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

Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker

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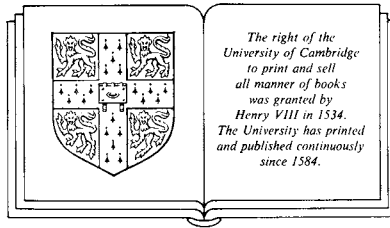
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Ibsen's lively art

A PERFORMANCE STUDY OF THE MAJOR PLAYS

Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker



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Preface

It should, one hopes, be a truism that a play is fundamentally a text for performance, which, by definition, is capable of achieving its fullest degree of expression only in the direct encounter between actor and spectator, when the apparent statement of the text is transformed, by mutual consent, into living representation. This is what Peter Brook means when he says that "no play can speak for itself." What is more, Brook reminds us, the process of theatrical interpretation must of necessity take place in an active, sometimes even a revolutionary mode – for the simple reason, as he explains, that "if you just let the play speak, it may not make a sound. If what you want is for the play to be heard, then one must conjure its sound from it." Seen in these terms, the plays of Henrik Ibsen have stimulated just such an active and regenerative search for theatrical forms and images capable of accommodating and amplifying his vision on the stage. During the course of more than a century and a quarter, this search has resulted in the broadest conceivable spectrum of practical responses on the part of actors, directors, and stage designers – responses which, taken together, make up an essential dimension of the critical attitude adopted toward Ibsen, whether in our time or in his own. Henry James once referred to him as "a sort of register of the critical atmosphere, a barometer of the intellectual weather." Each succeeding generation seems to discover – or rediscover – elements in his work that renew the dialogue in which the past and the present continue to meet. Theatrical performance is the true meeting place where these elements in a dramatist's work are tested.

It should be made clear at the outset that this book is not intended as a comprehensive survey or a chronological tabulation of the stage history of Ibsen's plays in any particular country or period. Even were an all-inclusive production calendar of this sort feasible, it would not serve our principal critical objective. Rather, the aim here is to offer

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more detailed, comparative analyses of certain key productions and clusters of productions, in an effort to shed fresh light on the problems of interpretation governing each of the plays discussed and on some of the ways in which these problems have been tackled in different periods and different theatrical contexts. The main emphasis is thus placed on the nature and continuity of the theatrical response to specific kinds of Ibsen play, from a romantic work like *Peer Gynt* to a so-called symbolic one like *John Gabriel Borkman*. Of course, as Georg Brandes quickly came to recognize, to Ibsen of all men such catchwords as "realism" and "symbolism" meant little in themselves: "although devotion to reality characterises both his nature and his poetry, yet he is poet and thinker enough always to let a deeper meaning underlie the reality he represents" (from Brandes' *Third Impression*, 1898). This deeper meaning manifests itself in Ibsen's theatrical syntax (in what Brandes calls the "almost broad obviousness" of his "emblematic tendency"), yet the precise manner of its expression is the lively variable that continues to give his major plays their abiding fascination in performance.

In fact, of course, each one of Ibsen's twenty-six plays possesses a performance history of some kind, however slight. Even the mighty *Emperor and Galilean* was at last performed in its entirety in a seven-hour production at Det Norske Teatret in Oslo in 1987. In the interests of readability and synthesis, however, we have inevitably had to select and to concentrate on six of the most representative and most frequently performed works, which provide the nucleus of this study. Each reflects a distinct aspect of Ibsen's dramaturgy and (sooner or later) a consequently altered pattern of theatrical response to the new challenge. In turn, the detailed performance studies of these six key works contribute to the development of a broader conceptual framework to which some significant productions of other plays in the canon (*Rosmersholm*, *An Enemy of the People*, *Little Eyolf*, and *The Master Builder*, to name four) are then related, at least in passing.

In a book that ventures to range in scope from Ibsen's own early productions of his work in the 1850s to the most recent reinterpretations and theatrical paraphrases of our own day, the issue of selection and emphasis becomes even more crucial when it involves choosing the productions and individual performances that seem usefully conceptual or broadly representative or (preferably) both. In the last analysis this process depends upon individual judgment, but it is hoped that the result in this case has been a selection that mingles tradition and experiment in a manner that may stimulate readers to consider and develop their own comparisons. (For reference purposes, a concise

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chronological index to the 200-odd productions included here is provided at the back of the book to guide the reader through the study's time-frame, but this apparatus is hardly a substitute for the far more comprehensive production calendars found elsewhere.) Above all, a study whose methodology is consistently reconstructive is quite obviously dependent for its success upon the gathering of the objective factual evidence that constitutes the basis for all theatre research – annotated texts, promptbooks, rehearsal records, set and costume designs, photographs, reviews, and whatever else has not already perished. The availability of such evidence, together with our conscious determination to push beyond the familiar and limited confines of English Ibsen into the less commonly traversed territory of German, Russian, Scandinavian and (in the earlier period) French theatre culture, has given the volume the shape it has – and, we hope, the basis for its usefulness as well. With a few exceptions, productions of Ibsen in other media (film, television, and radio) have remained outside the scope of our discussion, as have the many ballet and opera adaptations of the plays – in themselves, a fascinating subject for a study of its own.

Because of the comparative approach taken, a great deal of newly translated material has been incorporated here. In all but the instances noted, the authors themselves are responsible for the translations in this volume.

The modest genesis of this book was a paper read at a conference at the University of British Columbia, held in honor of Ibsen's sesquicentennial in 1978; it subsequently appeared in *Modern Drama* (December 1978) with the title "Ibsen's Theatre: Aspects of a Chronicle and a Quest." Some of the observations about the first American productions of Ibsen were initially published in *Scandinavian Review* that same year, in an article entitled "Early Ibsen Performances in America." A few of the major productions given prominence in this book (notably William Bloch's *Wild Duck*, Ingmar Bergman's *Hedda Gabler*, *Nora*, and *The Wild Duck*, and the world premiere of *A Doll's House*) have been discussed by us in various other contexts before, but in each case the material has been thoroughly revised on the basis of a fresh look at the sources. Otherwise, all other material in the volume appears in print for the first time.

The complexity of the source-gathering which a study such as this entails has required the assistance and occasionally tried the patience of a good many individuals and institutions. In particular, it is a pleasure to acknowledge the active help and cooperation of the following: the staff of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris; the Residenztheater, the Kammerspiele, and Dr. Heinrich Huesmann and the staff of

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the Deutsches Theatermuseum in Munich; the Max Reinhardt Forschungs- und Gedenkstätte in Salzburg; Dr. Klaus Völker and Ilse Buhs in Berlin; Det Kongelige Teaters bibliotek, Statsbiblioteket, Universitetsbiblioteket, and Ida Poulsen and Lisbet Grandjean of Teatermuseet in Copenhagen; Drottningholms Teatermuseum and Dr. Tom J. A. Olsson and the staff of the library of the Kungliga Dramatiska teatern in Stockholm; the Helsingin Yliopisto Pääkirjasto in Finland; the Harvard Theatre Collection and the Theatre Collection of the Museum of the City of New York; the Theatre Museum, the Royal Shakespeare Company, and the National Theatre in London; and in Oslo, Jan Johansen and Gerd Stahl of Nationaltheatret, Edward Baro of Det Norske Teatret, and Universitetsbiblioteket and Trine Næss of its Theatre Collection.

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