

# Towards a larp-acting culture : A manifesto

By Morgan Jarl, December 2008

Acting is the basis of all role play. The acting of a character, of a role, of a relationship or a function in the narrative – of any number of dramatic purposes. The act of role playing is the act of acting – as soon as you take on a different persona than your own, play enters the realm of acting. What ever approach we have to larping and role playing games we engage in acting. Most larpers don't reflect on their acting more than to consider whether it is believable or not; some not even that. This manifesto is a challenge of the weak acting culture of the larp community, and a call to all larpers to develop a stronger one.

This is a manifesto not of how larps should be, nor how they should be made. It is a call for those who truly create a larp – the players – to consider their play and thus their acting. As such it also reflects on the approach of creating larps, in that acting is a new dimension for an event to be considered and defined by the organizer. I am proposing to diversify the acting at larps by unifying larp participants behind the concept of acting. To do this we need to commit to practice and to develop our sense of style.

## **Unification**

What is the difference between acting and playing? This is a peculiar linguistic problem that takes on different aspects of the language. In the different languages of the Nordic countries the meanings of 'play' and 'act' are very different, and the activities that would fall under 'acting' in English would end up under several different words in Swedish (my native language). Thus we need to look at the activities of larping as being both. Play is the basis of all acting, be it larp, stage or screen acting. But when I speak of a unification of acting I do not mean everyone should act the same way – rather I mean we need to start looking at the cultural aspect of what we are doing as acting in the same sense as the other dramatic arts use it. We have focused on play for several years – both in the sense of games and gaming and the sense of child play. Now it is time for us to focus on the analysis of our activities through the lens of acting.

## **Sense of style**

Throughout the Nordic larp scene we have a variety of styles in acting. This is mostly an unconscious lore that has developed in different groups, and in most cases not something that is really considered consciously. We need to develop a sense of style in our larps and in our larp-acting. We need to develop a culture of unified acting styles with each event so that the vision of a particular larp is reached, and so to diminish the discrepancies between different players with different acting styles. Many times a bad larp-experience arises when two players have different expectations of and approaches to the acting in a larp. A humorous acting style might collide with an immersionist's realistic style, and the experience for both players would be jarring – they would seem to be living in different worlds, which would bring the player out of the fiction. This effect can be minimized if the organizers are clear about what is expected from the participants, and the participants in turn approach the larp as actors rather than players. But this takes practice, perhaps even formal or informal training.

## **Commitment to practice**

Within all other art forms there exist movements towards excellence in the practice. In the larp community this exists too – but mainly in the production of larps, not in the participants' acting. We need to develop methods, systems and infrastructures for the training of larp actors. We need to find solutions to develop our art form beyond the first steps of characterization. I am not proposing to create elite actors but instead to follow three rather simple steps to support participants in this development:

1. Develop clarity in larp writing to assist the development of a common acting style in each

- production.
2. Create acting courses that everyone in the larp community can partake in.
  3. Finally find ways of approaching character creation that are based in theatre and film rather than in role playing games.

Larp is physical, not verbal – it is a corporal and visceral experience and art form, not primarily an art form of the mind. We create the experience of a larp through action, verbal and physical, not through the character sheets of pen-and-paper games. We need to look at the physical representation, the relationships and the goals and aims of the character in a new way, to create deeper and more believable characterizations. We need to look at Stylization and Formalism – the heightening of certain elements and the clarity and unity of the aesthetics of a production. To understand the larp writer's vision and to realize it together demands practice in larp-acting, understanding of human nature and relationships, of the motions and dynamics of both the internal and external world. To start to analyze and internalize these things are intrinsic to developing the larp-actor. Training is almost necessary to do this.

There are several methodologies used within the dramatic arts to analyze acting, to practice acting and train the actor. Everything from Constantine Stanislavski's Method of Physical Action and Michael Chekhov's Psychological Gesture and Imaginary Body, through Keith Johnstone's Impro games of status and the deep emotional immersion of Method acting, to Indian dance theatre and the Rasaesthetics(TM) of Richard Schechner, should be looked at for development of the larp-actor.

We need to unify behind this concept of acting to develop the player into an actor - from someone who plays, to someone who acts.