

Somewhere Over the Rainbow: Contemporary Nordic Performance at the 2018 Arctic Arts Festival



Started in 1964, the Arctic Arts Festival in Harstad, Norway, has steadily grown from a three-day celebration of Nordic music to a week-long collection of northern performing arts. The arctic locale was selected by the festival's founder, the Norwegian journalist Jan Kr. Nilssen, to rival the scale and import of the nation's southern Bergen Festival. Nearly a thousand miles north of Bergen, Harstad's population of twenty-five thousand is spread across nearly two dozen islands clustered along the Norwegian sea. The June festivities occur during the "summer sun," in which it remains light twenty-four hours a day. With nearly two-dozen performances, the festival occupies the town's churches, bars, and streets, as well as the Kulturhaus, featuring a one-thousand seat auditorium and a smaller black box stage. To experience the festival is to wander the town. As I arrived, I was met by a monumental rainbow whose arch spanned the small islands of Rolla and Sandsøya. The band of colors, bent behind green, snow-capped mountains cresting from the sea, seemed ripped straight from the nation's 19th century romantic imagination. The work on offer, however, demonstrated just how far Scandinavia has traveled from regional specificity, aligning itself with broader preoccupations of European and world performance.

Engel, created by the Norwegian and Netherlander artists Marta Alstadaeter and Kim-Jomi Fischer, was one of the festival's handful of world premieres. The sixty-minute piece blends circus and contemporary dance in a duet revolving around questions of perception and support. In particular, the piece ruminates on how partners uphold and succumb to the pressures of their collaborators. Choreographically, the show employs the physicality of circus without its showmanship or spectacle. The performance opens with a pair of dream-like images. First we see Fischer's half-lit back, his arms in an almost imperceptible movement as if effortlessly treading water. After a black out, the lights slowly illuminate a pair of bare feet hung in mid-air above where Fischer once stood. As the stage brightens, those feet grow into legs, and then a body, mysteriously floating in the blackness of the stage. This second figure is Alstadaeter, clothed in a salmon pink tank-top and shorts, distinguishing her from her partner's work-inspired wear:

blue slacks, grey button-up polo, and sandy-red beard. The costuming affirms the pair's respective roles established in the opening images. Fisher's function is as a foundation, while Alstadaeter is what needs to be held aloft.

Returning from a second blackout, we find Alstadaeter precariously standing atop Fischer's shoulders. Perched some eleven feet in the air, the image is now one of a Giantess. As the pair look straight out into the audience, you can see Alstadaeter's feet and toes grip Fischer's bulging shoulders, their muscles visibly straining beneath their collective balancing act. Like a sentinel atop a Segway scooter, Alstadaeter leans in the direction she wants to go and Fischer races to that area of the stage. The scene is majestic and terrifying. Alstadaeter is pitching forward and back in increasingly breathless movements. The audience and I gasp as this steely-eyed, but visibly wobbly structure surveying the space. At one point the duo race downstage and lean over the audience like a mythical beast, causing three rows of spectators to collectively recoil with unease. Eliciting a sense of danger is, perhaps, the most consequential element of circus that the duo employs. Alstadaeter repeatedly appears vulnerable to miscalculation. She is thrown, spun, flipped, and swung above, between, and around Fischer's body. The specter of hazard in the choreography lends the piece an engrossing suspense.

While these acrobatic thrills are common to circus, what feels fresh in *Engel* are the performers' divided intentions. Fischer persistently attempts to free himself of his charge, while Alstadaeter desperately tries to avoid the floor. Like a child laying pillows across a carpet of shark-infested waters, Alstadaeter uses Fischer's body as a life raft in the seas of the black box theatre. This conflict produces the show's few moments of humor in which Alstadaeter outwits her partner by using his feet as her own before scaling his back like a mountain and installing herself on his head. As the piece progresses, however, the conflicts dissipate and Alstadaeter and Fischer dance more than they compete. The obligations of support opening up to the pleasures of dependence. At times the uncomplicated depiction of collaboration tips into the saccharine. In the last twenty minutes of the performance, the duo's bodily entanglements clearly resemble hugging and cradling. Foregoing the mysterious opening images, the latter half of the performance points towards more intelligible forms of reliance. While Alstadaeter and Fischer's energy and technique never flags, these gestures seem to resolve the ambiguity of the relationship of the performers into something legible—a narrative of love—that seems at odds with the earlier, energizing dangers of the circus infused choreography.

A second world premiere of the festival, *Sound of Silence*, is a Norwegian dance piece created by choreographers Mari Bø and Maria Ulvestad and sound designer Gaute Barlindhaug. At a brief thirty-minutes, the show is a series of enigmatic exercises that use choreography to produce a live soundscape. Staged in the city's Bethel church, the audience finds a tangle of chords and naked light bulbs snaking the perimeter of a white, square playing space, with seating on three sides. The weave of wires leads to a stage-left hub of electronics: a laptop, distortion pedals, and a mixing board. These conduits are the first performers we encounter. Entering the space, the equipment issues small squalls of static that cast an electro-reverence inside the church's nave, situating us as some strange parishioners of technology. The selected venue may have been the result of booking logistics in a small town, but the production's use of technology to demonstrate the immaterial was doubtless a presentation of faith.



Sound of Silence. Photo: Kristin Rønning.

We are returned to silence once Gaute Barlindhaug enters the space decked in black slacks and a white button-up shirt. A figure within Tromsø's 90s techno scene—producing acclaimed bands like Röyksopp—Barlindhaug is an accomplished electronic musician. Barlindhaug nonchalantly clicks off a distortion pedal, snapping the room into silence, before his collaborators, the dancers Mari Bø and Maria Ulvestad enter. Both trained dancers, Bø and Ulvestad previously collaborated on dance works shown throughout the country. Sporting black blazers, they offer a slight variation on their technician's formal wardrobe while projecting a similar warm informality. Meeting center stage, Bø and Ulvestad angle themselves slightly, pause, and slowly tilt forward until gravity takes hold and pulls them to the floor. The motion—at once unhurried and sudden—slices through the preceding ambience. The dancers brace themselves as they hit the floor. Their contact with the stage loops us back to that earlier sonic state. As their hands smack the floor, a digital rattle fills the room. The performers rise, reset, and collapse, again producing a distorted thunder. Dotting the downstage are flat, circular microphones amplifying the dancers' contact. From behind his equipment, Barlindhaug mixes and distorts the captured sounds, producing an echo of the past. The soundscape builds under the repetition of Bø and Ulvestad's falls as the pair introduce a complex sequence of hand movements across the floor, feeding the mics with slaps, slides, the sounds of skin brushing the marly surface. In recording and amplifying the dancers' efforts, the production renders the visual into the auditory, materializing sounds of silence.



Sound of Silence. Photo: Kristin Rønning.

Next Bø retrieves a directional microphone that looks more like a hand-held movie camera. She holds the device to her beating heart, which gives off its own pounding before measuring the sonics of her hair, eyelids, and voice. These vivid auditory fragments—in which moisture atop an eyeball is given the volume of a small stream—add some quotidian comedy. Like pressing one’s ear against the wall to better hear your fighting neighbors, each sound’s details suggest a reality just beyond our vision. The method is then unceremoniously applied to Ulvestad, whose brunette locks indeed rustle differently than Bø’s gold hair. If this all seems too slight for a performance, it is worth considering that *Sound of Silence*’s reverence bends towards amplifying the minor. In doing so, the work follows in a line of choreographic practices that understand dance as a form of technology, or, better yet, a medium understood through the potentials of technology. Fellow Norwegians, Findlay//Sandsmark are likewise composed of a sound/scenic designer and a choreographer exploring how dance and technology can activate and document one another. Or the expansive practices of Annie Dorsen who, like her clear disciples, zooms in on the imperceptible, the marginal, and incidental. The challenge of this work is its reliance on an audience’s willingness to amplify along with the microphones. To hear mountains in all these sonic molehills.



Sound of Silence. Photo: Kristin Rønning.

In its most startling exercise, Bø produces a glowing, pink mound of fabric from upstage, which she unfurls into a lightbulb-stuffed jacket. As she slides into the garment, we discover that it too is bugged with microphones transforming the act of dressing into a something like the racket of kicked trashcans. Once inside the jacket, Bø slices her arms through the air drawing cacophony from nothing. Standing from his station, Barlindhaug clicks a distortion pedal in the center of the room triggering an off-kilter hip-hop beat. Bø, in response, moves into hip-hop choreography as the electrified jacket rattles the bars of the whole enterprise. Here the production drives home its premise—a duet between choreography and its unheard sonic consequences. Then, just like that, it ends. The dance and sounds stop and we are returned to the silence of the church nave; a theatre built on belief in the invisible.

If *Sound of Silence* testifies to dance's imperceptibility, *Dance for Me*, a performance created by British-born Brogan Davison and Icelandic-born Pétur Ármannsson, employs dance to more pragmatic ends. Here dance is a prism through which to understand biography, family, and intimacy, if not dance itself. The title of the show, also the name of Davison and Ármannsson's Reykjavík-based company, holds a double meaning. The unpunctuated phrase is both a question the artists ask themselves—what is dance for me?—and the injunction to perform. In this respect, title embodies the production's central tension, the pleasures and demands of partnership and art practice.



Dance for Me. Photo: Pétur Ármannson.

The catalyst for this encounter is not romantic, however, but familial. The production centers on Davison's relationship with her father-in-law, Ármann Einarsson, the dad of her collaborator and partner. The premise is beguilingly simple. Ármann wants to learn to and practice dance from and with his daughter-in-law, Davison. The three document the process through short, low-fi video interviews around the family table. In each film, Davison and Ármann, and the off-camera son discuss Ármann's interest in dance, preparations for performance, and the show's premiere, which occurred in 2013. Their report is warm and erratic, charged with the permissiveness of familial acceptance. There is a sense that with their good intentions in tow, anything can be spoken between them; that the petty crimes of familial miscommunication never deserve more than a raised eyebrow.

Our two performers will use dance to test and affirm those bonds. The stage action is seemingly as simple as the films that back it up. Davison, wearing jeans and a t-shirt, stands behind a microphone, while Ármann sits in a soft-orange recliner listening to a record. The bare stage is left for their personalities to fill, with Ármann playing the star. A high-school music teacher who moonlights at a hotel for extra cash, Ármann wants to dance. For him this is a means of expression for a man whose spirit seems impossibly big for his body. This is no small feat. Ármann is himself substantive with a shock of thinning black hair atop a tall-frame and beer-belly, he would appear to any child as an actual giant. But it is his apparent lack of dancer training that attests to his spirit. In an opening dance salvo, Ármann runs full-speed towards the audience before stopping on a dime and gliding around the room with his wings outstretched,

but he is quickly winded and hunches over to catch his breath. Davison reminds him that his cigarette smoking is the cause—to which he shrugs. She asks how drunk Ármann plans to get after the show. A wry smile captures Ármann's face as he wheezes his one-word answer: "schnapps." As Ármann recuperates, Davison introduces herself. She suffers from depression and has a conflicted relationship to her dance practice. More importantly, she uses the opportunity to quiz her father-in-law about herself. Does he think she would be a good mother, and what, if anything, does he think of her generation? His responses: "yes" and "you worry too much."

The informality and non-virtuosity of the performances draws on tendencies throughout contemporary dance/performance. Jerome Bel's works seem a key touchstone. In *The Show Must Go On* (2001), *Disabled Theatre* (2012), and *Gala* (2015), Bel's dancers (trained and untrained) are, within the context of choreography, reframed as extraordinary by way of passion, not practice. *Dance for me* similarly draws on the egalitarian principles of documentary theatre, in which authenticity constitutes artfulness. But what distinguishes this work is not its methods, but its artists. As a biographical sketch of a family, there is a palpable sense of intimacy rippling through the show. As Davison and Ármann continually reveal themselves to and for one another, this sense spills into the auditorium. At one point, Ármann leads the audience in an impromptu sing along of a Norwegian folk song. Ármann is, after all, a music teacher, and with that comes some understanding that of the many meanings art has, some can only be understood when making it together. Just as Davison taught her father-in-law to dance for her and himself, so Ármann gave us an opportunity to sing for him and ourselves.

These sequences continue with some variety. The juxtaposition of videos, dance sequences, and conversation between the two led to biographical confessions. Ármann tells of a night of excess when he, blind drunk, headed to the bathroom to relieve himself. Cut to his son's screams. The door Ármann opened was to his sleeping-son's room. The toilet seat he lifted was his son's laptop into which he now finds himself pissing. He shakes his head as the audience roars with disbelief at this impossibly crude and loving father whose wronged son sits behind us running the lights to illuminate this story. Davison, in turn, recounts the night she was born in Brighton, England during a hurricane. Her parents, sequestered in the safety of the hospital, were spared the storm, which smashed their home's windows, sending slivers of glass across their bed. She, we are told, saved her parents' lives. While Davison's self-aggrandizement is played for laughs, it underscores the show's recurring theme: that families—made or given—save us in unexpected ways. And if art has a place at the dinner table, it is in communicating that fact.

In the final moments of the show, Davison and Ármann embark on a long duet. It is a sequence of synchronized, energetic dancing. He struggles to keep up not with the choreography, but the pace. Each time he stops, hands upon his knees to suck air, she encourages him. Davison stands patiently as her father-in-law gathers his strength. And he obliges, bypassing his body to draw from the deep well of energy reserved for the things and people you love.

Stellar Moments of Humanity, by the Austrian/Catalonian collective Electrico 28, similarly understands performance as a testament to the value of relationships. As the title suggests, the group evokes extraordinary 'moments' born of collective experience. The performance takes its title and lofty aims from the prolific Austrian writer Stefan Zweig's 1927 book, *Decisive Moments in History*. The book suggests history is shaped by the efforts of individuals, citing a series of representative events that Zweig calls "miniatures." The book's whimsical peoples-history identifies six conditions that enable transformative events: having a common objective; making a radical change; being aware of all the

details; repeating something over and over again; taking many turns in life; and, finally, if the stars are aligned.



Stellar Moments of Humanity. Photo: Laia Foradada.

Electrico 28 uses Zweig’s blueprint to investigate how performance can conjure such moments. Their method—an audio-guided walking tour of the city—is a staple of the European theatre. Rimini Protokoll’s *Remote* series is among the best known of these theatrical formats, where spectators are led on a tour of a city with the aim of seeing it as a living theatrical landscape. Electrico 28 employs similar technology—programmed headsets—but drops Protokoll’s passé and largely joyless proposal that “all the world’s a stage.” *Stellar Moments of Humanity* reorients the well-worn premise by framing the city as theatre that Electrico 28’s artists are determined to fill with theatricality.

The guides for this exercise are four performers in pea-green spandex and absurdly quaffed hairstyles. Calling themselves the Electric Four, these intergalactic adventurers are here to show us and the city a good time. As the group of forty-head-phoned-wearing spectators gather in the central square of Harstad to await our experience, a figure in a black trench coat glares at the audience conspicuously. The character slowly removes her jacket to reveal her absurd costume and hair. Soon a similar figure appears on a second-floor balcony, holding aloft an antenna, which we can assume, tunes into our headsets. As

two more figures emerge, we hear a voice explain that these self-elected, the Electric Four, will use us as allies and witnesses to their attempt to create a stellar moment. But before we strike out on our journey, we are given a sense of the hands in which we have been placed. The cosmonauts, lacking the subtleties of human social interaction, stomp around the plaza to the music piping through the headphones, perform silly dances, and playfully menace pedestrians—scooting a giggling group of school girls from a park bench to be used as dance stage. Watching from across the square, the ticketed audience quickly realizes that our guides are a bunch of clowns.



Stellar Moments of Humanity. Photo: Laia Foradada.

The sound of a telephone ringing in our headphones launches the Electric Four—and us—on a goose-chase to locate the source. Passersby are subjected to good-natured, if invasive, investigations into the source of the ringing: a baby in a pram is checked as are the backpacks, grocery bags, and cellphones of unwitting pedestrians. Once the source of the call is located—a rotatory phone stuck to the side of a parking garage—the premise of the performance is explained and we are off to create a Stellar Moment.

Our first stop is the backroom of a hotel where we are divided into two groups. The comics wordlessly switch belonging between the two audiences: hats, coats, bags, and jewelry, while gesturing instructions to take care of each other's stuff. We are then ceremoniously given gold, glitter-star headbands to wear

and taught an intergalactic salute: the left-hand middle and pointer fingers pressed to the star on our head then collectively launched into the air like a rocket. Two members of the Electric Four then lead each of the two groups on various missions throughout the city. My group was chaperoned by Jordi Solé Andrés and Lilli-Marie Mendel, with Andrés playing the joyful, exuberant fool to Mendel's impatient and all-business foil. Directed out the back of the hotel, our headphones switch to an upbeat electronic pop beat, ideal for a spirited walk. And that's what we do—we parade through Harstad with our fools playing proud, but clueless emissaries. They saunter into oncoming traffic and greet any pedestrian puzzled by twenty, gold-star-headband-wearing adults and two weirdos in key lime exercise suits. All but one impatient motorist, who Andrés deftly redirected like a bullfighter, seemed to find our presence a pleasant distraction.

The next stop was a playground where we practiced “having a common objective.” Inside a small courtyard dotted with park toys an audience member is selected for a game of hopscotch leading to a hidden map. Once unfurled, the image shows instructions for a sculpture of balancing rocks. The planter stacked with little boulders suddenly makes sense. As Andrés holds up the instructions we tentatively assemble the structure rock by rock. The completed sculpture looks nothing like the image, but our guides care little—it is the effort that counts; we aren't here to get it right, we are here to get it done. And, more importantly, to do it together. With our first mission complete we again give the Electric Four salute: index and pointer finger to our star-headbands and then, on our guides' cues, we throw them up to the wind like a leaf we finished admiring.

There is something freeing in their acceptance of our efforts. I rarely enjoy immersive performances, let alone ones that call for interaction. Participation often strikes me as a failure of theatrical imagination. That, in solving the riddle of how to engage an audience, artists become shockingly literal. The trouble emerges from a reliance on the idea that where the body goes so goes the mind. The impressive mazes of Punchdrunk or Rimini Protokoll's immersive, site-specific works are frequently burdened with self-important insights, overwrought performances, and shoddily constructed stories. The productions act like sophisticated adults to better tell you children's stories. At the start of *Stellar Moments*, I was seized by the cold fear of being condescended to. What quickly elevated the work, however, was its very superficiality, its playing for comedy, its acceptance that, perhaps you can create a stellar moment, or not, but you can build rock sculptures, not because it is profound, but because it feels good and what is more profound than the capacity for joy?

The next task was to make a radical change. The uplifting music returns as we bop thorough the streets and snake up a flight of stairs and into a small, working hair salon. As we pass the bemused owners of the shop, a ripple of recognition hits: it was, of course, Coco Chanel who taught us that, “A woman who cuts her hair is about to change her life,” but even the novelist Thomas Pynchon understood, “change your hair change your life.” As a bald man, I stood confident knowing that my radical hair change was long complete. A customer having her hair done watched amusingly while a young woman from our group was swiftly selected, placed in a chair, and wrapped in a black bib. Shears, however, never appeared; instead our leaders seized on the woman's bangs trying to replicate their own heavy-hair-sprayed coifs. Uncorking massive cans of hairspray, the volunteer was quickly engulfed in a transforming cloud of faux-aqua-net. The amateur-stylists then set to work teasing her bangs into swoop last seen in 1980s. The shop's owners and customers giggled as our tour guides turned on the larger group baptizing us with the simple spray of radical transformation.

With some changes under our belts, we saunter to a massive graffiti mural where our powers of observations were tested. Standing a good fifty feet from the muraled wall, we are told to close our eyes while our hosts augment the scene. Our task is to find the changes. We are given an audio cue telling us when to open our eyes, at which time we scan the scene for developments. In the initial go-round, a rubber ducky was affixed to the wall, then a picture frame, then one guide disappeared, and finally, a grotesque pile of fake poop materialized. The task is pure child's play. Peek-a-boo in a parking lot.

For our final task, we are shepherded to a vacant lot where a basketball hoop sits suggestively in the distance. Here we are trained in the art of repeating something over and over again. As we line up across from the net, a basketball mysteriously flies into the lot. Our task is, again, clear. The first volunteer is placed a near-impossible distance from the hoop, but her valiant effort inspires a series of participants, each of whom is moved a bit closer to the backboard. Finally, a young man flips the ball into the hoop: swish; nothing but net. The guides embrace the unwitting athlete and the three jumps together in a small circle. We burst into applause. We're getting better at this thing, becoming children.

We stride on to the Harstad docks where the fjord is draped in clouds that occasionally slip, exposing mountains in the near distance. The guides lead us down the boat ramp where vessels bump and nudge against rubber buffers, and down a flight of stairs into the concrete, underwater structure of the dock. The room is small and freezing. Images of fisherman and big catches are pasted to the wall. A young woman in a yellow fisherman's outfit appears from a corridor to serve us thimbles of cold tea, before we head to the surface again. This was the performance's most puzzling or underdeveloped moment. The confusion comes from the fact that until now, we have been the city's oddities, yoked to space-aliens in pursuit of goofball Enlightenment. Why then have we come to a private encounter with another performer?

The question is quickly stifled as we ascend to the docks and see a familiar visage on the horizon: the other half of our party and their tour guides. Walking towards each other, we are encouraged to hold hands. Some pull the group forward with the urgency of reunion, quickening our collective steps. When we meet, many hugged, all exchanged the articles they safeguarded, and everyone seemed to be smiling. But my stellar moment was in the following seconds. As we busied ourselves with feigned and actual gestures of reunion, our guides slipped a good hundred feet away to look back on their creation. The Electric Four stood in a line, and so did we—mirroring them for one last intergalactic salute. I was not excited for my reunion, but as I launched my fingers from my forehead in a final salute, I knew I would miss my new alien-friends who believe that theatricality's power comes from its propensity for pleasure. Then they turned and sprinted up the docks, their green capes waving a final goodbye as they disappeared into the arctic distance.

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