

Flock in Reconciliation

The dance performance 'Birget' secures the position of Elle Sofe Sara as one of Norway's best choreographers.



Dance

'BIRGET; Ways to deal, ways to heal' at The Norwegian National Opera &

Ballet

9 February 2023. Also playing in Hamar, Bergen, Stavanger and Harstad.

[Karen Frøsland Nystøyl](#) Theatre and dance critic

Published yesterday at 13:51

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Can politics become dance?

Yes.

When choreographer Elle Sofe Sara and artist Joar Nango join forces to make a contemporary dance performance about the Norwegianisation policy towards the Sami, it's already highly political.

Yet it strikes me that the performance is most of all humane, characterised by an expression that is about charity. 'BIRGET; ways to deal, ways to heal' fundamentally resonates with reconciliation.



REINDEER HERDING: Farming reindeer is a recurring theme both in the text and in the choreography. At the back of the stage is a transcript from the Storting, the Norwegian Parliament's Question Time, from 12 October 2022.

PHOTO: ØYSTEIN HAARA

Worn-out sleigh

Elle Sofe Sara is a choreographer and director who lives in Kautokeino. In 2022, she was awarded the Critics' Prize for the dance performance ['Vástadus eana – The answer is land'](#), which is also a performance about the importance of belonging, about land, and of the importance of being in a flock.

She has taken the notion of the flock with her into the collaboration with Carte Blanche – Norway's national contemporary dance company – in a performance that premieres in Norway's city of power: Oslo.

Just like 'Vástadus eana', the performance 'Birget' also begins away from the stage. In the foyer of the Opera House is a worn-out sleigh and on top of it is a blue tarpaulin and some red snow stakes.

The sleigh is hardly noticeable in the crowded foyer, and when the dancers come out to the audience, there are few that notice them.



GATHERING AROUND THE SLEIGH: A worn-out sleigh from Kautokeino in the foyer of the Opera House. The 'Birget' performance begins around this sleigh, but most people didn't really notice. Dancers (from left): Brecht Bovijn, Noam Edelman Shatil, Caroline Eckly.

PHOTO: ØYSTEIN HAARA

Over a small portable speaker, excerpts are played from the King's speech from the opening of the 7th Sami Parliament, but hardly anyone notices his majesty's speech either.

It is striking how small and insignificant the art is – almost invisible. At the premiere, the sound of the audience almost entirely drowns it out.

This opening of the performance didn't manage to bring the audience together. The sleigh is pushed towards the entrance to Second House, and the audience follows. But did anyone actually get what was happening?



RECONCILING: Well-used, yellow bags are sent from the audience area and down to the dancers on stage where they are used to build something new – and they become a kind of image of cooperation and reconciliation.

PHOTO: ØYSTEIN HAARA

Dance with Vestre

Once on stage, the Carte Blanche dancers wear shorts, crocs, flip flops, hoodies, cowboy boots or sweatpants.

The king's speech continues in the auditorium while the dancers take the stage, position the sleigh, rig up a kind of communal area – it's all reminiscent of everyday life.

'That we can live as equals is of paramount importance,' says the king. Gradually, the choreographic picture changes, the dancers switch to clothes made of transparent plastic and we sense the gathering/development? of a flock.

The dancer Brecht Bovijm suddenly moves as softly as a reindeer across the stage.

The sound of the performance moves from the king's speech to a recording from the Norwegian Parliament, the Storting's Question Time 12 October 2022, in which ministers Kjerkol and Vestre both have to answer for what's been done to rectify the situation after the [Fosen verdict was given](#). They also answer questions about proper healthcare for the Sami population.



TOGETHER ON THE PLAINS: In fellowship a flock gradually comes together, but at the same time each dancer represents an individual.

PHOTO: ØYSTEIN HAARA

Springing and stomping

In parallel, the dancers join small groups that gradually grow larger. The choreography starts with small lateral steps that build into larger movement patterns into which more dancers fall.

The flock springs, stamps and stomps. They carry when needed. Together, the dancers form a community about themselves.

The sleigh is pulled forward and gradually a society is formed out of plastic. At this point, Joar Nango's scenography is essential. It comprises objects found on the reindeer plains, meaning a lot of plastic and tarpaulins.

So the performance is also about pollution, the central elements being plastic and scrap.

It's very well integrated into the performance as a whole, and a new meaning is formed when left-over objects in the world can be used to build something new. It also resonates well with the title of the performance: *Birget* is Northern Sami and means 'to salvage'.



STOMPING: Draped in plastic and with choreography that builds community, Carte Blanche creates the feeling of a flock in 'Birget'.

PHOTO: ØYSTEIN HAARA

Healing wounds with compassion

Throughout much of the performance, the dancers have their gaze fixed on the audience and at some point they also need their help: Large, empty, yellow sacks used for reindeer feed are hidden under several seats in the auditorium.

As audience members take them out and pass them on to the stage, the opera house is not only inundated with a river of yellow, but also with an act of charity, a building of community, the start of reconciliation.



COURAGEOUS: Elle Sofe Sara proves herself a courageous choreographer in the performance 'Birget'.

PHOTO: ØYSTEIN HAARA

'Birget' was conceived as a response to the work of the [Truth and Reconciliation Commission](#), which will deliver its report this summer. The performance asks how to deal with injustice and how to heal wounds. The responsibility is primarily in the hands of politicians but 'Birget' points to individuals as important components in the healing process.

This is a strong artistic collaboration between Sara and Nango, and Sara proves herself as one of Norway's most courageous and proficient choreographers.

The beginning may not have worked, but the performance quickly recovered. The courage, energy

and power of the finale shows promising hope for a healing process.

As long as it's not all forgotten when we return to mingling in the foyer.

- **Title:** 'Birget; ways to deal, ways to heal'
- **By:** Carte Blanche, Norway's national contemporary dance company
- **Venue:** The Norwegian National Opera & Ballet, and will also be played in Hamar, Bergen, Stavanger and Harstad.
- **Dates:** 9 February – 24 May
- **Idea and concept:** Elle Sofe Sara & Joar Nango
- **Choreography:** Elle Sofe Sara
- **Scenography:** Joar Nango
- **Costume Design:** Indrani Balgobin
- **Composer:** Anders Rimpi **Lighting Designer:** Arne Kambestad
- **Dramaturg:** Thomas Schaupp **Research:** Ravdna Turi Henriksen
- **Dancers:** Irene Vesterhus Theisen, Anne-Lise Rønne, Ole Martin Meland, Aslak Aune Nygård, Caroline Eckly, Dawid Lorenc, Adrian Bartczak Noam Eidelman Shatil, Nadege Kubwayo, Hanne van Driessche, Brecht Bovijn, Gaspard Schmitt, Daniel Mariblanca, Tilly Sordat, Trine Lise Moe.
- **Co-producers:** The Norwegian National Opera & Ballet, Bergen International Festival, Nordic Next, BIT Teatergarasjen