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**“WHAT THEATRE CAN AND CANNOT BE”: THE THEATRE OF GOD’S
TRANSGRESSIVE OULU ACT AS A SOCIAL DRAMA**

In the early afternoon of the 17th of January 1987, an auditorium at the Oulu City Theatre in Finland is filled with theatre professionals and representatives of the cultural field. Four students from the Helsinki Theatre Academy who call themselves the Theater of God (*Jumalan Teatteri*) are about to present to the theatre festival audience what they have declared as a manifest about “what theatre can nowadays be, and what it cannot be” (Hotinen, 1987, 390). Four young men enter the stage and proceed to cause a chaotic scene by throwing yoghurt and feces at the audience, discharging a fire extinguisher and one of the performers cutting his wrist with a razor blade. The audience escapes and the members of the Theater of God are soon arrested. A nation-wide scandal is born, and the two-minute act radically shifts the public discourse on the state of theatre and professional actor training in Finland. The Theater of God’s Oulu act has been categorized as everything from an avant-garde performance to an act of terrorism. This paper approaches the happening as a transgressive performative and explores its aftermath through the framework of anthropologist Victor Turner’s conceptual social drama. Turner defines social dramas as “units of aharmonic or disharmonic process, arising in conflict situations” which consists of four chronological phases of public action: breach, crisis, redressive action and finally reintegration or schism (1974, 37). The paper investigates how transgression manifested in the Theatre of God’s Oulu act through the breakage of corporeal, psychological as well as performative boundaries. Recognizing the Oulu act as the breach in the social drama which unfolded, the crisis phase is discussed in the specific context of the cultural tensions of Finland in the 1980’s and the Theatre Academy’s controversial training methods at the time. The extensive redressive actions, from legal processes to probations and terminations of employment, are discussed together with the “sub-breaches” which appeared as protests against the redressive actions and maintained the crisis phase. Finally, the paper addresses the complexity of determining whether the social drama resulted in reintegration or a schism.

Hotinen, Juha-Pekka. "Jumalan teatteri." *Mitä-Missä-Milloin, Kansalaisen vuosikirja 1988*. Helsinki: Otava, 1987.

Turner, Victor. *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1974.

Biography

Sanni Lindroos received her Master's degree in Performance Studies from Stockholm University in January 2022. Her thesis "A Number, A Noose, A Nipple: Three Interventions in the Construction of Performative Nationhood During the Finnish Independence Day Reception" investigated embodied acts of protest in the context of performative nation-building. Her research usually gravitates towards the construction of scandals in the Finnish society.