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0521619246 - Ibsen's Lively Art: A Performance Study of the Major Plays

Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker

Excerpt

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Becoming Ibsen

During the early years of his career in Norway, as a stage director in Bergen and later in Christiania (now Oslo), Henrik Ibsen acquired and developed that keen sense of the practicalities of performance that is such a prominent characteristic of his dramaturgy. Although *Catiline*, his first play, was politely refused by Christiania Theatre, its successful production of his one-act saga drama *The Warrior's Barrow* in 1850 earned the twenty-two-year-old playwright a free pass and thus gave him his first real opportunity to study live theatre, by watching a variety of plays that constituted a representative cross-section of the romantic repertory. Only one year later, at the invitation of the renowned violinist and composer Ole Bull, he took up the post of playwright-in-residence at Bergen's Norske Teater, where, for the next few years, a new Ibsen play was performed annually on the theatre's founding day. At the end of his first season in Bergen, Ibsen was also offered the job of stage director and was given a three-month travel grant to Copenhagen and Dresden for the purpose of acquiring, as his contract stated, "such knowledge and experience as will enable him to assume the position of *Instructeur* at the theatre, which embraces not only the instruction of the actors and actresses, but also the management of everything pertaining to the equipment and properties of the stage, the costumes of the players, etc."¹ Both at the Court Theatre in Dresden and especially at the Danish Royal Theatre in Copenhagen, the young apprentice director was exposed to the methods and materials that gave him the practical basis for his own management of the Bergen Theatre.²

During the period when Ibsen took up his new directorial responsibilities, the theatre in general was on the threshold of a profound transition. Despite the increasing concern at mid-century with the ideal of ensemble acting, the modern conception of a director as the guiding artistic force behind a production, coordinating all details of

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the performance and integrating them into a unified whole, was not fully formed until the 1880s. Around 1850, the personal influence of the director was still governed by the principles and aesthetics of a theatrical system based on relatively few rehearsals, the observance of recognized rules and conventions for positioning on the stage, and the preservation of the individual actor's independence in preparing his role. Nor were the responsibilities of stage direction necessarily vested in one person. In Bergen, this task was (very typically) divided into two distinct parts, stage arrangement, which was assigned to Ibsen, and role instruction, which was the province of Herman Laading, a well-educated schoolmaster whom we might call a dramaturge today. At least in theory, Laading took charge of preparatory play analysis and role elucidation, while Ibsen, as stage director, was asked: "(1) to organize the scenic arrangements, including the costumes and scenery, of each play, and generally to direct it (groupings, entrances, exits and poses, etc.); (2) to watch the mime and gestures of each player, to ensure that the physical expression is appropriate to the words and the character of the part; and (3) to achieve the necessary coordination and show each of the performers which part, in terms of the scenes, he is to play in the overall action."³ At times, notably when his own plays were being staged, Ibsen extended his mandate to embrace not only the creation of a suitable physical *mise-en-scène* but the supervision of the actors' interpretations as well. Nevertheless, the nature of his influence remained decisively different from that exerted by a succeeding generation of naturalistic directors like Bjørn Bjørnson, William Bloch, and their more famous contemporaries in France, Germany, and Russia. "There was no question," recalled Lucie Wolf, who acted under Ibsen both in Bergen and in Christiania, "of his ever giving us instruction as Bjørnson did."⁴

Rather, the young director's chief preoccupation was with the visual effects of setting and costuming and with picturesque patterns of movement and grouping – effects and patterns that reflect the fundamental character of the romantic theatre as a colorful "living picture gallery" (to borrow Schinkel's apt phrase). The rich pictorial beauty of this style of theatre held a profound fascination for Ibsen the dramatist as well as for Ibsen the director. Having eventually also assumed the supervisory task of stage-managing each night's performance, he kept a careful record of the sets, floor plans, crowd positions, props, and other matters pertaining to each production in the repertory. As scholars have demonstrated, these production notes (for thirty-three of the 121 plays performed during his five-year tenure in Bergen) provide a convincing impression of an able director's readiness to experiment

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1 Water-color sketch by Ibsen from his Bergen years, perhaps meant for a rustic landscape setting.

with new and unconventional approaches to practical problems of stage arrangement.⁵ The real significance of these notes, however, is as evidence of Ibsen's developing sensitivity to the importance of setting, lighting, and costuming as dramatic values – large-scale metaphors capable of concretizing the drama's theme and mood. Furthermore, of the hand-colored costume sketches and stage designs we are told he customarily prepared for his productions, enough iconographic evidence has survived to confirm this sense of Ibsen's decisive responsiveness to the visual aspects of theatrical expression.⁶ The manner in which he utilized this visual component in his work would change radically – and more than once – during his career, but its central importance to his conception of a play never diminished.

Hence, far from being hampered, as critics have sometimes maintained, by the so-called "artificiality" and "unreality" of the theatrical context in which he found himself at the beginning of his career, Ibsen – who during this period regarded a measure of abstraction as a *sine qua non* for the theatrical art – exploited the flamboyantly pictorial and totally theatricalized theatre of the romantic era to the fullest, in his effort to bring an added dimension of dramatic suggestiveness to the performance of his own plays. Although the technical and financial resources of the Bergen Theatre were sorely limited, the five saga

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dramas he wrote and staged there are fortified with an ambitious and demanding series of atmospheric stage environments upon which the dramatic action depends. Thematic affinities between a play like *Lady Inger of Østeraad* (1855) and Ibsen's later work have often been pointed out, but the conceptual use of setting and lighting in this early historical drama, with its sombre Gothic interiors illuminated by moonlight, firelight, or the flickering glow from a branched candlestick, provides an indirect but equally significant foretaste of that strong visual consciousness which becomes so characteristic of the dramatist's mature work. In the medievalized ballad play *The Feast at Solhaug* (1856), the first Ibsen play to be acted outside Norway and the only one of his works to enjoy unqualified popular success in Bergen, it was again the author-director's powerful visual imagination and his ability to exploit the resources of the theatre to underscore theme and mood that made the strongest impression. Hence, although these early literary products of Ibsen's stage apprenticeship have had little or no subsequent performance history, their importance as signposts in his maturation as a theatre poet should not be overlooked.

In the summer of 1857, Ibsen resigned his post in Bergen to take up a new and, he hoped, a more visible position in the Norwegian capital as "stage instructor and artistic director" at Christiania Norske Teater, the distinctly unprestigious rival of the established "Danish" theatre on the Bank Square. Located in an unfashionable street and patronized by a predominantly working-class audience, this playhouse had an artistic reputation that was none too high, and Ibsen's five-year directorship there ended with the theatre's financial collapse in 1862. As we know, the Christiania years were in general a time of great personal hardship and self-doubt for Ibsen, during which his dramatic output faltered and even threatened to cease altogether. For five years between *The Vikings of Helgeland* (1857) and *Love's Comedy* (1862), he wrote nothing at all for the stage. On the other hand, his involvement in practical theatre – and in the ongoing debate over its true nature and purpose as a cultural force – continued unabated. In particular, his views on the function of stage direction reflect a wider attitude being voiced on many sides in the 1850s and after: the director's art can be compared to the art of the painter; in both cases, once the pervading tonal coloring of the work has been established, the task then is to place the individual figures in the composition in an harmoniously integrated and meaningful relationship to the whole.⁷ While hardly original in themselves, such views remind us of Ibsen's steadily developing concern with total theatrical effect, as an indispensable aspect of the dramatist's thinking about his play.

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The Vikings of Helgeland, which Ibsen directed with great success at the Norske Teater (24 November 1858), proved to be a crucial turning-point in dramaturgical terms – away from the contrived style and improbable situations of the earlier plays, toward a concept of dramatic action shaped by Hermann Hettner's insistence (in *Das moderne Drama*, which Ibsen read with profit during his early Bergen years) that great historical tragedy must concern itself primarily with character rather than with mere intrigue. In theatrical terms, meanwhile, the play's elemental characters and larger-than-life action drawn from the Icelandic sagas locate it unequivocally in the older tradition of romantic picturesqueness. Ibsen makes skillful use of costumes, setting, and lighting to accentuate the underlying vision and atmosphere of a stark, rough Viking age. From the turbulent, wintry seacoast of the opening act, the drama moves to a banquet-hall interior, at first dimly lighted by a log fire burning on a stone hearth in the center of the floor and later (in Act Three) seen by daylight, before returning in the final act to the rocky, barren shore. This coast, illuminated by the sombre glow of torches, a log fire, and the moon ("occasionally seen through dark and ragged storm clouds"), is the stern arena for the final tragic events that end with a vision of black horses and the avenging valkyrie Hjørdis riding through the sky – "the last ride of the dead on their way to Valhalla." Similarly bold contrasts in the color and texture of the costumes – described in unusual detail in the stage directions because Ibsen had at first hoped to have the play produced at Christiania Theatre itself, rather than by his own company – lend added force to the picturesque impact upon which the effect of Ibsen's ambitious saga pastiche depends. It is not surprising that the singular attempt made by Edward Gordon Craig in 1903 to transfigure *Vikings*, in somewhat the same spirit as that in which Appia sought to simplify and transfigure Wagner, found no imitators in the modern period.⁸ Rather, this once-popular play is inseparably linked to the nineteenth-century taste for pictorial illusionism and ethnographic detail exemplified so well in Eugen Quaglio's painted scenery for the craggy, fateful seacoast, evidently designed by him for a production of the play in Prague in 1884.

By the time Ibsen staged *The Pretenders* at Christiania Theatre almost six years later (17 January 1864), the long apprenticeship he had served in this older theatrical tradition was at its end. The dramatist, by now thirty-six years old, desperately needed – and soon found – a new and less constrictive artistic climate for his development. As a play, his first incontrovertible masterpiece is only superficially similar to his earlier work, for it now uses the action and spectacle of medieval history – the

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2 The wild, rocky seacoast in *The Vikings of Helgeland* (Acts I and IV) as designed by Eugen Quaglio in 1884, probably for a production in Prague.

struggle of Haakon and Skule for the Norwegian throne – as a metaphor for the underlying spiritual (and deeply personal) dichotomy between the irresistible power of a great calling and the paralyzing impotence of self-doubt and anguished self-scrutiny. While Ibsen's own production of his sprawling epic drama adopted a style (reflected in his stage directions and in P. F. Wergmann's surviving stage design) rooted in a traditional attention to historical "accuracy" and "authenticity," the play's subsequent production history, which has been recounted in detail elsewhere, is in itself a vivid chronicle of the changing theatrical styles and forms adopted to accommodate and amplify Ibsen's vision on the stage.⁹ From this moment on, in other words, Ibsen's plays belonged to the theatre at large.

The fact that the dramatist himself was rarely satisfied with the interpretations of others may be the inevitable outcome of his method. "Ibsen dislikes watching performances of his plays – I understand that it is in fact directly painful for him," writes Emil Poulsen, one of the greatest of Ibsen's early interpreters, in an article that may be among the first, but is certainly not the last, to question the playwright's "intrusion" into the actor's and the director's territory, through the medium of prescriptive stage directions: "It is said that he works out his plays in his head, down to the minutest detail; only when everything is completely finished is the play written down. Thus he lives

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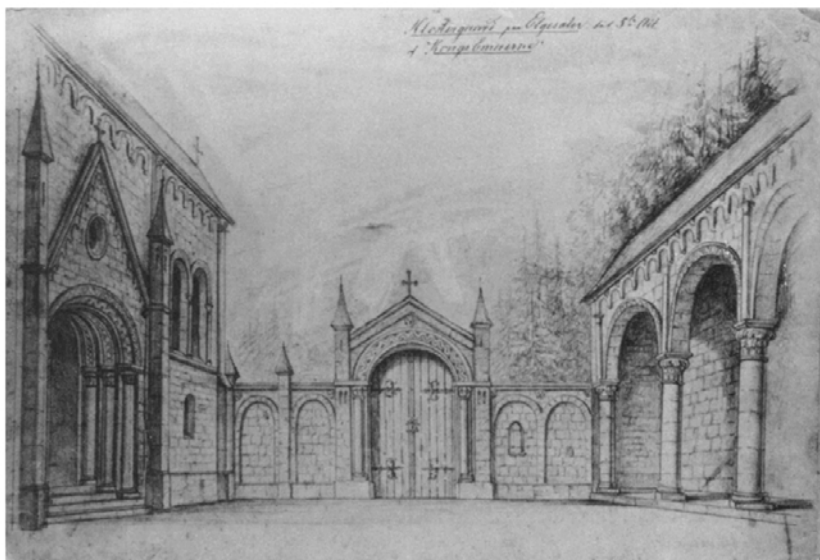
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- 3 The only surviving design for one of Ibsen's productions of his own plays: P. F. Wergmann's setting for the moonlit convent yard in the last act of *The Pretenders* (1864).

with his characters in the most intimate relationship – knows every feature of their faces, every intonation in their voices, virtually every fold in their garments. How then can he expect to see precisely this image reproduced on the stage? Every moment will be a struggle between the actor's picture and his own – a continual effort on the actor's part to erase the picture that has been stamped on Ibsen's mind for so long. It is for this reason I think it must be painful for him."¹⁰

The Christiania production of *The Pretenders* in 1864, the last performance Ibsen ever directed, thus marks the end of his active involvement in the practical theatre. Nevertheless, countless letters to those engaged in producing his plays, dealing with casting, role interpretation, and even specific staging suggestions, demonstrate that he never lost touch with the living theatre and wrote with concrete performance conditions in mind (rather than, as Poulsen suggests, for the reader and the printed page). The intimate knowledge of the stage and its conventions which he gleaned from his early experiences as a director sharpened his extraordinary sensitivity to the poetry of environment in the theatre, that is, to the use of theatrical elements that create a specific mood capable of strengthening the spiritual action of the drama. Directing the first productions of his early saga dramas, he

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taught himself to write a carefully visualized, highly charged physical *mise-en-scène* into his plays, aimed at concretizing the psychological states and spiritual conditions of the characters. Costumes, settings, props, and lighting effects remained throughout his career the syntax of his dramatic poetry. In turn, this inherent theatricality in his work has been the source of its continued vitality, long after the specific theatrical conditions for which a given play seems intended have changed or vanished altogether.

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In the hall of the Mountain King: *Peer Gynt*

When Ibsen at last left Norway behind him and journeyed south in the spring of 1864, he felt that he had escaped, as he later recalled, “from the darkness into the light, from the mists through a tunnel out into the sunshine.”¹ A distinct new phase in his growth as a playwright began. Both *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, the first two plays that he completed during his long, voluntary exile, were conceived as dramatic poems, unfettered as such by the technical limitations of existing theatrical practice and intended, at least initially, to be staged only in the activated imaginations of the reading public. *Peer Gynt*, its author wrote to the critic and translator Edmund Gosse (30 April 1872), “is wild and formless, recklessly written in a way I could only dare to write when far from home.” Five years earlier, its publication had met with considerable hostility on the part of those critics who regarded the play as a work in which the blend of light-hearted fantasy and biting satire lacked any ideal element and, as such, any poetic validity.

It was the influential Swedish director Ludvig Josephson who first recognized the great theatrical potential inherent in the new, freer, “reckless” style of these monumental reading dramas. During Josephson’s enlightened leadership of Christiania Theatre in the mid-1870s, he was responsible for a cluster of significant Ibsen experiments. His pioneering stage version of *Peer Gynt*, presented for the first time on 24 February 1876 and retained in the Christiania repertory for an unprecedented run of thirty-seven performances, was thus the high-point in a succession of achievements by Josephson that had previously included the premieres of both the revised version of *Lady Inger of Østeraad* (1875), starring Laura Gundersen as the intense, troubled Inger, and *Love’s Comedy*, the vigorous satire of the institution of marriage that Ibsen finished in 1862 but did not see produced until Josephson staged the play in Christiania in 1873.

Far more than these earlier endeavors, however, this director’s

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mammoth production of *Peer Gynt*, which required four and three-quarter hours to perform, stretched the resources of the conventional theatre of *trompe l'œil* illusion to the limit. "When the director is entrusted with staging a play," Josephson writes in his book *Teater-Regie* (1892), "he must nowadays approach this task in the most painstaking way through the study of detail – or, we might rather say, scientifically."² In somewhat the same spirit of pictorial fidelity as that which animated the work of the Meininger troupe, Josephson's precise and colorful *mise-en-scène* for Ibsen's drama pressed into service not only the theatre's own capable designers, Wilhelm Krogh and Olaf Jørgensen, but also a corps of landscape painters that included the gifted young naturalist Fritz Thaulow. Their common task was to create a pictorial background for *Peer Gynt* that was rich in local color and "authentic" ethnographic detail. As a result, Peer's progress through the world was presented here as a series of realistically conceived episodes and striking (if quite literalized) pictorial stage effects. Henrik Klausen was a lyrical and sprightly Peer in an interpretation in which – despite the amusingly trollish Mountain King created by the celebrated comic actor Johannes Brun – the lyrical element far outweighed the satirical. In this respect, Josephson's concept was inextricably bound up with the commissioned musical score composed for the occasion by Edvard Grieg – that charming but inappropriately rhapsodic excrescence of which the play has never fully succeeded in ridding itself. Ibsen's Peer, the fraud and self-deceiver who goes roundabout, remained, in this first ambitious production of the work, primarily the dreamer of romantic dreams that crystallized into a dream vision of the redemptive Solveig, who appeared before him as he slumbered in the Moroccan desert in the fourth act.

When *Peer Gynt* again came to the stage, after an interval of nearly a decade, at the more cosmopolitan Dagmar Theatre in Copenhagen, the romantic, pictorialized style of production still held sway and seemed to the theatre's director-manager, Theodor Andersen, the only feasible alternative for such a work. His lavish Dagmar production, in which Grieg again assisted personally and Henrik Klausen re-enacted his playful and distinctly lyrical interpretation of Peer, holds considerable interest because Ibsen himself contributed detailed written advice about the performance and subsequently expressed his enthusiastic approval of it.³ ("You would have been amused at me during rehearsals," he wrote to his friend Franz Beyer a week after the opening on 15 January 1886. "I was so happy at being able to express my intentions that I put my oar in everywhere.")⁴ In general, the Copenhagen revival of *Peer Gynt* affords a perfect example of the emphasis on the creation