

Response to Thomas Solomon's article "The Play of Colors: Staging Multiculturalism in Norway"

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Stiftelsen Fargespill is thankful for the opportunity to add our perspective to Thomas Solomon's analysis of our program in the article "The Play of Colors: Staging Multiculturalism in Norway" published in DMO November 2016.¹ While we are grateful for an academic focus on our applied work, it is our belief that the kind of macro-analysis offered in his article misses many important aspects of the Fargespill project. In the article, Solomon does state that his analysis should be seen in conjunction with ethnographic research done on the project. However, as the findings of these research projects are only in the beginning phase of getting published and are largely written in Norwegian,² we would like to take this opportunity to add some nuances to Solomon's representation, provide the reader with updated facts, and offer our perspective about the work we do from day to day. Furthermore, we would like to suggest that publishing a critique of a program like Fargespill in an academic journal without engaging in any ethnographic dialogue with the employees or participants, is not a productive way to approach academic scholarship about applied music projects.³

A static picture

Solomon's analysis presents Fargespill as a series of musical performances and his analysis includes one video (Fargespill 2009) and texts about the project from the internet, as well as a book about Fargespill (Hamre and Saue 2011). We are well aware that academic publishing takes time and research often examines events that occurred years prior, but Solomon promotes a timeless image of Fargespill that only shows a fraction of what Fargespill once was. Applied projects like Fargespill live in a state of constant transformation. We still make shows, but not only by "the Fargespill-formula", which Solomon analyses, and we are also engaged in workshops in public

- 1 We would like to thank Dr. Jennie Gubner at Indiana University Bloomington for her thorough feedback and editing assistance and for acting as a thoughtful sounding board as we figured out the best way to articulate our ideas and concerns in this response.
- 2 One ethnographic based PhD projects about Fargespill, conducted by Camilla Kvaal, is in its final stage, and Hildegunn Schuff is finishing collecting qualitative as well as quantitative data for her PhD on Fargespill. Furthermore, several Bachelor as well as Master theses have been based on ethnographic fieldwork within Fargespill.
- 3 Fargespill arranged a meeting with Solomon after the article was published to discuss the findings.

schools and have been a part of a new course at the Western Norway University of Applied Sciences on Intercultural pedagogy.⁴ Furthermore, the staff and band has expanded and now include former performers.⁵

Fargespill – a social art project

On page 199 of the article, Solomon comments on the contrast between Fargespill's "representation of happily assimilated, singing and dancing children of immigrant background", and the Norwegian government's strict policies on immigration and the many cases of forced returns of child asylum seekers (Solomon 2016, 199). He criticizes co-artistic director Ole Hamre for stating that Fargespill is an "artistic project, not a social one", and goes on to say that "[s]uch statements strategically, if perhaps somewhat naïvely, serve to rhetorically insulate the Fargespill project from its political implications" (ibid.). We believe his analysis both misses the mark of the intent of the statement, to encourage a focus on the participants as capable performers, singers and dancers, not as someone who are on stage because they should be pitied, and gives Fargespill an unwarranted responsibility for the Norwegian government's policies.

We are very conscious of the fact that Fargespill has social implications and that it exists in a political sphere. Therefore, we take all the precautions we can when working with a group of people with diverse backgrounds, who are – at times – in very difficult life situations. While we are well aware of the social and political frameworks in which Fargespill exists, positioning the organization as an artistic project is also a mode of empowering young participants to see themselves as artists, taking the emphasis off their status as minorities. However, a distinction between art and social work is important in Fargespill; not just as a principal, but also in our day-to-day work. It establishes focus on the participants' capabilities instead of their limitations. We find that a consequence of our work method gives profound and meaningful experiences for the participants, that have a positive spill-over effect to other areas of their lives. This is a side effect we are positive could not be achieved if Fargespill just had a social focus.

Fargespill and the Norwegian state

Solomon questions if Fargespill provides a "space for the agency of refugee children and advocat(es) for their rights [...] or provide a sort of cover for the Norwegian state to carry out its exclusionary policies?" (Solomon 2016, 199). As most cultural organizations in Norway, we are dependent upon funding from government sources, and this – by default – makes us all somewhat limited in our ability to "politicize" projects. We have chosen not to engage in debates about the Norwegian governments

4 For a description of the course "Interkulturell pedagogikk og Fargespillmetodikk" (in Norwegian), see <https://www.hvl.no/studier/studieprogram/emne/ikp801>, accessed August 2, 2017.

5 As of January 1st 2018 the band in Fargespill Bergen consists of six persons, including two former performers. The staff consists of eight persons, including one former performer. Out of thirteen employees five are non-ethnic Norwegians.

policies concerning immigration because this is not our area of expertise, not to avoid criticizing the government. However, we have tried to make our voice heard in debates about how the government treats immigrants and refugees living in Norway. The article Solomon mentions about Aves, a participant who was deported in the middle of the night, is the only one that has made it to print so far (see Hamre and Moberg 2014).⁶ Furthermore, our aim is to make Fargespill a free space for our participants. For some, it is the only arena where the focus is not on their adversities. We are well aware of the everyday political issues affecting asylum seekers, but our primary loyalty lies with our participants in providing an artistic and collaborative space for them, and in creating a space where they feel empowered through artistic expression. If the Norwegian government claimed that Fargespill exists as a representation of how well Norway treats immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers, or positioned the project as a state ensemble, we would not hesitate to dispute it.

When Solomon states that Fargespill provides a smokescreen for the government (Solomon 2016, 188 and 201) and thereby makes Fargespill responsible for the shortcomings of the Norwegian state, he actually removes focus from the larger structures and put the blame on practitioners, who devote their time and energy to intercultural work in Norway. A more productive approach could have been to look at how the Norwegian government supports projects like Fargespill with children and young refugees and immigrants, and at the same time carry out exclusionary policies. It is not the foundation of his claims that we take issue with; we too have our own critiques of the way the Norwegian government treats asylum seekers. However, calling Fargespill a smokescreen and throwing the blame in our direction reduces our efforts to a superficial political strategy. Solomon should instead direct the blame more directly at higher political entities responsible for the policies affecting asylum seekers.

What Fargespill is to us

Solomon writes that "while Fargespill represents itself as being a minoritarian mode of presentation, it is actually a fully majoritarian mode" (Solomon 2016, 188) and emphasizes how the structures of the organization leave the participants with very limited agency. He presents the "Fargespill-formula" as a procedure where the staff takes songs and dance movements from the children and youth in the project to re-model them and create medleys between Norwegian folksongs and interchangeable, anonymous songs from "other places". In our view, this gives a false image of what Fargespill is and how we work.

To clarify, a typical Fargespill musical piece is often a medley and the shows still contain medleys mixing Norwegian folk songs and songs from abroad (e.g. Ethiopia).⁷

6 We have written several other chronicles concerning treatment of asylum seekers and refugees in Norway and have pitched them to all of the largest newspapers in Norway, but none of them has been published.

7 The medley "Oromivaa" (2014) is an example of a mix containing a Norwegian and an Ethiopian folk song, see <http://fargespill.no/musikkvideo-2/>, accessed on December 4, 2017.

But these medleys are just as often created with elements from two non-Norwegian traditions, for instance a children's song from Mali and an Ivory Coast pop-song.⁸ In addition, some songs and dances are performed in full length without merging them with anything.⁹ Global youth culture, including hip-hop, rock, pop, different forms of classical music, and dance are also incorporated into our shows. For example, from 2015-2017 Fargespill collaborated with a Norwegian indie-rock group, the Real Ones¹⁰ primarily singing in English and in 2016-2017 Fargespill performed with The Norwegian Radio Orchestra.¹¹ During rehearsals participants teach their songs and dances to each other. This may involve guidance from the staff, but only if need be. For instance, some of the youth have taught elaborate dance-choreographies and songs to each other with practically no interference from the staff.¹² Furthermore, it is not only songs, which the staff find suitable for the shows that are taught during rehearsals. Weekly rehearsals with different groups of participants also include dances, songs, rhythm- and pitch-training games, clapping-games, body-percussion, schoolyard games that are introduced by either individual participants or by the staff member in charge of the rehearsal.

Solomon writes that "[t]he songs presented in Fargespill's stage shows represent the home countries of the children (...)" (Solomon 2016, 188). This is not quite the case. We do ask if the participants have something they would like to share from their upbringing and encourage them to ask family-members, but we are not trying to impose specific nationalities or ethnicities on them. We try to approach people as individuals and we encourage them to bring in songs that are meaningful to their lives. As we are aware of the ethnic labelling many of our participants face in their daily lives, we work to promote an environment where the participants feel comfortable expressing themselves as they choose. We agree that branding people only by ethnicity is problematic and that no one should be forced into identity boxes. In contrast to Solomon, Vibeke Solbue, who has done doctoral research on inter-cultural education in Norway (Solbue 2014), sees Fargespill as one of few positive examples involving immigrants and refugees in Norway. In a panel discussion at Bergen University College in June

8 The performance "Butulumani/Okininkpin" in the show "Fargespill – Real Ones" (2016) is an example of this, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ViS_xWPLz4I&feature=youtu.be (52 minutes and 50 seconds into the video), accessed December 4, 2017.

9 The performance of a Lithuanian Polka in "Fargespill – Real Ones" (2016) is an example of this, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ViS_xWPLz4I&feature=youtu.be (29 minutes and 20 seconds into the video), accessed December 4, 2017.

10 The show "Fargespill – Real Ones" was the outcome of this collaboration, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ViS_xWPLz4I&feature=youtu.be, accessed December 4, 2017.

11 The show "Fargespill – KORK" was the outcome of this collaboration, see <https://tv.nrk.no/serie/hovedscenen-tv/MKMF21014316/30-10-2016#t=1h5m48s>, accessed December 7, 2017. NRK also made a documentary about Fargespill, see <https://tv.nrk.no/serie/hovedscenen-tv/MKMF21014316/30-10-2016>, accessed December 7, 2017.

12 In "Fargespill – Real Ones" (2016) for instance "Kitagururo" was instructed by Hanna F. Jensen, "Lithauensk polka" was instructed by Rasa Vaskanaite and "Tunak tunak" was instructed by Mira Thiruchelvam and Jeran Karunairaja, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ViS_xWPLz4I&feature=youtu.be (7 minutes and 20 seconds, 29 minutes and 10 seconds and 42 min 25 seconds into the video)

2016¹³ she stated that Fargespill is one of the few arenas where children and youth can express – and be applauded for – aspects of their non-Norwegian ethnic backgrounds. Thus, according to Solbue, Fargespill is a sphere where non-ethnic Norwegians can gain cultural capital from being *not* Norwegian.

When putting a show together, the artistic directors and founders of Fargespill, Ole Hamre and Sissel Saue, along with choreographer Elizabeth Guinoo have the final say about the performed program. Our work-model is based on the participants' agency, and we try to leave as many decisions to the participants as we can in the creative work-process. This is to ensure that what we portray from the stage are in accordance with their sense of authenticity, especially when working with medleys. But when it comes to the final decisions of, for instance, what tunes to combine or the order of songs, a horizontal planning structure where every participant would be heard, would simply be too time-consuming.

The frame we provide makes it possible to direct performances in professional settings with around 100 children and young adults. However, this does not mean that the participants are not heard, that their opinions are not taken seriously, or that their work is not credited. We make every effort possible to give voice and credit to each participant who brings in and/or directs a song or dance, both at rehearsals, in leaflets handed out at the shows, and on our webpage where each participant has his or her own sub-page with a picture and a description. We also hold regular meetings with the older participants where they can share ideas and air critiques. The youth are free to use the Fargespill-house where we have offices, rehearsal spaces and a small studio, whenever it is available, and they do so to a large extent. These spaces are made available not just to rehearse Fargespill-songs or dances, but also to rehearse or record their own projects.

It is evident that many participants feel that Fargespill is *their* project, and that the staff is just there to provide the frame. This is illustrated in the response from former participant Irene Kinunda, who together with Solbue, Hamre and Solomon attended the panel debate mentioned above, which followed Solomon's presentation of a draft of his article "The Play of Colors". She felt that Solomon misrepresented Fargespill and stole all the credit from her and the other participants and gave the credit to the staff instead. In this case, Kinunda clearly expressed a feeling of ownership of the creative work, taking place within Fargespill. However, she did not feel that she was ascribed this agency in Solomon's analysis, where participants are framed as helpless puppets manipulated by staff looking to exploit vulnerable youth.

13 The panel discussion took place at the Grieg Research Summer School 2016, Bergen University College, June 7, 2016. Besides Solbue, the panel consisted of Thomas Solomon, Ole Hamre, and Irene Kinunda.

Building bridges between academic research and everyday life

Fargespill is based on a simple philosophy that treats each participant as a valuable person with knowledge and skills worth sharing. This is a contrast to many so-called “integration projects”, which focuses on teaching things to groups of people rather than learning from them. We believe that meeting people with an open mind and fostering a space where participatory collaboration can occur is a healthy form of socialization, regardless of ethnicity and age.

Working with refugee and immigrant youth is a complex terrain and as staff we are open and encouraging to feedback and criticism to be able to better the project. If Solomon believes we are reproducing a hierarchy and a soft and superficial type of multiculturalism, we would be eager to discuss this with him and debate how we might improve our work and avoid reinforcing unhealthy patterns. That said, if scholars come to these conclusions without conducting ethnographic research, and only publish findings aimed toward an academic public that frame our efforts in a negative light, we feel that opportunities for dialogue are lost. To avoid this model of armchair research which uses a position of academic privilege to critique individuals who are engaging in on-the-ground efforts without giving those individuals a voice, we would like to encourage researchers to make contact with their research subjects, present the findings to them and engage in a dialogue whenever possible. The point of this dialogue is not to alter the analysis, but to give organizers and participants an opportunity to voice their experiences, discuss the analysis and practical implications, and become a part of academic conversations about the complexities of doing applied work.

Seeing Fargespill as something positive in relation to creating a framework for embracing cultural differences is according to Solomon “contained within the logic of multiculturalism [he] has critiqued here, and so is ultimately self-serving” (Solomon 2016, 201). Hence, a critique of the critique is not possible in Solomon’s eyes, and it seems impossible to see anything good about Fargespill – both on a macro- and a micro-level. We can agree with Solomon that power-relations exist in the post-colonial world, that white males continue to have more power than anyone else, and that racism and fear of “others” exists in Norway despite the fact that Norwegians see themselves as open-minded, welcoming, and free of a colonial past. We also do not deny the fact that the majority of the people employed in Fargespill in Bergen are ethnic Norwegians, although these numbers have changed significantly since Solomon collected his data.¹⁴ However, Solomon’s conclusion that Fargespill at best is a “naïve but harmless spectacle”, at worst a “cynical manipulation” that “grossly misrepresents the reality for, and experiences of, people of non-white, non-European immigrant back-ground in Norway, sidestepping ongoing problems of racism and intolerance [...] while providing a smoke screen that distracts from the Norwegian state’s problematic treatment of child refugees and asylum seekers” (Solomon 2016, 201) is not only inaccurate, but disempowering to the participants and staff. Ultimately, we

14 There are eight ethnic Norwegians and five non-ethnic Norwegians in the staff and band in Fargespill Bergen as of January 1st, 2018.

believe such statements reproduce the same privileged voices of power he is trying to critique. According to Solomon, the songs, dance-moves and clothes of the participants with minority background have the purpose of staging a kind of domesticated multiculturalism on stage. However, power lies in the eye of the beholder and this is just one possible interpretation of our participants' collaborative creative practices. Are the colorful performances exoticizing and alienating, or are they perhaps the only opportunity these kids have to publicly share elements from what they feel is "their" cultural heritage?¹⁵ Similar to our critique, Norwegian professor and folk musician Tellef Kvifte accuses Solomon of "projecting his own hegemonic understanding of culture" into Fargespill performances, and for being an "exotifying academic [...], more preoccupied with the product than the process" (Kvifte 2016).¹⁶

Solomon's analysis, and his focus on texts has of course made us think a lot about what Fargespill is, who it is for, how the frames are defined and how we present the project. To navigate within the larger power structures without reinforcing a hierarchy seems impossible in Solomon's view. We believe and acknowledge that facilitating and co-creating dynamic spaces for empowerment through creative expression for children and youth from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds is a complex and challenging task. Nonetheless, we are proud of the work we do and see these challenges as opportunities – opportunities that are negotiated each day between the participants and management. As an organization, we will continue to strive to do the best we can and we will always welcome critiques and suggestions, especially in forms that invite our voices to be part of the conversation.

15 Solomon also insinuates that the costuming is exoticizing, e.g. the grass skirts worn by females of African origin in the Bane Moni video (Solomon 2016, 191). If he had talked to the participants, he would have known that the participants themselves had chosen to wear the grass-skirts.

16 Kvifte comments on an article by Maja Skanding (2016), a former student of Solomon, who criticized Fargespill and referred to Solomon's presentation at the Grieg Research Summer School 2016, Bergen University College, June 7. The quotation from the article is translated from Norwegian to English by the authors.

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