

Norwegian theatre-makers under political pressure for criticising politicians in power

The media narrative and debates about the theatre production Ways of Seeing shows a Norwegian public sphere under pressure from anti-democratic forces.

By Ragnhild Freng Dale

Text commissioned by Pia Maria Roll, Hanan Benammar, Sara Baban and Black Box teater.

Censorship and threats to artists is not normally associated with Scandinavian countries, but events in Norway over the past months invites us to think otherwise. Since late November last year, a group of independent theatremakers have been subject to intense political pressure, sensational media coverage and direct as well as indirect allegations of invasion of privacy and links to a series attacks mounted to the house of the former Minister of Justice, Tor Mikkjel Wara.

The Minister left his post on 28 March 2019, after the Norwegian Police Security Service (PST) pressed charges against his partner for [setting fire to the family's car](#). She is currently a suspect in other incidents but it is too early to say what the outcome of the investigations will be.

The controversies started in November 2018, when the theatre production by Pia Maria Roll, Hanan Benammar, Sara Baban and Marius von der Fehr premiered at Black Box theatre in Oslo. In the four months that have followed, the artists behind the theatre production, *Ways of Seeing*, have been wrongfully under fire from right wing politicians and sensational media coverage. The description of the production, published on the [Black Box teater's home pages](#), said the piece “mapped the networks whose interest it is to make Norway a more racist society.” On stage, two of the actors, Hanan Benammar and Sara Baban, go on a ‘pilgrimage’ through Oslo’s suburbs, in an effort to understand how Norway has become a more racist society, and who has made this possible. They turn the gaze of the audience towards powerful politicians and the billionaires who sponsor far right publications such as Resett and Human Rights Service (online platforms which claim to offer an ‘alternative’ to the main stream media, but is associated with the far right and Islamophobic content).

In the story told on stage, they hide in the bushes outside these homes. Footage of actual houses are used as a backdrop, anonymous-looking facades behind hedges, filmed or photographed from a public place on the street. The actors only ever quote public statements, and no names or addresses of family members are mentioned in the production. Former Supreme Court judge Ketil Lund (who led the [Lund Commission](#) which revealed the Norwegian government’s systematic surveillance of citizens from 1945 onwards, particularly those associated with the political left), also appears on stage, and discusses with actor Baban how their actions are legal, as well as the increased and much more serious changes in what kind of information authorities can access and collect about their citizens in contemporary Norway.

Already in its first week, late November, the production sparked debates and controversy: right-wing publications such as Human Rights Service, document.no, and Resett immediately published articles and commentaries defaming the production, accusing the artists

of violating the privacy of the persons named. Politicians of Norway's Progress Party (FrP), who have been part of the government since 2013, accused Black Box teater of indecency, and several of them wanted the support to be removed. The Minister of Public Security, Ingvild Smines Tybring-Gjedde, told Resett she had taken the case "higher in the political system", but later [refused to explain](#) what she had meant to the Norwegian newspaper Dagbladet. Parliamentary representative Christian Tybring-Gjedde of FrP used his public Facebook page to spread sensational and incorrect information about what he called the 'hateful theatre' of Black Box teater. He also targeted one of the actors in the production, Sara Baban, and wrote that she was "posing with a machine gun" and "this is how refugees thank Norway for being welcomed here" on her Facebook profile picture. Almost immediately following the post, Baban received several threatening messages, which [she later reported to the police](#).

The fact that the piece is a work of fiction; that a ghost who fought in the Algerian struggle against French colonialism appears on stage, or that it is not only politicians on the political right, but also former Labour Party leader, now NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg whose house is pictured in the play, seemed to either escape or be deliberately neglected in the narrative produced by most media and those who criticised the production.

In December, council representatives for FrP in Oslo, where Black Box teater is located, attempted to [remove the funding](#) from the theatre. Along with most critics of the production, they did not distinguish between the independent artists who made the production and the theatre, which is a programming theatre and co-producer of the production. Further, they only targeted three of the artists, all women and two of them ethnic minorities in Norway. The proposal was not backed by any other party, but nevertheless [shocked the directors of several theatres in Norway](#) and politicians in Oslo, who called it attempts at political censorship. Oslo FrP has since kept claiming that the theatre broke the law and should have its funding removed.

But where did all narrative of violation of privacy come from? Though the production did not mention details of family members at all, this narrative was repeated multiple times by the press in the following weeks and months, where the idea that the artists had actually hid in the bushes for days and weeks and covertly filmed the homes was taken to be true, along with the idea that this exposed the politicians to risk. Much of it started when Laila Anita Bertheussen, the partner of Tor Mikkell Wara (who until 28 March was Minister of Justice), published a [chronicle in the Norwegian newspaper VG](#) on 1 December 2018. She had seen the theatre production a few days before, where she filmed and disrupted the running of the show, a fact its director, Pia Maria Roll, mentioned in a debate on the live debate programme [Dagsnytt 18](#) on November 28, 2018. Bertheussen reacted strongly to the filming of the house, and accused the theatre of illegally invading their privacy and dragging her into the public sphere.

It is a paradox that many of the critics of the piece, who claim it invaded the privacy of elected politicians, themselves revealed details of personal lives and family members in public statements. Wara's partner was, for example, not known until she wrote in VG, but her claims, backed by speculations in the media, changed the narrative: instead of discussing racism in Norway and the content of the piece, the public debate concerned what was appropriate to show on a theatre stage. With a [few exceptions](#), this version, as well as the accusation that Wara had been called 'racist' in the production, became dominant in the public sphere.

On 19 December, Bertheussen [reported three of the artists](#), Roll, Baban and Benammar, to the police, as well as the director of Black Box teater, Anne-Cécile Sibué-Birkeland, for violation of her privacy. The case was rejected by the police in January, as they found there was no reason to investigate whether a violation of the law had taken place. Bertheussen filed a complaint on 7 January, which was rejected again a month later, this time by the Police Prosecutor. The State Prosecutor then intervened, and on 14 February [ordered Oslo Police District to reopen the case](#) – a reopening which would later prove to be based solely on what Bertheussen had reported to the police and without contacting the artists.

In the same period, [a series of incidents](#) around Wara and Bertheussen's house took place: in December, someone spraypainted 'rasisist' on their wall (a misspelling of 'racist' in Norwegian), sent threatening letters, and attempted to set fire to the couple's car in March. The Norwegian Police Security Service (which operates under the Ministry of Justice) had the incidents as their top priority for weeks, closely followed by the media.

Though there was no evidence to tie the artists to the events, they received little support for the threats levelled at them during the same period. The media continued to make links between the production and the attacks, repeating that they had ['covertly filmed'](#) the houses and implicitly making a 'guilt by association' in their coverage. On 12 March, director [Pia Maria Roll told VG](#) neither she nor any of the other artists had ever been interviewed by the police, and that they obviously had no motive to attack the house. The Minister of Justice, Wara, told VG there was a ['chain of events'](#) between the theatre production and the attacks on his house. He was careful to not directly claim the theatre was responsible, but had earlier called the theatre ['morally bankrupt'](#) in the newspaper Aftenposten in December.

The same idea was reflected by the Prime Minister of Norway, Erna Solberg (of the Conservative Party), who on 13 March [criticised the theatre director](#), Pia Maria Roll, in public. Solberg said the theatre production had "made it harder to be a politician", by drawing attention to their homes and families. The Prime Minister had not seen the production herself, and based her statements on the claims brought into the public sphere by, amongst others, Bertheussen and a number of right-wing publications. According to Jon Wessel-Aas, who was hired as the lawyer of Roll, Benammar and Baban the same week, these statements insinuated a link between the artists and the events at Wara and Bertheussen's house, a connection he [protested heavily against](#).

On 14 March, [Bertheussen was charged by PST](#) for the last incident near her family home, setting fire to the family's car to give the impression something illegal had taken place. Solberg [refused to apologise](#) for her statements at the press conference the same day, instead repeating that the families had been impacted and claiming freedom of speech and the right to criticise the production.

The same week, the police decided to charge the artists and the director of Black Box teater for violation of privacy, and asked the Oslo District Court [permission to search their houses](#). The District Court rejected this, but the police appealed the decision. The lawyer of the theatre filed a complaint supported by the lawyer of the artists, and the case was [dismissed for the last time only days later](#), as again, no violation of the law had taken place. The events nevertheless added to the pressure on the artists, and their lawyer, Wessel-Aas, has since sent a [complaint to the Oslo Police District, also this supported by the lawyer of the theater](#). The complaint details the course of events and demands compensation for the wrongful accusations and treatment they have been subject to from the police, who for weeks spoke to the press about the investigations without giving the artists details of what they were accused of.

The series of events, and particularly the statements from the Prime Minister, caused outrage from cultural workers and politicians from the opposition. A large number of artistic organisations, political parties and labour unions has since come out in support and solidarity: [55 organisations supported demonstrations](#) for artistic freedom and solidarity with the artists in Oslo, Bergen, Trondheim and Kristiansand on 23 March. Many of the speakers voiced concern for a potential ["chilling" effect](#) of the Prime Minister's statement, particularly seen in conjunction with FrP's statements and attempts to remove the funding for the theatre and the artists.

The Prime Minister has had several questions of whether she will make an apology, but has thus far refused to do so. On 27 March, she was asked directly [five times during Question time in Parliament](#), but refused to admit that her statements and incorrect description of the theatre production has added to the pressure the artists have faced.

Combined, the high level of inaccurate and deliberately misinformed renderings of the

theatre production, and the accusations of associated guilt for the attacks on a Minister's house, has put extensive pressure on the artists involved in the theatre production, and on Black Box teater. All of them have received threats and trolling via email, Facebook and phone calls, accusations of being a terrorist or threatening national security. Much of this has been racial slur, directed at them as ethnic minorities in Norway.

Parts of the media have also continued adding to the pressure. After the Arts Council's grants for artists for 2019 onwards was announced on 29 March, the public broadcaster NRK wrote the artists had received "[2.7 million Norwegian kroner](#)", implicitly linking the money to Ways of Seeing, instead of explaining that the approx. 270 000 NOK/year had been granted for 5, 3 and 2 years to each of the artists individually, to realise future projects. The grants are part of a [yearly grant round](#), where 861 other artists also received similar grants. NRK, instead of explaining this to the public, interviewed Christian Tybring-Gjedde, one the FrP politicians who has been spreading sensational and incorrect information about the production and the artists.

The way the press, the police and national politicians have handled the events around Ways of Seeing, shows that freedom of speech in Norway is under pressure from anti-liberal and anti-democratic forces. It is of utmost importance to ensure that the structures protecting freedom of speech and artistic freedom is strengthened in the time to come, and that they can make work without fear of sanctions also when they criticise those in power.

Oslo, 12 April, 2019