

#MeToo turns deadly

Opera singer Anne Sofie von Otter blames #MeToo witch-hunt for her husband's suicide

David Walsh
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Anne Sofie von Otter, the famed Swedish mezzo-soprano, is speaking out to the press for the first time about the March 2018 suicide of her husband, Benny Fredriksson. She recently gave a lengthy interview to *Die Zeit*, the German weekly newspaper.

After *Aftonbladet*, a leading Swedish newspaper, published anonymous accusations that he was guilty of sexual and psychological abuse, Fredriksson resigned from his post at the Kulturhuset Stadsteatern (House of Culture and City Theatre) in Stockholm, the country's premier cultural center and theater, in December 2017. On March 17, while accompanying his wife on tour in Australia, Fredriksson killed himself.

Toward the end of his life, his widow disclosed, Fredriksson was afraid of going out into the street for fear of being recognized. "Suddenly he turned inward and everything was about 'what did I do wrong?'" she said, according to the *Irish Times*. Von Otter criticized the #MeToo herd mentality. "What has happened," she asked, "to our independent, critical thinking?"

An investigation by the city of Stockholm, whose results were published after Fredriksson's death, revealed there was no evidence of sexual abuse.

Fredriksson's death was the tragic and terrible product of the ongoing sexual harassment witch-hunt, spreading within affluent upper middle-class circles from country to country like a plague. Many of the vices of this social layer—selfishness, subjectivism, vindictiveness, professional jealousy and ambition—show themselves in the Fredriksson case.

In a recent article, the *Washington Post* noted that for 16 years Fredriksson led the Kulturhuset Stadsteatern: "He discovered his love for theater at the age of 13 or 14 ... and began working in the city theater at 16. The playhouse was an escape from Fredriksson's hard-knock childhood,

circumscribed by the one-room apartment where his family lived. His mother was an alcoholic, his wife said."

The *Irish Times* reported July 27 that last December *Aftonbladet* "printed anonymous accusations that he [Fredriksson] was a 'little Hitler' who bullied and terrorised ... The newspaper interviewed 40 people who claimed he had turned the centre into his own personal 'dictatorship', forced women to rehearse naked and pressed a woman to either have an abortion or forfeit a role."

None of this was true. In March, the *Irish Times* pointed to the results of the city investigation, which "found no evidence of sexual misconduct by Fredriksson. On the contrary, the report presented in part on Tuesday said the claims against him—particularly the abortion allegation—were misleading. ... Instead it appears Fredriksson expressed regret that an actor would not be able to take on a role as she would be eight months' pregnant by the premiere."

The same article revealed that actor "Karina Ericsson Wärn was interviewed by the newspaper but, after she had nothing negative to report, she said she was not included.

"Another actor told Swedish broadcaster SVT how the *Aftonbladet* journalist 'lost interest' in their interview when no negative stories were forthcoming. 'This was a mob, they were looking for scandal,' said Leif Andréé."

In von Otter's conversation with *Die Zeit*, the *Washington Post* explained, she said "she was in London with the couple's younger son when the explosive allegations appeared. She said her husband was 'at a loss' in responding to the 'character assassination.' He quickly resolved to step back from his job, she said.

"At first, he was relieved, she said. But depression soon set in. No one would defend him publicly, she said, for fear of being 'dragged into the muck by the media.' She

said her husband suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder that became acute about three months after the initial shock. She offered to cut her tour short and return to Sweden, she recounted, but he insisted on staying abroad with her in the spring. ...

“The opera singer fiercely backed her husband’s innocence, saying he was a difficult boss—‘he could yell sometimes,’ she said—but that he was blameless of sexual misconduct. ‘Benny was not a womanizer, he didn’t look at women’s breasts or behinds,’ she protested. She judged that it was unwise for her husband to have stepped down so quickly, a view that he came to share, she said.”

The *Post* article continued: “When Swedish actresses banded together and complained of abuse, von Otter said, she found much of what they described ‘bad and unacceptable.’ But she also accused the media of exaggerating the charges of lewd conduct, saying ‘pornographic undertones’ became a strategy to attract readers. She said she hoped the case would be a ‘rude awakening’ for newspapers that she said tarred her husband. ‘We all have good and bad sides, but we no longer live in the Middle Ages,’ she said. ‘We do not publicly pillory anyone and spit on or stone him or her.’”

But the #MeToo movement does *precisely* that. A layer of ambitious professionals, encouraged and sustained by the media and the political establishment, is conducting a ferocious campaign to purge the film, media and entertainment industry of individuals perceived to be blocking their career paths. It doesn’t have the slightest progressive content, and the support offered it by ostensible “left” organizations is even more deplorable. This selfish and authoritarian movement is viewed with dismay by wide layers of the population.

Even within the film world and the intelligentsia, some voices of opposition can be heard. The *Irish Times* noted in March that prominent Swedish actor Noomi Rapace [*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*] “said her country’s #metoo campaign was problematic for choosing not to talk about the motivations of women making allegations. ‘I am not for sale ... but there are a lot of women playing the game and climbing the ladder to their advantage,’ she said. ‘I saw it in Stockholm early on and I saw it in the film business in LA.’”

Prize-winning Swedish novelist Lotta Lundberg argued that the “#metoo campaign had conflated bad behaviour with criminal behaviour ... and enabled a witch hunt against Fredriksson ‘that would make any trashy tabloid paper blush’. His suicide, she wrote in the *Svenska Dagbladet* daily, ‘is what happens when you run your

own trials in vulgar and hate-filled social media threads: you hang people’.”

Sweden’s press ombudsman Ola Sigvardsson recently criticized six newspapers for violating “good editorial practices” in ten sexual harassment cases. One of the six was accused of a “gross breach of good editorial practices.” The Press Council singled out for criticism the practice of naming names in cases where there was a lack of evidence.

Anyone who thinks the #MeToo campaign is not a full-fledged witch-hunt, with genuinely reactionary and sinister implications for the democratic rights of the working class, is only fooling him or herself.

The feminist movement in the Scandinavian countries is especially venomous and right-wing. It should not be forgotten that the political conspiracy against Julian Assange, which may result in US authorities being able to seize and imprison or murder him, originated with these elements.

On Thursday, the Amsterdam-based Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra announced in a statement it was terminating its “collaboration with its chief conductor Daniele Gatti with immediate effect.” As its rationale, the Orchestra referred to a July 26 *Washington Post* article in which “Gatti was accused of inappropriate behavior.” Two female musicians charged him with making improper advances, in 1996 and 2000. The *Guardian* notes that the “Italian conductor, 56, has led the prestigious orchestra since 2016, succeeding Mariss Jansons to be only the seventh chief conductor in its 130-year history.”

Gatti issued a statement, “To all the women I have met in my entire life, especially those who believe I did not treat them with the utmost respect and dignity they certainly deserve, I sincerely apologize from the bottom of my heart.” Meanwhile, without an investigation or Gatti having the right to appeal the decision, his career has been ruined.



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