

BIN-Nordens og Nordisk Ministerråds konference:  
Børn og kultur – det æstetiskes betydning?/  
Det æstetiskes betydning i medier, kunst og kultur for børn?

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### Zachris Topelius' Children's Theatre Concept and the Performative Aesthetics of Play

The journalist, author, academic, and civic organization activist Zacharias Topelius (1818-1898) was one of the most influential ideologues in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Finland, and he is also considered the father of Finnish children's theatre. Children's plays written by him formed the core of children's theatre repertoires at both theatres and schools throughout Finland until the 1960s. In my dissertation project I examine practises through which the early "Topelian children's theatre" could be seen to have participated in the construction of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Finnish childhood. The viewpoint of the study is largely influenced by theorisations on performativity. In my conference presentation I will concentrate on the relationship between aesthetics and the social in Topelius' ideas on children's own theatrical activities.

According to Zachris Topelius, the main purpose of all art was to raise good citizens, and he argued that theatre had the greatest potential in this. Children's theatre then was particularly important for Topelius because children represented the future of a nation. Topelius originally wrote his children's plays for children's own home and school productions, and it was important to him that the aesthetics of these productions was supposed to remain simple and playful. According to Topelius the act of playing – in general but particularly in the framework of theatre – was deeply significant for the formation of the child's identity and, therefore, ought to be used for educational (ideological) purposes. As play can be understood in countless ways, in my presentation I first briefly analyze what theatrical playing incorporated in Topelius' children's theatre thinking. I then contextualize these ideas with Friedrich Schiller's claims on aesthetics and play. Finally I use the concept of performative to make a link between the Topelian aesthetics of play and participation in the process of identity formation. In my dissertation project I also make an interpretation of how this participation was part of the larger context of late 19<sup>th</sup> century Finnish childhood.

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