

Excavating AmerikA

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SCENE

DOCUMENTATION

PERFORMANCE

Once upon a time, in the centre of Oslo, there was a place called AmerikA. Spelled just like that – a “k” instead of a “c”, and the last A capitalized. If you wrote it by hand, you would circle that last A, graffiti-style. It was neither a continent nor a country, but a smaller place, a single location: A large, magical garbage heap which came alive, pulsating with light and life, attracting the crazy, the destitute, the incomprehensibly visionary. It grew out of the asphalt to exist briefly but intensely, for one weekend of the autumn of 2000, before it disappeared – far more suddenly than it had appeared. It was called, by one visitor, “the greatest thing in Norwegian art since Munch”. And it was a larp.

It was, by most measures, the largest larp ever held in Norway. It took almost a hundred organisers and volunteers, organised in multiple networks, committees and subcommittees, to build the whole thing. Production-wise, it was the size of a Swedish 1000-player larp, or a British

3.000-player fest. It drew on the services and sponsorships of dozens of companies, institutions and organisations. It was played by hundreds, closely watched by thousands, observed by tens of thousands. Its economy was modest, relying on material donations and volunteers rather than cash – but had services been paid for the normal way, AmerikA’s budget would have been in the millions of Euros.

It is also, perhaps, the most forgotten larp in Norway. Google it, and you will find only some sporadic mentions on larper websites. Most larps suffer this fate – as endeavours, they are similar to sandcastles, reaching their most complete state the moment before they are washed away by the tide. But the large, ambitious, unique larps are usually rewarded with a longer life. Amongst the old-timers, we still talk about the larps of the 1990s. We still invoke the ghosts of *Kybergenesis* or *Knappnålshuvudet* or the Bronze Age larp of 1996. Our favourite larps stay alive as online photo galleries, as Knutebook reports, and as nostalgic conversations. Not so with AmerikA. More film and megapixels were used, more videotapes recorded, to document AmerikA than any other Norwegian larp – but the documentation has been conspicuously hard to find, online and offline.

To this amateur archaeologist of lost larps, the relative obscurity of AmerikA poses two interesting questions. First: If it was forgotten due to mistakes made, might there be something to learn from those mistakes? The “mistake” angle, however, does not ring true. Spectacularly ambitious larps have, in the past, caused a lot of talk even as failures – *Mineva*, a Swedish steampunk larp that was promoted but never held is still considered a canonical larp by some. Hence, AmerikA’s disappearance from the larp discourse must have some other explanation, and our second question is the more intriguing one: what has caused this relative obscurity?

I write as only partially an outsider. I was a late arrival to the Welt-schmerz network, the loose group that organized AmerikA and its smaller successor Europa. While a principal organiser of Europa, I was a player and only one of many helping hands at AmerikA, though perhaps with more access than most to the main organisers and internal discussions of AmerikA.



- The quiet place at the highest point of the mountain of garbage.

Photo
Britta Bergersen

Origins

However unique and untraditional, AmerikA was not born in a vacuum. The typical Norwegian larp of the 1990s would be set in the fantasy genre and last for five days of uninterrupted role-playing. The earliest such larps – heavy with swords and sorcery – were plagued by the problem of dead characters. Once a character was dead, the player needed a new character, and as a 5-day larp progressed it would get harder and harder to figure out which player is playing which character. Norwegian larpwrights began limiting the potential for character death and, hence, reduced combat and the kind of magic that kills characters. This dynamic, combined with



player preferences, led to a progressively stronger emphasis on the personalities, cultures, society and politics of the characters.

From approximately 1995, some of these cultural simulations – especially in Oslo – began commenting on contemporary society or recent history. The larps *Sunrise High* (a high school drama) and *P13* (a hostage-taking thriller) were pastiches of pop culture but also explorations of US society in the shadows of the Korea and Vietnam wars. *Kybergenesis* dramatized Orwell's dystopia “1984” in a larpified study of raw, totalitarian power, while the “Social Femocracy” larps (subtitled “*A Kindergarten teacher’s dream*”) were respectively interpreted as utopias or dystopias depending on which player you asked. The historical larps *1944*

■ A sample of the AmerikAns.

Photo
Britta Bergersen

and *1942 – noen å stole på?* (the latter also held in 2000, and a contestor for the title of “largest Norwegian larp”) brought attention to the realities of Norway’s World War II history, highlighting but also nuancing the official narrative of universal national resistance.

The Weltschmerz Network

It was from players and organisers of some of these larps that the “Weltschmerz Network” crystallized, with start-up meetings and brainstorm sessions held in 1998. The name is one of those seeming self-contradictions that characterize the project – *weltschmerz* (a sense of hopelessness, giving up on the world) was precisely the opposite of what Weltschmerz (the network) was trying to achieve. It was not irony – but the opposite: taking the component German words “world” and “pain” literally. The idea was precisely to expose the “pains of the world”, with the aim to change the world rather than withdraw from it.

The network was founded on the belief that larps might be used not just as political commentaries, but also political tools – playground worlds designed to affect change in the real world. There was some justification for this belief: players had reportedly walked off previous politically themed larps, especially *Kybergenesis*, with radically revised worldviews and political opinions.¹ And larps themselves were media magnets – a hundred costumed players in the woods drew far more press attention than a hundred protesters waving placards in the city.

A second, entangled, current also found its home in the Weltschmerz network: that of seeing larp not just as a form of art, but as something superior to traditional art: more democratic, more inclusive, more powerful in the individual experience and collective transformations it could effect. These two trends were, at the time, easy to unite. Politically themed art, and discussions on the political relevance of art, were once again becoming prominent in the art establishment, a discourse that resonated with the Weltschmerz larps. Furthermore, various artists and art movements – from interactive and environmental theatre to the net.art and interactive

¹ The ethical problems of such manipulative larpwrighting were not discussed much at the time. To our defense, the “radically changed worldviews” were still not the worldviews of the organisers.

installations of the 90s – had sought to make art more interactive. With some justification, the Weltschmerzners saw larp as the final form of this journey: an art form that was *inherently* interactive and participatory.

An important caveat: The Weltschmerz ideology was never formalized, and there was never complete agreement on what the ideology entailed, but a cluster of ideological statements could be seen in the slogans that surrounded the project: “The age of irony is over”, “nothing is true unless it is on television”, “Our world, served raw”, and “Fuck passive art!”. There were certainly Weltschmerz members who did not agree with any of these statements but participated nonetheless. Weltschmerz was a big tent, a blessing but also a curse which, we shall see, came back to haunt AmerikA.

From network to production team

As with ideology, so with organisation: There were tenets of a belief – in informal networks, flexible organisations – that were never brought to a cohesive whole but rather interpreted in different ways by different members. Among the network’s initiators were three old-timers of the Oslo scene – Hanne Grasmø, Attila Steen-Hansen and Erlend Eidsem, who were to serve as AmerikA’s director, producer and lead scenographer, transiting from “network members” to hierarchical positions in the process. Still, networked modes of organization could be seen in the way different subdivisions of the hierarchy were given unusually extensive autonomy to make major decisions on their own domain, whether it was dramaturgy or the physical shape of the garbage heap, and further recruit organizers and volunteers through their own personal networks.

While most of the other Weltschmerzners were larpers, several had only a tangential connection to larp and a stronger connection to either “art”, “politics”, or both. The network met partially on an e-mail list, partially at brainstorm sessions where ideas for future projects were freely discussed.

From those early brainstorm sessions came the concept of a series of “continent larps”, each one focusing on “world problems” with a continent as metaphor, and the notion of placing a garbage heap in the centre of Oslo. When the time came to put ideas into action, they were combined and the “slum town” became AmerikA.



- The Fortress of Washing Machines, home to SevenS, black-clad women who communicated only through song. In the background: headquarters of the national labour unions.

Photo
Britta Bergersen

Concept

“Garbage 1:

Waste. Trash. Rats. Blood. Stains. Rags. Leftovers. Dust.
Rust. Stench. Fumes. Puke. Broken. Damaged. Buried.
Hidden. Forgotten.

Garbage 2:

Shreddable commerciality.”

- from the AmerikA website²

² The original pre-game version of the website is located at <http://weltschmerz.laiv.org/AmerikA/index2.htm>

The narrative, as it was marketed beforehand, was this: A winning lottery ticket has been inadvertently thrown away. Media has tracked its path through the waste handling system, to the garbage pile AmerikA, home to tons of rubbish and a few dozen homeless. Suddenly thrust into the limelight, AmerikA is sought out by treasure-hunters of all kinds, scavenging for the lottery ticket.

At the larp, some were to play the resident “homeless” – who had built their homes on the garbage heap – others to play secondary full-time characters, who were frequent visitors to the heap, and a final group were to play different kinds of invaders – treasure-hunters, tourists doing “slumming”, their guides and facilitators, as well as others. The genre was announced as “magical realism” – and while it was gritty, dirty and impoverished there was also magic aplenty, and a certain degree of abstraction. For example, the organisers declined to specify which country AmerikA was located in, never mind whether it was diegetically placed in the centre of Oslo.

AmerikA and America

The name was not only a reference to the United States, although distorted American flags and images of Lady Liberty featured in some of the promotional material. It was rather a reference to the Americas; north, south and centre; and to some aspects of what they represent to Europeans.

AmerikA the larp focused on liberty (seen in the main cast of characters), exploitative capitalism (seen in the primary antagonist), constructive capitalism and the American dream (hinted at in the in-game economy), and more than anything on consumerism and the rich-poor gap, manifested in the very public display of the garbage that is the hidden excrement of consumerism.

Still, these aspects of “America” were sources of inspiration, rather than a “message”. There was never one Message to AmerikA, never a single answer to the question “So what was AmerikA about?” There were plenty, overlapping and sometimes contradictory statements made either explicitly by organisers or implicitly by their work. It visualized poverty, and the rich-poor divide, but it was not a hardcore larp where players would feel, on their body, the life of the dwellers in Earths worst slums. AmerikA can easily be accused of romanticizing poverty, as many of its central characters were voluntary outcasts, dignified in their rags, well fed – presumably unlike the involuntary poor. But their dignity, romance, and semi-voluntary estrangement from respectable society would not be apparent to the casual observer. To the citizens of Oslo, the citizens of AmerikA were presented as pitiful, outcasts, the monsters of underclass given centre stage. Was it then a moral tale, about the inherent humanity of the impoverished, the romance of life to be discovered under a dirty surface? Was the tale meant for the role-players, or those who watched them?

The lottery ticket narrative, likewise, could be seen as a story about the search for happiness, symbolized by gambling wealth. But was it also a critique of this narrative – an emphasis on the futility of the quest for material riches? Who were the happier: the desperate treasure-hunters who did not find the ticket, the hobos who did not even search for it, or the yuppies who were so bored with their own wealth they needed to enter the slum for a taste of excitement?

And what shall we make of the choice of Youngstorget as the location for the game? Known to Norwegians as “maktens torg”, the marketplace of power, Youngstorget is surrounded by the offices of political

parties and the main labour unions. Was it to spite them or to identify with them that tons of garbage were placed in their midst and turned into a larp?

These questions cannot be resolved, for the simple reason that the answer will depend on whom of the organisers you ask, and the final form of the larp combined ideas from all of them. And, as we shall see, the intentions of the organisers did not necessarily match what actually occurred at AmerikA. Once the larp was left in the hands of its players, it took on a life of its own.

The characters

The number of “players” at AmerikA is hard to count. Some thirty to fifty players had prepared for months, including three full weekends of drama exercises (for one weekend of larp) to play the core community of the garbage heap. More full-time characters (nobody knows how many) were added as the larp came closer. During the larp came the one-shot characters, their players recruited from the street, who walked in for a few hours of play. Guided tours brought scores of tourists being shown around the garbage pile for half-hour trips. And finally, there were the spectators: people who stood outside AmerikA, staring in, observing, some glued to the spot for the entire weekend.

From this onion-like structure of participation, we find an onion-like structure of characters: at the heart were the *bergboer*³, the citizens of the garbage heap. They had little in common except for being outcasts, some voluntarily so. An old prostitute, a bottle-cap general, a mad preacher, a woman who was a cat, a non-abusive paedophile: this is just a sample of the characters that lived on AmerikA, calling it their “home”.

Outside these, but still full time characters: the invaders and ancillaries – the Real Life Company (RLC), a corporation specializing in “slumming” and extreme tourism, the gangs Crazy Dogs and the Rats, the seven women who lived in a fortress of washing machines and com-

³ The Norwegian word “bergboere” literally translates as “mountain-livers”, and can apply to someone who lives on top of or inside a mountain. Additionally, the word has folkloric connotations, as trolls were said to inhabit the inside of mountains. “Bergboer” is the singular, “bergboere” the indefinite plural and “bergboerene” the definite plural. In this article, I have used “bergboer” as the English plural form.





- (left) "Herr P", the oldest of the *bergboer* and the first to settle on the garbage pile.
- (middle) The woman who was a cat.
- (right) A character consorting with a sanitation worker (organiser).

Photo
Britta Bergersen

municated only through song, as well as groups who pretended to belong to one of the former categories but had sinister agendas of their own.

Then there were the part-timers – treasure hunters, expelled kids in search of a home, the General’s ex-wife, a DJ working for the Real Life Company – characters that would enter for a few hours with some minor connection to the society of AmerikA.

Even less committed: the tourists, brought into AmerikA for even briefer periods on slumming tours, trash-techno parties, waving cameras and expensive electronics, tourists both in-game and off.

And finally, there were the spectators. AmerikA was walled off, but from the terrace on the north end of Youngstorget any pedestrian could have an excellent view of the larp. Some stood there for almost the whole duration of AmerikA, following the movements of a hundred characters – reality theatre before the break-through of reality TV. No-one thought to interview the spectators, or figure out what their experience was like, but the following anecdote is telling: late at night, a stranger walked up to the organisers by the gates of the larp, and exclaims: “I’m so exhausted... I’ve stood up there and watched for fifteen hours... now I have to get some sleep. But I’ll be back first thing in the morning!”

My own lens to AmerikA was through playing the character of Aronsen, the junk dealer. Our shop, mine and my assistants’, was an old bus, with half on the inside and half on the outside of the wall that surrounded AmerikA. We would buy items of interest from the citizens of AmerikA on the inside, and resell them to shoppers on the outside. Each customer was told not just the price of the artefacts, but also their history – “This lighter here may seem old and insignificant, but in fact, it was once used by a young man to light the cigarette of a young woman whom he had just met but would subsequently marry. And this old typewriter...” All of Aronsens stories were true, and when he bought artefacts their price were determined by the value of the stories that they held.

Gritty magic

Aronsens supernatural ability to sense the history of objects was an example of AmerikAs “magical realism”: there were no wizards or vampires or spells going “flash!” and “bang!”. No rules were needed to simulate this magic – it was embedded in the characters, enacted in dramatic expression and improvisation. Its magic was manifest in little things, oddities of nature, character back-stories, trivial yet symbolic.

Perhaps the closest cultural reference to AmerikA can be found in the movies of Emir Kusturica, and especially *Age of the Gypsies* – where the protagonist’s mystical talent at telekinesis, and visitations from the ghost of his dead mother, do absolutely nothing to save him from a life of crime, tragedy and poverty yet illuminate his story, lend to it some meaning and sense of wonder. And the lives of the AmerikAns were tragic, poor, sometimes criminal – but also strangely numinous with meaning.

Character development

For the players at the heart of the onion, a great deal of time was spent by the larpwrights on coming up with and refining character ideas. These ideas were sometimes written, sometimes communicated verbally, sometimes developed through discussions between player and larpwright. Further development happened at the drama workshops, where each character was associated with an animal and the players were led – through drama exercises – to “evolve” the character from animal to human, borrowing personality and body language from the animal spirit.

Of the *bergboer*, each character was individual, personal, and only the players have a complete picture of their characters. The individuality and subjectivity of the characters make them hard to document, unlike the achievements of contemporary Swedish and Finnish arthaus larp with their elaborate written texts. But the sheer joy of exploration that could be obtained from meeting, interacting with, and understanding



AmerikAs gallery of characters points to the larp as a truly extraordinary accomplishment of both role-playing and larp authorship.

However, as we progress further out from the centre of the onion, characters become increasingly brief and generic. The gangs Crazy Dogs and the Rats were unique and well-defined as groups, but individual characters were left for players to refine from a collective template. The Real Life Company was defined by function rather than personality – “Cook”, “Guide”, “Manager”. Work did go into supporting players in their individual character development, but it was nowhere near as refined as that spent on the *bergboer*. Some groups, such as “the witches” seemed like they were introduced only to increase the number of players: a larp cliché if ever there was one, and one that felt quite alien to AmerikA. At the extreme end, each tourist had only the character of “tourist”, in-game and off, probably the simplest playable generic character ever invented.

This, I should add, was neither coincidence nor necessarily poor craft: there was a conscious decision by the organisers to focus their creative effort on the central characters at the expense of the others, in the belief that excellent role-playing by the *bergboer* would carry the larp for other players as well as spectators. While this hypothesis may have been correct, it did not correspond well with larpers’ expectations of equal treatment and post-larp feedback included complaints of neglect or poor dramaturgy from non-*bergboer* players.

- A nighttime display of photographic art. The cross above was erected by AmerikA’s resident mad preacher.

Photo
Britta Bergersen

Dramaturgy

With any larp, we can talk of two dramaturgies – the one intended by the larpwrights beforehand, the *fabula*, and the actual observable interaction of players, the *larp situation*. At AmerikA, these diverged to an unusual degree.

Here is how I think the larp was intended to be played: a host of treasure hunters would descend on AmerikA, encounter and interact with its central characters, who might support or oppose the treasure-hunt



but in any event provide some fine role-playing. Since several false lottery tickets were planted, and at least one of the groups pretending to be the Lottery Commission had other, more sinister, motives, the plot would twist and turn until eventually the ticket would be found and the larp would be over. In the mean time colour would be provided by a number of minor plots, such as “The Rats” attempting to establish themselves on “Crazy Dogs” territory, the *bergboer* would be their usual entertaining selves, and the Real Life Company with their guests would watch from the sidelines.

In the larp as it was actually played, the lottery ticket was only one of several lesser stories, not particularly important to other characters than the treasure hunters. The central conflict of the larp situation came to be between the “citizens” – gangs and *bergboer* – and the Real Life Company (RLC). The attitude of the citizens towards the RLC was not clearly defined before the larp, but players naturally interpreted it as hostile. As the Real Life Company held slumming tours and sat perched on the roof of the café, laughing at the poor sods down on the ground, hostility increased.

The incident by the television temple

The turning point came on Friday evening, when a (real) camera crew with a (real) TV star⁴ were guided around AmerikA by the RLC as part of a (role-played) initiation rite for the spoilt (real/role-played) TV star. The TV team’s arrogant behaviour (not role-played, but interpreted as if it were) provoked the citizens in several different ways, culminating in a near-violent situation when the TV team tried to enter the Temple of Discarded Televisions, a holy place to many of the *bergboer*, and were surrounded by a mob of angry, threatening natives. The threatening behaviour of that mob is some of the most realistic-looking role-play I have seen at larp – the crowd were intimidating both in-game and off, furious both as characters and players. The border that separates role-play from authentic behaviour was particularly porous in this situation, as the camera team

- A moment of silent meditation inside the temple of discarded televisions. The text on the refrigerator refers to God and to Norway’s most popular brand of frozen pizza.

Photo
Britta Bergersen

⁴ The “star” in question was comedienne Anne-Kat Hærland, at the time the hostess of the show “Nytt på Nytt” on NRK, the Norwegian public broadcaster.

undoubtedly saw themselves as being outside of the game. Eventually, the team and its star, chose to leave rather than fight, and in the later report that aired on TV the scene by the temple is the final one.

The siege of the Real Life Café

The “TV team incident” was followed by several more incidents and constant tension. The climactic moment came on Saturday, when the RLC tried – unsuccessfully – to resolve tensions by holding a speech directed towards the *bergboer* from the platform of their café. Mid-speech, the café was stormed by 20+ citizens, and the RLC spent the rest of the larp on their platform in a state of siege, reduced to a symbol of the Enemy: those who had cast us out, or those from whom we sought isolation.

In retrospect, it seems obvious that the presence of a Real Life Company intruding on the grounds of AmerikA’s outcast society would lead to conflict. But the organisers had not intended this. The RLCs dramaturgical function was to provide a way for part-time characters to enter

- AmerikAns playing war-drums on a discarded pipe.

Photo

Britta Bergersen



the larp – its symbolic function was to embody the contrast between rich and poor, haves and have-nots, garbage producers and garbage collectors. That this contrast ended up as actual conflict is, at least in part, due to one of those small misunderstandings that can have big consequences at a larp.

How real is an unreal contract?

AmerikA had an owner – the character of the “Trash Baron”. She owned the ground upon which AmerikA stood, ran the garbage dumping business, and gave the *bergboer* permission to stay there in return for a small rent and other services. The Baron was the highest-status character in the game, and we were instructed that when the Baron said “jump!”, we jumped. The organisers had intended for the RLC to be present under the Trash Barons protection, and communicated this by holding a mini-larp where RLC and the Baron agreed on the terms of protection. At that mini-larp, agreement was reached, and the RLC promised to send a formal contract for the Baron to sign. During the time that passed between the mini-larp and AmerikA, no contract was produced. The RLC players saw this as an “off-game” matter – that the contract had been sent, read and signed without the need to role-play. The Baron’s court interpreted it is an in-game matter – that no such contract existed. Subsequently, when push came to shove at the larp, the RLC found itself without the Baron’s protection.

This begs the question: would things have happened differently, if this misunderstanding had not occurred? I doubt it. The “TV Team Incident” was situated on the border between in-game and off, characters and their players. The camera crew in all likelihood thought of themselves as off-game observers, and the behaviour interpreted as arrogant and provocative by the characters was merely the behaviour of professionals doing their job documenting people they thought of as actors.

When the players chose to interpret the camera crew as in-game, and express their hostility towards them through fairly real-looking

physical role-play, a boundary was crossed. The players did not disobey any formal rules of the larp, but they asserted their right to decide what was diegetic – a power traditionally held by the larpwright or gamesmaster. Similarly, the characters did not disobey the Baron’s orders, as no such orders were given, but they claimed AmerikA as their territory in unambiguous terms. This was AmerikA’s Rubicon moment – from that point, there was no turning back. I suspect that if the trash baron had subsequently proclaimed the RLC to be under her protection, she would not have stopped the rebellion but would instead have become a target of it.

Performing in the public space

AmerikA’s biggest claim to innovation was its situation in public space, asking its participants to simultaneously be role-players and actors, to play for the sake of their own experience and for the observers. What were the consequences of this experiment?

My own immediate experience was that it was extremely demanding. The moment I walked out from the bus wreck that was my in-character home, I felt the burden of all those eyes observing, felt that every move I made mattered (and needed to be well-executed), saw myself from the outside. It was not stage fright, but rather the exhaustion that comes from performing a difficult and demanding task combined with the immersion-breaker of constantly thinking about your role-play from the outside.

Even harder than role-playing against other larpers in public view was role-playing against customers in Aronsen’s Second Hand Antiques – we found it both tiresome, and ultimately impossible, to role-play our borderline lunatic characters against audiences who did not even pretend that they believed in our play. A role-played outburst of anger, for example, would be met with polite laughter from the “customer”, who saw all of this as entertaining, and did not even acknowledge that she had just been insulted by an angry shopkeeper. The customer’s behaviour

constantly negated our own. Eventually we gave up, and closed the shop to the outside.

The performers, the role-players and those in-between

Was my experience shared by all? Certainly not. Most players felt the pressure of performance, and many commented that they took frequent off-game breaks, a usual no-no at Norwegian larps, as a way to handle that pressure. But while some, otherwise capable, players withdrew into the shadows others – equally capable – received a boost from the limelight, and excelled when role-playing in the open spaces. A third group – perhaps the majority – felt the public role-play to be tiresome, yet nonetheless meaningful, and carefully alternated between public play, private play and off-game breaks.

This did not amount to an ideal larp experience, rather to several smaller episodes of meaningful play interspersed by off-game breaks. For me, the high points were individual meetings with other *bergboer* characters in the privacy of their shacks and tents. For a more extravert friend who played Peder P, Aronsen's stuttering wreck of an assistant, the high point was a romantic dinner, held in public view in the central space of AmerikA on a candle-lit table made of trash, seated on old toilets, where his shy, inept character managed to conduct a shy, inept and highly endearing date with a woman he referred to as "an angel". It was a beautiful private moment, viewed by thousands.

AmerikA confirmed, on one hand, that live role-playing can be done in front of an audience and remain meaningful to both role-players and viewers. But conversely, our experiences demonstrated that the skills and motivations required to enjoy and succeed at such performative play are not the same as those required to enjoy and succeed at a regular larp. In the years after AmerikA, I have several times seen experienced theatre actors entering their first larp – and withdrawing, due to exhaustion, after a few hours of highly intense role-playing. Their challenge seems to be the



- A romantic dinner, Amerika-style.

Photo
Britta Bergersen

same as ours, inverted. If any conclusion can be drawn from this, it is that “role-playing” and “acting” are two separate modes of behaviour and not subclasses of each other.

What leads some players to adopt a performative style of role-play, while others do not? Can these skills be learned? Can larps be designed so as to be fully enjoyable both as performances to be watched and role-play to be participated in, or must there always be a trade-off? Alas – Amerika does not give us enough information to provide any clear answers, except that the field remains problematic.



Hindsight is 360°

A surreal slum city in the centre of Oslo: surely this is media fodder? Yes, and no. Press coverage was disappointing, to say the least. Few took the event seriously, the journalists dispatched were mostly hacks, and the most significant coverage allotted to the larp came from the aforementioned “Nytt på nytt”, a TV programme devoted to low-brow satire. The carefully planned media strategy – based on trading exclusivity for quality coverage – fell apart before the larp started, when some journalists managed to get hold of three volunteer builders, grabbed some quick quotes and photos, and thereby “scooped” the event – obliterating interest from

- A player/character resting outside of the limelight.

Photo
Britta Bergersen

the rest of the media. In the end, AmerikA left a far smaller imprint on the public record than it had on the city of Oslo.

But what of the players? One explanation for AmerikA's relative obscurity might have been that it wasn't particularly enjoyable as a role-playing experience. Player reports vary, as they always do, and some reported very intense experiences. Still – the reviews, the few of them that made it into written form, and the many I have heard orally, were highly mixed. While organisers were thanked for their sacrifices, the words “Best”, “Larp”, “Ever” – that are routinely spoken after even mediocre larps – are conspicuously absent from AmerikA reviews. While the players of the *bergboer* were generally satisfied, though not always enthusiastically so, several of the outer rings of the onion were dissatisfied.

The conflict against the Real Life Company was important to the *bergboer*, but damaged the larp of the RLC players, who spent most of their time as besieged observers on the café roof, unable to realize any of the activities they had planned pre-larp. After the larp had started, players who had received “tacked-on characters” realized they were neither important nor particularly welcome – and felt, perhaps, unfairly treated. From several different angles, there were complaints that the “plots” left their characters with too little or too much to do.

Many of AmerikA's characters were deep, complex and well-defined, but the dramaturgy and social structures rehearsed old larp clichés, built over simple conflicts (“Group A and Group B are eternal enemies”) and puzzle plots (“someone has found the lottery ticket/Ring of Power/magic trinket – but who? Not everyone is who they pretend to be”). These “plots” ended up focusing on a few characters and institutions – which were actively sought out by others, leading to a severe imbalance in activity. In terms of aesthetics it was, to quote one artist who walked off the street and into AmerikA to join the larp movement, the “most important thing to happen in Norwegian art since Munch”. But as a larp, as role-played experience, it wasn't particularly memorable.

The political project of AmerikA was also lampooned by one sanctionious reviewer on the laiv.org webforum:

“How many of us left for Prague? How many stayed to clean away the trash? How many used plastic cutlery during the larp? How many are still drinking Coca Cola? How many have seen the garbage they themselves are made of?

Those numbers should tell us how good this was. And from what I have seen this far, we haven't come a *_single_* step further”.

This critique, of co-players as much as organisers – is instructive, because it illustrates how little consensus there was in the feedback. Players criticized AmerikA *and each other* from wildly different angles, complaining about unfulfilled expectations: it was not a good enough larp, it was not a good enough performance. It did not keep its promise of innovative character-work, or it was too untraditional and difficult to play. It didn't have enough “plots” or it shouldn't have had “plots”. It was too political, it was not political enough. Every participant, every organiser, had their own unique dream of AmerikA. The communications, pre-larp, were well-written but ambiguous, making it easy for players to project wildly different expectations onto the larp. In the end, the fulfilment of any one dream would have to come at the expense of the others.

“How did it come to this?”

The radical seed idea, that of a politically and artistically transformative mega-larp held in the centre of Oslo, was impossible to achieve with the limited resources available to the Weltschmerz founders. As the project progressed, and ever-greater hurdles were encountered, the initiators took to selling off chunks of the vision, piecemeal, in return for a chance to realize it.



- Amerika as it appeared from the terrace overlooking Youngstorget.

Photo

Britta Bergersen

When human resources were insufficient, more and more people were brought on board and given the authority to make any decision in their domain. Amerika's dysfunctional dramaturgy was presumably caused by the fact that the character writers did not agree on what constituted a "good character" and a "good plot". Any one of their ideal dramaturgies might have worked, but the final mish-mash of dramaturgies and individual styles did not.

The greatest sacrifices were those made to secure funding for the larp. To prospective business sponsors, Amerika was sold as a grand spectacle, while political groups were assured of its meaning as a protest against consumerism and inequality while the artists who worked as scenographers were assured of its artistic purity. To the wider Oslo larp scene,



AmerikA was sold simply as a huge promotion of live role-playing itself. In this way, volunteers and paying players were recruited, and both were needed to get the accounts to balance, but the artistic and political edge of the project was dulled. In order to accommodate the wider larp scene which supported AmerikA, any mention of art and politics was eviscerated from the media strategy. But as one organiser confessed to me a few weeks before the larp: “We are whoring ourselves off to anyone who can offer the slightest bit of help”.

Things might have been different had AmerikA obtained a single large grant or single large sponsor early on. At the very least, it would have freed core organisers from the chores of fundraising and left them free to focus on actually making the larp. But the major funders of Norwegian

art and culture declined the applications sent by AmerikA, and the final budget had to be pieced together from an overwhelming number of other sources.

Judging the garbage pile

From the previous chapters, it is tempting to conclude that AmerikA was a failure, or at least a mediocrity. However: we do not judge a theatre play by how much the actors enjoy it. Is it then right to judge a public spectacle such as AmerikA by discussing the quality of “characters” and “plots”, by the metric of “player experience”?

I have neglected one group in my summary of reviews above: the observers. What was their outcome of the larp? Since we do not know their names or how to contact them, we cannot know. But what drove them to stay perched on the balcony a whole weekend, through rain and cold and darkness, to watch us role-play? Surely they were not watching a failure.

AmerikA tried to succeed as a larp, as a political demonstration, and as an art project, and I think it succeeded admirably on at least two of those accounts. As a larp, it was certainly imperfect, but innovative larps are never perfect. The project’s story, of organisers struggling with the impossibility of their ambitions, is similar to those of *Kybergenesis*, *Trenne Byar*, *Futuredrome* and *Dragonbane*. The first two are generally regarded as important milestones in Norwegian arthaus larp and Swedish fantasy respectively. Only timing and happenstance separates them from the latter two, which have a more mixed legacy.

AmerikA might have been a flawed role-playing experience. But it was, as many players commented, a great experience – living, for three days, in the pulsating, magical garbage-world, Art and Discovery and the Sense of Wonder behind every corner, fascinating stories being enacted by every person you meet. Had all pretensions at role-play been dropped, had

it been announced as a “Burning Man”-style festival in the centre of Oslo, would it have been better thought of? Probably, but “AmerikA the trash art festival” could never have been held without the resources of the larp scene – and without the role-playing, I think it would have been a poorer event.

I think it is safe to claim that it succeeded as art, as an aesthetic spectacle of multiple meanings to be observed and perhaps interacted with, and that this success was made possible only by it also being a larp with political ambitions.

When I summarize the player reviews, it should also be kept in mind that most of the players never posted a review, and most of the reviews posted were strangely fragmented, oscillating between praise and criticism, discussing random details but not the whole. Offline conversations have left me with the same impression: that something central is missing in our evaluation of AmerikA. We were asking whether AmerikA was a good or bad larp, and clearly it was both, but the question we really wanted to discuss was: “what did it all mean”?

Legacy and prophecy

With the benefit of eight years of hindsight, I can try to answer that question, and at the same time assess whether AmerikA was successful as a political project.

“How many of us left for Prague?” asked the sanctimonious reviewer above, and he was referring to the anti-IMF and World Bank protests that would occur a week after AmerikA. These were the European extension of an anti-globalization movement that had reached the West in the autumn of 1999, as AmerikA was on the drawing board, when a loose coalition of labour unions, anarchists and environmentalists succeeded in shutting down the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle.

While not many AmerikAns left for Prague, many joined the movement in the autumn of 2000 and spring of 2001, becoming founding members and core activists of the Norwegian branches of Attac, the

Independent Media Centre and Adbusters. In the summer of 2001, during the protests against the EU ministerial meeting, I walked with some fellow larpers through the streets of Gothenburg, every shop closed, police helicopters hovering overhead, and we reflected on how very larp-like this all was, how like AmerikA.

There was a spirit of angry optimism underlying those outbursts of aggressive protest. The conflicts of the anti-globalization movement were not new – what was new was the sense that it was finally time to do something about them. The age of global cold wars and local despotism was over, and it was time to direct our attention to matters higher up on the moral scale. The punks in Seattle, the Brazilian land squatters, the Korean farmers, were fighting the same angrily optimistic battle as the citizens of AmerikA throwing out the Real Life Company. It was a fight not over money and resources and ideology, but rather for a way of life, for the right to be poor and self-governed, however imperfectly, rather than middle class and enslaved.

In this sense, AmerikA was both prophetic and a self-fulfilling prophecy – pre-empting the global justice movement that would not fully arrive in Norway until some months later, partially with the help of radicalized larpers.

Were we influenced by AmerikA in our subsequent activism? Perhaps. If AmerikA's goal had been to manipulate its players into adopting such political persuasions, it would have succeeded admirably. But, as discussed initially, the larp's vision and content were so ambiguous that any claim of intentional manipulation falls apart. Rather: AmerikA became a political discussion by other means, a place where the aesthetic, philosophical and activist threads of the new politics were brought together, and digested by players through their own contributions and conclusions. AmerikA was where we met, and where these ideas met, and where they passed from abstractions into the world of embodied experience.

In another sense, too, AmerikA would be both prophetic and self-fulfilling prophecy: loudly and aggressively proclaiming the arrival of larp as a superior, participatory, form of art. When Swedish larpwright-turned-

pervasive game producer Martin Ericsson shouted “Fuck passive entertainment!” from the stage of the 2008 Emmy Awards, he was paraphrasing a slogan that had first appeared on AmerikA posters eight years earlier.

From angry optimism to defeated pessimism

The “global justice”, or anti-globalization, movement is still around. But it lost its momentum, optimism and spirit of inevitability when two planes crashed in New York in September 2001 and the global political climate changed. The vision of America which was mirrored in the Real Life Company – a well-meaning technocracy, oppressive only in its belief that consumerism and suburban villas were the birthright and duty of all mankind – has been replaced by the image of a wounded giant, full of vengeance as it falls. Recent years have shown the Europe of civil wars, ethnic cleansing, and dehumanizing bureaucracy – which was subsequently mirrored in the larp Europa – to be far more plausible than the angry optimism of AmerikA.

I think this is the reason we do not talk about AmerikA. Every day, the news reminds us of Europa (*asylum seekers drowning in the Gibraltar, neo-nazis throwing Molotov cocktails at houses of prayer*), or of 1942 (*tanks rolling into Tskhinvali, bomber planes hovering ominously over Baghdad*), or of a dozen other dark and brutal and war-like larps that have been played in the years before and after AmerikA.

But as for AmerikA, the brief and imperfect and aggressive glimpse it provided of an autonomous Utopia, a place where dignity could walk in rags, and the Real Life Company could be defeated; that vision was so fragile, so fleeting, that we cannot think back on it without feeling embarrassingly naïve.

And ultimately, I propose, that is why AmerikA deserves to be remembered: We have had enough of tragedies and dystopias, in larp as in real life. Fuck passive art! It’s time to resurrect the magically real.