



Exhibiting the Extraordinary Body: Six Itinerant Performers and Their Livelihood in the Nordic Countries, 1864–1912

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Now the “little fellow” has started traveling around the country in
order to show himself for money.

—“Nu har ‘pysen’ börjat resa landet rundt för att låta se sig för
pengar” *Vimmerby Tidning* 6/13/1902

The “little fellow” in the quote above was not little by any standards. In fact, the Swede Gustaf Edman, of whom this was written in 1902, is still one of the tallest men ever. In 1902, he had just started his career as an extraordinary-bodied itinerant performer, and he was marketed as “The Giant of all Giants,”¹ “The Swedish Giant,”² and “The Giant from Gotland.”³ This chapter examines the livelihoods of six extraordinary-bodied itinerant artists, who performed and were exhibited in the Nordic countries ca. 1860s–1910s. They all traveled extensively and were shown

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to varied audiences in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Finland, at town markets, in restaurants, at hotels, in connection to so-called museums, and at other locations and events where large crowds were expected to gather.

In this chapter, I examine the reasons why the performers—or their relatives in their stead—decided to go on tour. I also investigate their marketing strategies—that is, their advertisement practices, expenses, and ticket revenues—and which additional items were for sale, and what the role of the impresario was. The source material, mainly consisting of digitalized newspapers in Sweden, Denmark, Norway, and Finland, does not provide detailed information on ticket incomes and expenditures in each individual case, but some general remarks can be made, nonetheless. Judicial sources, such as an estate inventory (Swedish: *bouppteckning*), a declaration of an estate bankruptcy (Swedish: *uraryakonkurs*), and a series of title deeds (Swedish: *lagfarter*), have supplied some useful additional information on the prevalent economic terms and conditions of the performers to earn a living from showing their bodies to a paying audience. There is also circumstantial evidence suggesting relative success—but also a complete failure—of the exhibition tours.

The number of extraordinary-bodied artists touring in Europe and in the Nordic countries for longer or shorter periods between the 1860s and 1910s was immense, and therefore a careful selection had to be made for this study. The criteria for choosing the artists were the length of their careers and the geographical scope of their tours in the Nordic countries. I thus chose artists who had traveled and performed for over ten years and in at least three of the four Nordic countries.

Rather than choosing larger groups, so-called human caravans, or circus troupes,⁴ I sought acts consisting of only one or two individuals. In studies on larger performing groups, such as human caravans, the individual and his or her economic prerequisites tend to fade out, as the overall economics of the tours are dealt with. After these aspects had been taken into consideration, I ended up analyzing more profoundly two single artists and two duos: (1) Anna Sofia Nilsson (1848–1922), a crofter's daughter from Blackstad parish in the county of Kalmar, Sweden, who was born without arms and had deformed legs⁵; (2) the sisters Aurora (1855–1905)⁶ and Amalia Eklund (1858–1922),⁷ born in Vimmerby, Sweden, and both suffering from albinism; (3) the exceptionally tall Gustaf Edman (1882–1912),⁸ born in the parish of Burs on the island of Gotland, Sweden; and (4) Katie Stewart (ca. 1845–1893) and Alice Ruffen (ca. 1867–1897), two African-American women, possibly from the state of

Alabama. The last case is used to exemplify how the concept of “extraordinary bodies” is strongly connected to time and place. The two African-American women were, of course, not extraordinary in any sense in Alabama, but they were nevertheless able to support and promote themselves as extraordinary-bodied in the Nordic countries in the late nineteenth century, as there were very few other persons of African or African-American descent at the time in this part of the world. To my knowledge, almost no sources deriving from the extraordinary-bodied performers themselves have survived. I prefer to use the term “extraordinary-bodied” instead of the more derogatory “freaks,” as none of the selected artists were labeled or described as a freak in the source material I have retrieved for this study.

REASONS TO GO ON TOUR

There might be multiple concurrent, interlinked factors for an individual to decide to show his or her body for a paying audience. It is important to remember that a person born with a severely deformed body or a rare medical condition faced some challenges that were out of the ordinary towards the end of the nineteenth century. Paupers were a societal problem, worsening from time to time with bad harvests, famine and times of scarcity and war. A person who was physically or mentally unfit for work threatened to become an economic burden for both their family and the surrounding local community.⁹

Blind persons and injured war veterans who sang at the town markets were a common sight. They collected alms and lived off the charity of others, as they had few other means to make a living. In other words, there was a certain tradition of seeing and perhaps staring at persons with defective bodies or lacking some crucial senses, such as eyesight. Bearded ladies, obese men, women and children, dwarfs, conjoined (or Siamese) twins, and heliophobic (albinos or persons who were afraid of sunlight) were among some of the groups of individuals seen on stages in Europe and also in the Nordic countries.¹⁰ As it was part of the experience for market-goers to see and experience something uncommon there, paying a small sum, a coin or two, to see something or somebody with an unusual appearance, an extraordinary-bodied person, could almost be called a tradition.

In Anna Sofia Nilsson’s case, the narrative on how exhibitions of her as the armless embroideress first began was given by the impresario G. A. Hedman in 1866. He claimed he had discovered Nilsson’s

extraordinary skills, and he described how against all odds she had managed to become a very skillful seamstress and maker of needlepoint works (see Fig. 8.1). She had also acquired the skill of writing. Credit was given to Jenny Dahlström, the daughter of the local chaplain, who had spent endless hours in Nilsson's company, training her. The impresario Hedman claimed he had "rescued" Nilsson and her mother from a small room, where the daughter had done her handcraft in conditions resembling slavery. Thanks to Hedman, Nilsson and her mother now lived a comfortable life, traveling from town to town with performances of Nilsson showing her skills to an audience.¹¹ In his account, Hedman does not mention that he, in fact, was the one making the money, although he claimed he shared the income with Anna Sofia Nilsson and her mother. In other words, the two women saw a possibility to get a larger income than Nilsson would



Fig. 8.1 Picture of Anna Sofia Nilsson doing needlework with her feet. (Västergötland's Museum)

have been able to earn if she had remained in the working and living conditions she was in when Hedman “discovered” her.¹² Anna Sofia Nilsson was 17 years of age when she went on her first tour.

Aurora and Amalia Eklund’s father Carl Edvard Eklund was a carpenter and mirror maker in the town of Vimmerby in Sweden. However, his business was not doing well at the end of the 1860s, and in a newspaper advertisement, he tried to sell his house and real estate connected to plot number 23 in the north quarter of the town.¹³ Judging from later evidence, he was unable to sell the property at the time.¹⁴ In 1870, he and his wife Hedvig Charlotta Carolina (*née* Ringström) started touring with their two albino daughters.

The economic distress of the family worsened considerably right at the beginning of the tour in Stockholm, when Aurora Eklund had an accident and burned herself severely. Due to an epileptic seizure, she had fallen over the stove. In the newspaper advertisements, their father had promised to show *two* albino girls,¹⁵ but due to the accident he was now only able to show *one*. Of course, this threatened to lessen the public’s interest in the show. Inexperienced as they were in show business and perhaps somewhat naïve, they had also agreed to pay exorbitant rent far above the normal price.¹⁶ The family was in even deeper economic trouble than they had been before leaving Vimmerby. They reached out to a powerful man from the same region as them, Chamberlain Axel Fredrik Liljenstolpe, who had influential friends among the Stockholm elite. Liljenstolpe arranged a charity campaign for the poor family and managed to collect 181.25 riksdaler.¹⁷ The family was able to pay off some of the debt they had accrued during their stay in Stockholm and cover the medical expenses of Aurora Eklund’s injury. She recovered and the family was able to continue the tour and the shows. When the tour started in 1870, the Eklund sisters were 11 and 14 years old.

A year later, the economy of the family was still meagre. In 1871, the local authorities in Vimmerby arranged a judicial auction (*exekutiv auktion*) to sell two-thirds of the house and property holdings of the father to cover his debts. The property was valued at 666.67 riksdaler.¹⁸ Therefore, it seems probable that the decision to show Aurora and Amalia Eklund for money was made due to economic distress.

Also, in Gustaf Edman’s case, the underlying cause to go on tour seems to have been economically motivated. His father was a butcher, and from a young age, Edman worked as a farmhand. He was exceptionally strong, and when something heavy had to be moved or lifted, Edman was always

called upon. It was said that a Danish circus director, Mr. Schröder, spotted Edman at a market in Hemse on Gotland and immediately signed a deal with him. Schröder promised to pay Edman six times the money he made as a farmhand if he joined Schröder on a tour in Sweden and some cities on the European mainland. During his first years on tour, Edman was shown both as an exceptionally strong man and as an exceptionally tall man (see Fig. 8.2). Toward the end of his career, his height attracted all the attention. Edman was described as a cheerful, funny, and kind person, which of course increased his popularity.¹⁹ Like Anna Sofia Nilsson, but in contrast to the Eklund sisters, Gustaf Edman had an occupation and income before the decision to go on tour.

Fig. 8.2 Picture of Gustaf Edman with his wife Anna and their children. This photograph is taken ca. 1912 by Carl Lindblad in Oskarshamn, Sweden. (Pielinen Museum)



Edman experienced the negative sides of being dependent on an impresario. In March of 1903, newspapers in Århus, Denmark, reported an incident involving Edman and his impresario at the time, Mr. Køhn. Edman had signed a contract stipulating restrictions on how and when he could move freely in the streets. He was only allowed to show himself in the streets during the night, and Køhn would lock him up in his room during the day. Edman was paid only 40 kronor per month, whereas Køhn earned up to 3000–4000 kronor during their time in Copenhagen. While in Århus, Edman contacted a lawyer, who instructed him to immediately break the slave-like contract with Køhn and arrange his own shows without the help of an impresario.²⁰ In addition to economic reasons, the lure of adventure may have tempted Edman to leave his home and go on tour.

The reasons why Katie Stewart and her daughter/niece²¹ Alice Ruffen left Alabama or some other southern state in the United States around 1874 are not easily determined. But it is clear that when they arrived in Malmö, Sweden, in 1874 they did not speak the local language or have any sort of social network or support. While it cannot be excluded that they made an independent decision to go to Europe to show themselves at markets and thereby make a living, it is also possible that they were tricked or conned into boarding the ship and then taken against their will to Malmö. A Danish impresario, O. Sørensen, started showing them at markets almost immediately after their arrival. It goes without saying that Stewart and Ruffen were in a very vulnerable position during their first year on tour in Denmark and Sweden. Once they learned to speak Swedish, Danish, or a mix of the two, they were able to communicate with people around them and thus acquire some agency of their own. Prior to this, their livelihood and fate were completely in the hands of whoever was their impresario at the time. An indication of how they were viewed right after their arrival as objects or animals rather than as human beings is found in a Danish newspaper advert, which announced that a “negro slave” and her “negro daughter” would be shown at a market in Svendborg alongside parrots, apes, and mechanical devices.²² The fact that their names were not mentioned in the ads during the first three years supports the assumption that they were only barely regarded as humans.²³ The names of their Swedish counterparts in this chapter were never left out in advertisements of their performances.

During their more than twenty-year career as itinerant performers in the Nordic countries, Stewart and Ruffen used several names, none of which were verified by reliable sources. Thus, it is almost impossible to

find out who they really were and where they were born.²⁴ Katie Stewart used first and last names such as Katie, Katy, Ketty, Ketti, Kitte, Zitte, Senorella, Stewart, Stjordt, Johnson, Janson, Jansson, Jansen, and Negorosa, while Alice Ruffen's last name was spelled Ruffin, Ruffen, Rofin, Rosen, Rafen, and so on. Toward the end of her life, she also used the first names Alise, Topsy, and Toppsy and Jonsson as her last name. Their actual identities remain unsolved, as neither their names nor time and place of birth have been verified. Nevertheless, there are numerous sources on their lives in the Nordic countries. They both died in Sweden, Katie Stewart in 1893 and Alice Ruffen in 1897. When their life as itinerant performers started in 1874, Stewart was in her mid-twenties and Ruffen was still a small child, perhaps only six years old. For the two artists, the decision to sign a contract with an impresario and go on tour was a question of survival. As undocumented migrants, they had few other alternatives than to use their best asset—namely, exoticism—becoming “negro bush women” and showing their “brown-skinned” bodies to curious Nordic spectators.

MARKETING STRATEGIES

As both the single acts and the duos discussed in this chapter had fairly long careers, the marketing strategies changed somewhat over time and varied from case to case. In this section, I will specifically look at the way their bodies were portrayed in newspaper ads, articles, and news items.

Anna Sofia Nilsson's body was described in minute detail in newspaper advertisements and articles. The general tone is one of amazement, both in the ads and in the reactions of the audience described in articles and shorter news items following her performances. Nilsson did not have fully developed arms, just short stumps without fingers. “Born without hands and arms” was an oft-repeated description.²⁵ On her left foot, she had three toes, but the knee joint was missing; on her right leg she had a knee joint and four toes. Both her legs were shorter than normal legs and they were of different lengths. She used her right foot to do embroidery and needlepoint, but also to eat. She used a knife, a fork, and a spoon alternately.²⁶ She was also able to put thread on a needle by herself. To write, she pressed the pen between her cheek and her right shoulder. The emphasis in the marketing of Nilsson was put on her skill as an embroideress and the fact that she was able to do what she did *despite* her disability. During the first years, she was described as *underbarnet*, or the child prodigy, but

later, since she was no longer a child, the description *fotkonstnärinnan* (“female foot artist”) was used more commonly. Nilsson’s career as a foot artist lasted at least until 1902, possibly 1908 and perhaps even longer. She died in 1922 at the age of 74 in Linneryd, near Växjö, in Sweden.²⁷

The fact that Nilsson was rewarded for her work was mentioned several times in the ads and used as an additional marketing strategy. At the age of 14, she received an honorary award by the Economical Society in the County of North Kalmar, and at the age of 18, she was awarded a special honorary diploma at the Industrial Exposition in Stockholm.²⁸ The pedagogical aspects of her show were also emphasized. Both servants and young girls could learn from Anna Sofia Nilsson what could be gained through hard work and determination.²⁹ Nilsson was “displayed” in a black silk dress, sitting on top of a table doing her needlepoint, very much like a work demonstration at an expo or fair. All around her, needlepoint works and works of embroidery were likewise put on display, with Nilsson as the centerpiece.

The showing of the Eklund albino sisters did not include any other activity than the audience looking at the two individuals on stage. They themselves did not perform, speak to the audience, or act in any manner. Very much like in Anna Sofia Nilsson’s case, the unusual looks of the Eklund sisters were described in detail. In adverts, much emphasis was placed on their physical appearance and whiteness. Their pale skin, red eyes, and completely white hair and eyebrows were described.

They are recognized by their milky white, morbid skin color as well as white hair and red eyes. Their white skin and silvery white wool hair (similar to unspun silk), curly and ample like silver thread, gives them, although at such a young age, a serious and quite pleasant appearance, which often has aroused the greatest astonishment.³⁰

They were also depicted as being afraid of light, always spending their time indoors and in dim candlelight; this added to the mysteriousness surrounding them. Another emphasized thing was the normality of their parents, who were described, in contrast to their daughters, as “normal Swedish parents,” but also as “dark parents.”³¹

Of the six performers portrayed in this chapter, the Eklund sisters were the only ones marketed as natural wonders, and their extraordinary medical condition was highlighted. The advertisements included testimonies from medical experts saying that the albino sisters were a rare

phenomenon. Albinism is extremely uncommon, and for two sisters to have the same condition is even more unlikely. The Eklund sisters traveled extensively, and it was said that they had also been exhibited to the “royal families of Sweden and Norway.”³² This was a common way of marketing these kinds of performers. The connection to the royal families was mentioned to enhance the public’s interest, but it was not always true.

In Gustaf Edman’s case, his height, arm span, and weight are repeated in the advertisements. The measurements show some variation over the years, and it cannot be excluded that he in fact grew and gained weight during the ten years he toured. His height was reported to be 2.35 meters, his arm span 2.85 meters, and his weight 195–235 kilograms.³³ To Edman’s dissatisfaction, the impresarios tended to exaggerate the measurements in the ads. Photographs of Edman, where he was shown next to a person of normal height, were also used in advertisements. In the photos, he was usually wearing a top hat, which emphasized his height even more. His parents were said to be of normal height, but the adverts claimed that his sister was exceptionally tall as well.³⁴ Repeated numerous times was the size of his wedding band, so large that he could easily pass a two-kronor coin through it. In ethnological material, Edman’s large wedding band and the two-kronor coin are also mentioned.³⁵ An ethnological questionnaire sent out in 1944 also gives information on how Edman’s impresario tried to sell the performance at markets. It is stated that the impresario in front of the tent showed Edman’s exceptionally large shoe to the marketgoers and spoke in a loud voice to the passers-by:

The Swedish Giant is shown here! The Giant Gustaf Edman from Gotland! Everyone ought to see and admire him! In here you can see him live! You can see his bed and his unusual attire! He will perform only one day at the market in Tierp! Everyone should see him and be astonished!³⁶

Of all the six performers analyzed in this chapter, Edman knew best how to deal with newspaper reporters. When he arrived in a new town, he oftentimes paid a surprise visit to the news desk of the local newspaper. The reporters were, of course, shocked by what they saw, as many found his physical appearance both intimidating and frightening. As a rule, the visits always resulted in a news piece in the following issue of the newspaper, thereby giving Gustaf Edman the publicity he needed without paying for an ad.³⁷

In Katie Stewart and Alice Ruffen's case, the marketing strategies varied the most. In the beginning, in 1874–1877, they traveled in Denmark and Sweden and the tour was led by impresarios. The impresarios changed after 6–12 months and a new impresario modified the advertised characteristics of the women. Right at the beginning, the claimed fact that Stewart had been a slave earlier in her life was highlighted, but soon the attention shifted to their physical appearance. The color of their skin (“brown”), the texture of their hair (“curly like the wool of a black sheep”), their alleged lack of religion, and their alleged weakness for everything that glittered and sparkled were included in the description.³⁸ Various narratives about how Stewart and Ruffen had been kidnapped by a captain and later managed to escape from the ship that had taken them across the Atlantic were also common features in the adverts, being included to strengthen the fascination of the public and portray their lives as adventurous.

As the years went by, and probably at a point in time when Stewart and Ruffen were independent of any impresarios and therefore in greater control over what was written about them in the ads, factors such as their decent way of dressing and their skills as singers and dancers were given attention. Decency was used as a marketing strategy, because if the artists were decently dressed and had decent manners, also women could come and see their show.

In the last years of their almost twenty-year tour, the humor and comical qualities of the artists were of appeal to the audiences:

Everybody, both old and young, please come and see these funny negro women! Everyone will laugh!³⁹

In their marketing, Stewart and Ruffen used their supposed geographical origin in varied forms over the years: “South America,” South Africa, Brazil, and the city of Mobile in Alabama, by the Mississippi River, were among the locations they claimed they originally came from. “South America” in this context implied the southern states of the USA (see Fig. 8.3).

In addition to exotic locations, exotic foods were listed as Stewart and Ruffen's preferred diet. Among these were snakes, lobster, frogs, locusts, and French bread. However, eating exotic foods in front of the audience was not part of the show. Throughout the years, Stewart and Ruffen built their performance around song and dance, which they claimed were

Fig. 8.3 Newspaper advertisement of Katie Stewart and Alice Ruffen. Their performance and show were marketed as “Come and experience two Bush Negro Women”. (*Borgåbladet* 11/26/1881)



· Kom och se!
Söndagen den 27 och Måndagen den
28 dennes från kl. 6—11 e. m.
förevisas
å Järnvägshotellet härstädes.
Två Busch-Negerqvinnor

“national.” In the advertisements, their “national songs” and “national dances” were not defined or linked to any specific nation. Announcements that the upcoming performances were “the last chance” to see the artists were used repeatedly. It was not necessarily true, since many times the performances continued after “the last chance” had passed.⁴⁰

EXPENSES AND TICKET PRICES

In order for the artists to make a living and have some income from the performances, the expenses could not exceed the amount of money they were able to gain through ticket sales. Constant traveling was expensive. A horse and cart, and trains to some extent, were probably the means of transportation and conveyance most used by the six performers. Katie Stewart's announcement in the local newspaper about two runaway horses in Skellefteå in 1880⁴¹ and her job advertisement for a coachman in Vyborg in 1882⁴² both suggest that Stewart and Ruffen owned horses and used them for transportation. Judging from the speed at which the same women traveled along the Norwegian coast in 1877, giving performances in several coastal towns, the steamships and sailboats operating along the coast must have been their primary form of transportation in that phase of their tour.⁴³ As opposed to the others, Stewart and Ruffen did not have a "home," hometown, or any other form of permanent place of residence, which meant that, in addition to their clothes, props, and possibly a tent, they had to carry everything they owned with them all the time. They probably transported their belongings in trunks, coffins, and sacks.⁴⁴ The others were originally from Sweden, and it can be assumed that they had some form of home, rented room, or relatives who could harbor their belongings while they were on tour.

Rent, accommodations, and food were three major expenses that had to be covered by ticket sales. The price for renting a room, an empty shop, or some other suitable location for the performances varied considerably depending on where the place was situated. An ideal location was close to the center of the town, the market square, or the main roads in the area. The fact that the artists sometimes changed the location for the performance and moved it to another part of the town, mostly from a finer location or hotel to a less fashionable part of the town or a tavern, after a few days or a week of performances suggests short leases and hesitation on whether they should keep performing in the current location or continue the tour to a new town or village. Attendance numbers and ticket sales had to exceed rent and other expenses; otherwise, it was smarter to move on. During market days, many towns charged a separate market fee for sellers, vendors, cheapjacks, artists, and others wanting to rent a market stall or erect a tent.⁴⁵

It is not known with certainty where the itinerant performers ate their meals, but taverns, inns, and private homes rather than expensive

restaurants were presumably locations where they could get a meal for a reasonable price. The estate inventory list written after Alice Ruffen's passing in 1897 does not contain any kitchen utensils or cooking equipment.⁴⁶ On the other hand, the *urarvakonkurs* documents after Gustaf Edman's unexpected death in 1912 do mention a portable stove (*primuskök*) and a can opener, which Edman had received in July 1912 but not paid for. The hardware store Ågrens Jernhandel was therefore demanding payment in the bankruptcy proceedings.⁴⁷ If Edman was in possession of a portable stove and a can opener, he probably prepared his food himself while on tour. As an extremely tall person, Edman needed more nutrition daily than a man of average height. It is likely that by preparing or heating his own food, he managed to save some money. However, itinerancy presumably hampered food storage and food preparation, both for him and for the other artists.

Printed posters and newspaper adverts were additional high-cost items, but crucial for the success of the performances. At least in Stewart and Ruffen's case, there is evidence that they had posters with "blanks" printed on them. The blanks could be filled in by hand with information on the performance dates, show times, locations, and ticket prices; the printed poster itself only carried information of them as artists and their pictures.⁴⁸ Some of the artists, or their impresarios, also arranged for postcards and photographs of the artists to be printed, all adding to the expenses.

The ticket prices were fairly constant over the years: 50 öre was usually the price for an adult, 25 öre for children and servants. In Norway, adults paid 12 skilling and children and servants half the price, or 6 skilling. Some minor variations can be found, but generally speaking, all members of the audience paid a relatively small price for the joy of watching an extraordinary-bodied performer in the Nordic countries from the 1860s to the 1910s. Factors that could temporarily lower the ticket prices were competition from other performing artists in town during the performance days, low expectations of attendance numbers, or a prolonged stay in the same town.

Gustaf Edman was shown to the Finnish audience "for free" at the itinerant Hartkopf's Museum in 1912. Edman performed in at least twelve Finnish towns.⁴⁹ The owner of the museum, the Dane Niels Nielsen, used Edman as an attraction to draw more spectators, and he probably had an agreement with Edman about a fixed weekly or monthly salary. Those paying the entrance fee to the museum—Nielsen offered a panopticon, a wax

museum, and an anatomical cabinet—got to see “The Giant from Gotland” for no extra charge.⁵⁰

It is difficult to calculate the exact number of spectators needed to cover the expenses in each individual case, but since the current expenditures were relatively high due to the factors listed above, it was of vital importance to pique and maintain the interest of the public. The curiosity of the onlookers was the propelling force that supported the performances, but once this had been sate, they were unwilling to pay for additional viewings. Therefore, new audiences and new potential customers had to be sought again and again. Consequently, an itinerant lifestyle was inevitable for the artists. It was also extremely burdensome and could affect their health. At least two of the six artists discussed in this chapter died while on tour, and one of the remaining four passed away due to an indirect cause related to the lifestyle.

THE ROLE OF THE IMPRESARIOS

One very important person affecting the livelihood of the performers and the success of the tour was their impresario. Information is not comprehensive on whether the artists had an impresario for all their years on tour, but the source material allows for a fairly good estimate. In Anna Sofia Nilsson’s case, the aforementioned impresario G. A. Hedman signed a deal with her and her mother in 1866. Thirty years later, in 1896, an impresario named Mr. Charles Jensen surfaced for a few of Nilsson’s performances in Århus.⁵¹ While Jensen disappeared quickly from the sources and probably also from Nilsson’s life, Hedman’s role was vital in the beginning of her career. He claimed that his pure intention was to help her and secure *her* financial situation, but naturally, he had an economic interest himself to make as much money as possible from showing her and her works of needlepoint and embroidery. Apart from Hedman and Jensen, Nilsson’s advertisements did not reveal any other impresarios during her long career, but due to her physical limitations, her mother and possibly some other assistants must have traveled with her.

The Eklund sisters were initially shown by their parents, but after their mother’s death in 1878 and their father’s passing in 1880, the acrobat and leader of a family circus troupe, Theodor Pettersén, took over as their impresario. In Pettersén’s company and under his auspices, the Eklund sisters toured Finland and Russia.⁵² In Moscow, the two sisters were shown at a large industrial exposition as “natural wonders.” The fact that they

could not be exposed to sunlight or any other bright light complicated matters for them. Presumably, all traveling had to take place in the evenings or at night in order to protect their sensitive eyes from bright light. This also made them more dependent on others to arrange practicalities, such as booking locations and hanging posters for the upcoming shows. It seems unlikely that the albino sisters would have been able to tour without the help of others.

Upon their arrival in Malmö in 1874 and during their first years on tour, Katie Stewart and Alice Ruffen were completely dependent on their impresarios. O. Sørensen, who started showing them for money, transferred their charge to Josef Sidoli, an Italian immigrant. Shortly thereafter, Sidoli left them in the hands of A. Altenborg. In Norway, C. Schultz was in charge of the tour and the shows for a short period of time, but soon afterwards, perhaps in 1878 or 1879, Stewart assumed control. Their independence lasted for years, including the entire tour in Finland 1881–1883, but in October of 1883, a person involved in show business at the time, J. C. Jené, had signed Stewart and Ruffen's advert, but this was probably only a temporary arrangement. During the coming years, a few men were described as their impresarios, yet it is more likely that they were just somewhat questionable characters who joined the women for a while. A convicted criminal and former artilleryman, G. F. Larsson, was mentioned as their impresario in 1887, followed by a railroad worker named Linderoth in 1889.⁵³ Both Stewart and Ruffen developed a serious drinking problem over the years, and as Stewart's condition worsened to a point where she was no longer able to take care of the practical arrangements of the tour, Ruffen stepped in and took the lead.⁵⁴

Of all the six artists, Stewart and Ruffen were independent of impresarios for years at a time. Anna Sofia Nilsson needed assistance in many other matters, but she seems to have arranged the tours herself after the initial years. Perhaps Gustaf Edman could have arranged his own tours, but for some reason he preferred to sign deals with impresarios, time after time. At first glance, using a middleman or intermediary might not seem a smart decision fiscally speaking, but as shown above, all extraordinary-bodied artists did not have the ability or will to arrange everything on their own. Often impresarios and their artists worked as an economic team. If productization had been a concept in use already in the late nineteenth century, Anna Sofia Nilsson and her impresario Hedman would have been masters at it. Early on, Hedman sold photographs of Nilsson with or without her signature. A wide range of articles with embroideries that Nilsson

had done with her toes were also for sale: handbags, slippers, coat hangers, trays for candle scissors, small cushions for pocket watches, bookmarks, and paper bins. Lottery tickets and photographs of Nilsson's mother were also sold to the audience.⁵⁵

Aurora and Amalia Eklund and Gustaf Edman sold photographs to members of the audience, Edman also sold postcards of himself, but Katie Stewart and Alice Ruffen did not sell anything directly connected to themselves as artists. In 1886, they were caught selling illicit alcohol in their tent outside the area of a military training camp⁵⁶; although they probably earned a comfortable extra income selling moonshine, it cannot be regarded as additional merchandise equivalent to photographs or autographs.

ECONOMIC SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

Life as an extraordinary-bodied itinerant performer took its toll. Katie Stewart had a stroke while she and Alice Ruffen were on tour in the county of Kopparberg, and Stewart passed away in 1893. Ruffen was hospitalized in the fall of 1897 and died of "acute alcoholism," probably liver failure, and intestinal catarrh, on December 4 that same year. Gustaf Edman died of dysentery while on tour in Finland in 1912.⁵⁷ Only Aurora and Amalia Eklund and Anna Sofia Nilsson survived their active years.

The information that Stewart had died did in fact reach her former homeland through an administrative procedure stipulated in Swedish law. If a foreigner died in Sweden, the parson or vicar in the parish where the death occurred was to send a letter to the county governor, who in turn informed the Department of Foreign Affairs in Stockholm. The ministry forwarded the information to the Swedish consulate in the homeland of the deceased person. In this case, the Swedish-Norwegian consulate in Washington, DC, in fact received a letter with the somewhat distorted information that the American citizen *Mr. Senorella Jansson* had died in the parish of Säfsnäs in the county of Kopparberg. The announcement was then sent to the Secretary of State and published in the newspaper *The Evening Star*.⁵⁸ To my knowledge, no estate inventory was written after Stewart's death. If there were any assets to inherit, Ruffen inherited everything without any formal legal procedure. The formal estate inventory written after Ruffen's death in 1897 is a sad testimony on the poor, cold, and wet life of two African-American women. Wool clothing and underwear, wool hats, raincoats, scarves, hurricane lamps (or the like), and many

broken and worthless items are listed as her belongings. Many of the listed possessions were probably things the two artists had owned jointly before Stewart died. When the costs for the funeral and other expenses were withdrawn from her assets, Alice Ruffen's life ended with an economic deficit of 6 kronor and 40 öre.⁵⁹

Like Ruffen, Gustaf Edman was only 30 years of age when he died. He was married and had two children. Due to his debts and the creditors' unwillingness to settle them with his widow, the estate of Edman was declared bankrupt in December of 1912. The estate inventory showed a deficit of only 114 kronor and 97 öre, but the trustees referred to an unsuccessful real estate deal and poor economic sense in the household when they recommended that the bankruptcy of the estate assume legal force.⁶⁰

After their active years on tour, the economic situation of Aurora and Amalia Eklund was satisfactory. A series of title deeds in 1902 shows that they were still the owners of real estate in Vimmerby, although they had sold smaller parts of the estate earlier.⁶¹ There is also information of Amalia Eklund donating 3000 kronor in her testament to a fund for "three women in need" in 1922.⁶²

Considering her prerequisites and the fact that Anna Sofia Nilsson spent the first 12 years of her life in a poorhouse, the rest was an economic success story. After her active years showing herself, her skills, and her works of embroidery and needlepoint to a paying audience, she was able to retire to a fairly comfortable and economically stable life. Already in 1871, she was able to buy a house in Västervik, and in the late 1870s, she donated a part of her property and some funds to the Methodist congregation there, thereby enabling the building of a church.⁶³ Anna Sofia Nilsson was not only economically successful during her active years, but she was also, it seems, able to manage her funds well later on and live off the revenue.

CONCLUSIONS

An important—and one might even say crucial—element of the town markets consisted of the various entertainers, artists, exhibitions and other shows, organ grinders, merry-go-rounds, exotic animals, tame bears, and lotteries offered to the marketgoers. In connection to the markets, but also as separate events outside the market season, extraordinary-bodied itinerant performers showed their bodies and skills to a paying audience.

In this chapter, I have examined the artists' reasons to go on tour, their marketing strategies, expenses and ticket revenues, the role of the impresarios, and the additional merchandise for sale, in order to determine whether or not it was possible to make a living in the Nordic countries as an extraordinary-bodied itinerant performer between 1864 and 1912. The answer is both yes and no.

The extraordinary-bodied performers selected for this chapter were all able to support themselves and their families for long periods of time by using their physical appearance as a type of merchandise. Additional income was gained from selling photographs, postcards, and, in the case of the woman without arms, the works of embroidery she had made using only the four toes on her right foot. The two African-American women were selling and serving illicit moonshine from time to time to get extra income.

The shows or performances of extraordinary-bodied persons were oftentimes popular and perhaps even profitable, but the expenses for the performers also tended to be considerably high. At the same time, the performances were sometimes heavily criticized in newspapers, and the impresarios were accused of exploiting the artists and taking advantage of their vulnerability. In the cases of the Eklund sisters and Anna Sofia Nilsson, their parents were involved in the shows as impresarios and assistants, revealing how these artists were in fact the "breadwinners" in their families. Exhibiting their extraordinary bodies was a means of support for these people, one of the few means available to them. Some were more successful in the long run, but during their active years, they were all able to earn a living, and even support others while enriching their impresarios. Yet, the unfortunate fate of Katie Stewart, Alice Ruffen, and Gustaf Edman goes to show how life as an itinerant performer was by no means a road to success for everyone.

NOTES

1. Danish advert for *Kæmpernes Kæmpe* ("The Giant of All Giants"), *Fredericia Social-Demokrat* 6/6/1903.
2. Swedish advert for *Svenske Jätten* ("The Swedish Giant"), *Borås Tidning* 10/25/1904.
3. Finnish advert for *Gotlantilainen Jättiläinen* ("The Giant from Gotland"), *Helsingin Sanomat* 2/1/1906.

4. On human caravans in Denmark, see Rikke Andreassen and Anne Folke Henningsen. 2011. *Menneskeudstilling. Fremvisninger af eksotiske mennesker i Zoologisk Have og Tivoli*; on “freaks” in Finland, see Ville-Juhani Sutinen. 2019. *Kääpiöistä kolosseihin. Kummajaisten historia Suomessa*; on circus troupes in Finland, see Sven Hirn. 1982. *Sirkus kiertää Suomea 1800–1914*; on “freaks” in Norway, see Herman Berthelsen. 2002. *Skjægete damer og siamesiske tvillinger. Fra Tivoli til Big Brother*; on visual representations of the colonial world in Sweden and exotic shows, exhibitions and attractions, see Åsa Bharathi Larsson. 2016. *Colonizing Fever: Race and Media Cultures in Late Nineteenth-Century Sweden*; on the world tour of a group of Australian Aborigines led by R. A. Cunningham, see Roslyn Poignant. 2004. *Professional Savages: Captive Lives and Western Spectacle*; for a Canadian perspective, see Jane Nicholas. 2018. *Canadian Carnival Freaks and the Extraordinary Body 1900–1970s*.
5. Anna Sofia Nilsson’s (or Carlsdotter’s/Nilsdotter’s) birth record December 1, 1848, available online, Blackstads kyrkoarkiv, Födelse- och dopböcker, SE/VALA/00035/C/4 (1821–1849), p. 341: https://sok.riksarkivet.se/bildvisning/C0026758_00154#?c=&m=&s=&cv=153&xywh=2554%2C101%2C4725%2C2755. Below her name it is noted that she was “born a cripple.”
6. Aurora Eklund’s birth record November 27, 1855, available online, Vimmerby kyrkoarkiv, stadsförsamlingen, Huvudserien, Födelse- och dopböcker 1855, SE/VALA/00419/C1/7 (1846–1861): https://sok.riksarkivet.se/bildvisning/C0029042_00096#?c=&m=&s=&cv=95&xywh=349%2C1809%2C2974%2C1734
7. Amalia Eklund’s birth record July 8, 1858, available online, Vimmerby kyrkoarkiv, stadsförsamlingen, Huvudserien, Födelse- och dopböcker 1858, SE/VALA/00419/C1/7 (1846–1861): https://sok.riksarkivet.se/bildvisning/C0029042_00121#?c=&m=&s=&cv=120&xywh=748%2C363%2C5139%2C2996
8. Carl Gustaf Emmerik Edman’s birth record February 4, 1882, available online: Burs kyrkoarkiv, Födelse- och dopböcker, SE/ViLa/23019/C1/6 (1880–1894): https://sok.riksarkivet.se/bildvisning/00009382_00011#?c=&m=&s=&cv=10&xywh=-83%2C693%2C3399%2C1982
9. Nygård 2001, p. 80 ff.
10. A bearded lady advertised as *Skogskvinnan* (“The Forest Woman”) toured in Finland in 1897; see *Åbo Tidning* 6/27/1897. On bearded women in Norway, see Berthelsen 2002, pp. 75–79. On obese persons exhibited in Norway, see Berthelsen 2002, pp. 100–103. *Fröken Minna* (“Miss Minna”) was one of many obese women who toured in Sweden; see *Tidning för Wenersborgs Stad och Län* 5/23/1881. The dwarf *Fröken Viola* (“Miss Viola, also known as “Betty Viola”) toured in both Sweden and Norway;

- see *Helsingborgs Dagblad* 12/24/1895 and Norwegian *Aftenposten* 2/1/1896. On conjoined twins, see Berthelsen 2002, pp. 83–88, and an advertisement for the conjoined twins Rosa and Josepha Blazek in *Ny Tid* 4/9/1903 and in *Morgenbladet* 4/21/1903. A family consisting of four “heliophobics” (or albinos) toured Sweden in 1855–1856; see *Korrespondenten* 9/8/1855.
11. “Oscarshamn besökes för närvarande,” *Jönköpingsposten* 10/23/1867, gives an account of Anna Sofia Nilsson and her mother’s life when, due to the illness of Nilsson’s father, they were forced to live in a poorhouse among other paupers. After her father’s death, Anna Sofia Nilsson and her mother continued to live in the poorhouse, where the mother took a job as caretaker of the poor. She left the job when Nilsson was 12. Soon after this, Anna Sofia Nilsson seems to have been the one supporting the family by selling her handicraft and taking sewing assignments from a local retailer of women’s clothing.
 12. G. A. Hedman defended himself against accusations of fraud and trickery. *Åbo Underrättelser* 10/25/1866.
 13. “Kom och köp!” *Wimmerby Weckotidning* 7/26/1867.
 14. The heirs of Carl Edvard Eklund wanted to auction the same plot and property in March of 1881; see “Kungörelse,” *Wimmerby Weckotidning* 3/11/1881.
 15. *Stockholms Dagblad* 2/5/1870.
 16. According to Axel Fredrik Liljenstolpe’s account, the Eklund family had agreed to pay 180 riksdaler to rent two rooms for nine weeks. In Uppsala, they had agreed to pay 70 riksdaler for only one week’s stay. *Aftonbladet* 4/28/1870.
 17. *Aftonbladet* 4/4/1870; *Aftonbladet* 4/28/1870; *Aftonbladet* 5/27/1870.
 18. “Magistratens kungörelser,” *Wimmerby Weckotidning* 3/24/1871.
 19. Backman 2008, pp. 91–95.
 20. “Kæmpens Trængsler.” *Demokraten* (Århus) 3/23/1903.
 21. There is contradictory information about their relationship. Alice Ruffen is mentioned both as Katie Stewart’s daughter and as her niece. Without sources on their origin, it is not possible to determine how they were related, if at all.
 22. “Paa Pladsen bag Raadhuset,” *Svendborg Avis* 7/20/1874.
 23. *Negerbuskekvinder* or its Swedish equivalent *Buskeqvinnor* are the most-often used terms in the advertisements at this time. Their names are mentioned for the first time in *Bergens Tidende* 6/7/1877, almost three years after their life on tour started.
 24. It is possible that Stewart and Ruffen consciously used different names at different times to cover their trail against the authorities. Both were

- involved in illegal and shady activities from time to time. They were not in possession of and did not carry passports or other legal documents stating who they were and where they came from. Konseljakter E 1 A:638, dat. 13.4.1888, ärendenr 13, Justitiedepartementet, huvudarkivet, Riksarkivet (Sweden).
25. "Född utan händer och armar," *Göteborgs Handels- och Sjöfartstidning* 11/20/1866; "Tapisseri-sömmerska utan händer," *Borås Tidning* 8/2/1871; "Född utan händer," *Dagens Nyheter* 7/12/1875.
 26. "Till Norrköpings museum," *Göteborgsposten* 7/20/1864. The news item also depicts a needlepoint work Nilsson donated to the museum in Norrköping.
 27. *Dagens Nyheter* 3/21/1902; *Kalmar* 3/15/1908; Åkerman 1988, pp. 60–62.
 28. "Länets norra hushållningssällskap," *Barometern* 2/7/1863; Åkerman 1988, p. 61; "Bland pristagarne," *Kalmar* 7/21/1866.
 29. "...förevisningen är så långt utsatt på afton, så att tjenare skola få tillfälle äfven påse hvad en så vanlottad menniska genom fast vilja och ihärdighet kan åstadkomma," *Härnösandsposten* 8/29/1866; "Familjemödrar böra medtaga sina döttrar för att beundra denna qwinna och lära sina barn att inse hvad den som will arbeta kan uträtta här i werlden," *Tidning för Wenersborgs Stad och Län* 6/10/1870.
 30. "De igenkännas på deras mjölkhvita, sjukliga hudfärg samt hvita hår och röda ögon. Deras hvita hud och silfverhvita ullhår (liknande ospunnet silke), lockigt och fylligt som silfvertråd, gifver dem, ehuru de äro vid så ung ålder, ett allvarligt och rätt så behagligt utseende, som ofta väckt den högsta förundran," *Stockholms Dagblad* 1/7/1874.
 31. "Mörka föräldrar," *Stockholms Dagblad* 1/7/1874. The adjective "dark" probably referred to the hair color of the parents.
 32. *Tampereen Sanomat* 9/3/1881. Norway did not have a "royal family" at this time, as Norway was in a union with Sweden and reigned over by the Swedish king.
 33. The measurements were given in Finnish ads during the last months of his life. "Gottländska Jätten," *Jakobstad* 5/22/1912.
 34. *Åbo Underrättelser* 1/9/1906; *Turun Lehti* 1/13/1906.
 35. Nordiska museet, Stockholm, Etnologiska undersökningen, Frågelista 122: Marknadsnöjen och kringförda sevärigheter I, p. 521.
 36. *Ibid.*, p. 521. "Det var. här den svenska jätten förevisas! Jätten Gustaf Edman från Gotland! Alla måste se och beundra honom! Här inne får ni se honom livslevande! Ni får se hans säng, och hans onormala utstyrel i kläder! Han uppträder endast en dag på Tierps marknad! Alla måste se och förvånas!"

37. *Helsingborgs Dagblad* 4/15/1904; *Turun Sanomat* 1/9/1906; *Holbak Amts Venstreblad* 6/16/1907.
38. "Tvenne brunskinnade Buske-Kvinnor," *Alingsås Weckoblad* 4/22/1876.
39. "Se, läs och haf i minnet!" *Dagens Nyheter* 12/31/1891.
40. In Tromsø, Katie Stewart and Alice Ruffen announced that the performances at the end of May 1878 would be the last shows given there. The performances nevertheless continued in June with ticket prices for adults cut in half. *Tromsø Stiftstidende* 5/26/1878 ("Forevises for sidste Gang") and *Tromsø Stiftstidende* 6/2/1878.
41. "Bortsprungna hästar," *Skellefteå Nya Tidning* 7/7/1880.
42. "Palwelukseän halutaan," *Ilmarinen* 2/2/1882.
43. In May of 1877, Stewart and Ruffen performed in the southernmost part of Norway, in Grimstad and Flekkefjord, respectively, thereafter traveling all the way to Vadsø in the north. On the way, they stopped and performed at least in Bergen, Kristiansund, Trondheim, Bodø, and Tromsø before reaching Vadsø in August. Considering the Norwegian coastal terrain, travel by sea seems like the most probable form of transportation. See Berg 2003, pp. 18–24. Berg's article also mentions Anna Sofia Nilsson's performances in the northernmost part of Norway in June of 1877, less than three months before Katie Stewart and Alice Ruffen reached Vadsø.
44. In Finland, Stewart and Ruffen used rail freight to move their belongings and equipment but forgot to pay or did not have the money to pay for the carriage. A list of unclaimed goods transported on the Finnish railroads during the fourth quarter of 1881 (*Finlands Allmänna Tidning* 2/7/1882) states that Stewart had not claimed some trunks, boxes, and a sack weighing in total 380 *skålpund*, or 161.50 kilograms. Also, the estate inventory list for Ruffen in 1897 mentions the same or similar form of storage: trunks, coffins, and sacks.
45. Ehrnrooth 1915, pp. 127–169.
46. "Laga bouppteckning efter Negrinnan Topsy eller Alise Jonsson från norra Amerika," 9.12.1897, Köpings rådhusrätt och magistrat, Bouppteckningar 1896–1900, F 2 A:36, Landsarkivet i Uppsala, Sweden.
47. Oskarshamn's rådhusrätt och magistrats arkiv F IV 71, handlingar hörande till urarvskonkursen efter Karl Gustaf Emrik Edman 724/1912, Landsarkivet i Vadstena, Sweden.
48. Larsson 2016, p. 147.
49. According to newspaper advertisement, Edman performed at least in Kemi, Mikkeli, Iisalmi, Kajaani, Oulu, Pietarsaari, Lahti, Vaasa, Hanko, Joensuu, Turku, and Savonlinna before his sudden death in Savonlinna on the 3rd of October 1912. During 1912, Niels Nielsen toured in several other Finnish towns with Hartkopf's Museum, but Edman is not always explicitly mentioned in the ads. Edman had toured Finland also in 1906.

50. "Hartkopfs-Panoptikon och Anatomiska museum," *Hangö* 8/3/1912.
51. "Fodkunstnerinde Frk. Nilsson," *Århus Stiftstidende* 8/8/1896.
52. "Bland naturunder," *Dagens Nyheter* 7/17/1882.
53. "En negerimpresario," *Nerikes Allehanda* 8/12/1887; "Negressen och hennes dotter," *Jämtlandsposten* 10/28/1889.
54. "Tvenne Amerikanska Negresser," *Vestmanlands läns tidning* 3/19/1892. Advertisement signed by "Miss Toppsy," a name Alice used late in her career.
55. "Förewisning i Skrifning och Tapisseri-sömnad," *Stockholms Dagblad* 6/20/1866.
56. "Lönkrögeri och slagsmål," *Dagens Nyheter* 6/7/1886; the occurrence at Kronoberg heath also made the news in Finland; *Fredrikshamns Tidning* 6/26/1886.
57. On Stewart's death, see "Ett ovanligt dödsfall," *Dagens Nyheter* 2/10/1893. On Edman's death, see "Gustaf Edman on kuollut," *Keski-Savo* 10/3/1912. Alice Ruffen's death was not reported in newspapers, but records of her passing and the cause of her death are found in church archives, available online, Köpings stadsförsamlings kyrkoarkiv, Död- och begravningsböcker, SE/ULA/10695/F/8 (1895–1916): https://sok.riksarkivet.se/bildvisning/00181976_00029#?c=&m=&s=&cv=28&xywh=101%2C117%2C4482%2C2572
58. "Died abroad," *The Evening Star* 3/9/1893. The aforementioned church records on Ruffen's death suggest a similar flow of information as in Stewart's case, from the parish level to authorities in Stockholm and onwards, but the official correspondence has not been found, or has been lost.
59. "Laga bouppteckning efter Negrinnan Toppsy eller Alise Jonsson från norra Amerika," dated 12/9/1897, Köpings rådhusrätt och magistrat, Bouppteckningar 1896–1900, F 2 A:36, Landsarkivet i Uppsala, Sweden.
60. Oskarshamns rådhusrätt och magistrats arkiv F IV:71, Carl Gustaf Emmerik Edmans urarvkonkurs, godemänsberättelse, dated 3/3/1913. Landsarkivet i Vadstena, Sweden.
61. "Beviljade lagfarter," *Vimmerby Tidning* 9/19/1902.
62. Bäckman 2000, pp. 18–19; Nordmark 2005, pp. 88–89.
63. Åkerman 1988, pp. 60–62.

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