of the last. You do not need to give reasons for your decisions. You can hide yourself behind very subjective concepts all the time. The theatre manager can say: “The instructor will not include you in the play. He does not think you are good enough. I do not think you fit in. I do not think you are good enough.” You cannot argue rationally against such an allegation. You can just say: “But I do not agree”.

There is of course no law of nature that decides that charismatic and informal culture must lead to more sexual harassment. Still, sexuality seems to be one of few ways for the actors to try to improve their chances of getting the roles they want.

The sexuality of the theatre

A special feature of theatre is that the work of the actors does not materialize in an external work of art in the same way as when a painter paints a painting or a writer writes a novel. Theatre is the work of the body (Sjørup and Kirkegaard 2007). In addition, theatre is an art form where someone is watching someone else’s bodies (Langsted 2005). The centrality of the body both in the actual work of the actor and in the organization culture of theatre is therefore an important aspect to consider when we want to understand the high numbers of sexual harassment incidents reported in our survey.

Quite a lot of the answers in the open response category of the survey thematize questions related to gender equality. Especially, a lot of informants claim that there are some important differences between the working conditions of male and female actors. One of the informants says:

I want to argue that the view of women is a much bigger problem than the sexual harassment. Female actors have a lower status than male actors, and they have much harder working conditions. You need to be tough to handle it. It is a shame that our profession not have come any further with regard to gender equality.

A couple of other answers also circle around the order between the sexes. Essentially, there are a lot of comments on the well-known gender/age problem in the theatre. The problem is often discussed in relation to the question of whether actors should be employed on a permanent basis or on short term contracts (Sirnes 2001, Røyseng 2007, Kleppe et. al. 2010). It is often claimed that one of the challenges for the theatres in Norway is that the actors in the permanent ensembles do not fit the casting needs of plays in the repertory. According to this claim the theatres have too many women over forty years in their ensembles and too few young men. While this is often related to the available roles in the world literature, some of our informants indicate that it is rather the ideal of a woman in the theatre world that is the problem:

There exists another type of harassment which has something to do with sexuality=age / gender discrimination. You should pursue young sexuality, not experienced and purposeful femininity to be an object of attraction on stage.

In line with this, some of the informants also claim that there are stricter criteria connected to how the female actor looks than how the male actor looks:

I think the question of the body is interesting. I experience that it is more allowed for male actors to be corpulent and out of shape than for their female colleagues.

These opinions are similar to the findings in studies in other Nordic countries. One Danish study found that some actors argued that the reason why female actors should be as young and fresh as the morning dew is that the classical roles are written for young women which the erotic plot is circulating around. Other actors argued that it the reason can be found in a kind of Pygmalion myth. Following this myth the male director has a need to be mirrored in the young female actor. The more experienced and educated male teacher educates the young and pure female student (Sjørup and Kirkegård 2007).

Several of our informants claim that they have been socialized into specific ideals of how the bodies of male and female actors should be already at the Academy of Theatre:

One of the things that I remember the most is the experiences from the Academy of Theatre where the teachers commented upon how our bodies should be in order to perform our profession as actors. I think this is special for our profession. Sexual harassment happens everywhere, but the requirements for how male and female bodies should be, seem to be distinct to the education of actors.

Similarly one of the other informants writes:

You have forgotten to ask about sexual harassment during education, what you can experience during education when you are young and vulnerable.

This indicates that specific ideals of the gendered body are deeply rooted in a chain of institutions in the theatre world. This need issue needs to be investigated further.

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