

## CHAPTER I

*Early Years in Norway**Narve Fulsås*

From early on, Ibsen was attributed a gloomy childhood in his birthtown of Skien. ‘The ingenuity of biographers has done its best to brighten up the dreary record of his childhood with anecdotes,’ wrote Edmund Gosse in the first full-length biography to appear in English, ‘yet the sum of them all is but a dismal story.’<sup>1</sup> Ibsen’s early years in the Norwegian theatre (1851–63) have also usually been depicted as a generally depressive experience, making his move abroad in 1864 a transition from darkness to light. Although this narrative is still live and well, recent decades have seen a reevaluation of Ibsen’s childhood and youth as well as his theatre years. There is no denying that the Ibsen family experienced a major economic and social setback and that Ibsen eventually came to experience the theatre as restrictive. However, the explanatory value of ‘declassing’ has been questioned and the value of his theatre experience has received new emphasis.

**Skien and Grimstad**

When Ibsen was born in 1828, Skien was a small coastal town of just 2,000 inhabitants, beautifully rebuilt in empire-style wooden architecture after a major fire in 1779. The town was dominated by what was called a *patrician* class controlling the area’s iron works, sawmills, timber export and shipping industry, and Ibsen was born into this tightly connected local patriciate through both parents, Knud Ibsen and Marichen Altenburg.

At the time of his birth, however, this class had already experienced major setbacks, starting with the consequences of the Napoleonic Wars early in the century. By the 1830s, a new and broader middle class had largely replaced the rather exclusive old merchant class controlling the country’s main export industries. In 1834, Knud Ibsen’s business collapsed and he never regained a solid foothold. A couple of his children were shopkeepers for a time, but without much success. None of Knud and Marichen’s children received much schooling. By itself, that need not be a



Figure 1.1 Skien before the great fire in 1886. The fire destroyed Ibsen's childhood home close to the church.

sign of poverty, since private teaching was a sign of wealth – and Knud Ibsen always maintained some of the appearance of the status he had inherited. Henrik may have received private instruction, but it seems that his only two years of organized education took place from the age of thirteen. He also took evening lessons in Latin, as well as lessons in drawing and oil painting. One of the dreams of his youth was to become a visual artist, and some works of his, mainly landscapes, have been preserved.

In 1843, Knud Ibsen's financial situation got even worse and the creditors went after the family's property outside the town, Venstøp, where they had lived since their troubles started a decade earlier. At this time Knud learnt that the pharmacist in Grimstad, some 140 km further southwest along the coast, needed extra help. He secured the place for his eldest son (Henrik's elder brother had died as an infant), and after the compulsory church confirmation in the autumn, he moved to Grimstad at the end of 1843. At the age of fifteen and a half, Henrik was on his own. He spent more than six years in Grimstad, a town less than half the size of Skien. Grimstad, like the other towns in this southern coastal area, was dominated by the building and running of sailing ships trafficking local

and distant waters, reminiscences of which are present in the playwright's *Pillars of the Community* (1877).

In Grimstad, at the age of eighteen, he became father to a son. The mother, Else Sophie Birkedalen, was a maid serving Ibsen's pharmacist master. Ibsen had no intention of marrying Else Sophie and was by the law liable to pay for the boy's upbringing until he was fourteen years old. Just a year's time after his paternal case, however, Ibsen's life started to take a new direction. In early 1847, he passed a pharmaceutical assistant's test and was entitled to a regular income. Around this time, he also started to make friends who shared his literary interests, and with whom he read and discussed writers like the Danish national-romantic playwright Adam Oehlenschläger and the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. One of Ibsen's friends, Christopher Due, later claimed that Ibsen admired Voltaire and that he was remarkably well read. It was thanks to Due that Ibsen had his first poem published in a Kristiania newspaper on 28 September 1849, under the pseudonym Brynjolf Bjarme.

Ibsen was now reading Latin in order to prepare for the entrance exam to the university. Inspired by his reading of Sallust and Cicero, he wrote his first drama, *Catiline*, much in opposition to Cicero's negative depiction of his hero. His other Grimstad friend, Ole Schulerud, was enthusiastic about Ibsen's literary future and brought the manuscript to the capital in the autumn of 1849. Schulerud submitted the manuscript to Christiania Theater and also tried to find a publisher. The theatre rejected the play, however, and it was only published after Schulerud had put his own savings into the endeavour. On 12 April 1850 Ibsen's first play was out, still pseudonymously. Soon after this, Ibsen himself left Grimstad to join Schulerud in the capital, full of literary ideas but first of all intent on qualifying for the university.

On his way from Grimstad to Kristiania in the summer of 1850, Ibsen visited Skien for the second time since he had left. It turned out to be his final visit. During the 1850s, the Ibsen family disintegrated. Henrik's brother Johan went to the United States in 1849 and probably died on his way to California a couple of years later. By 1857, Knud Ibsen stopped working altogether and was soon registered as 'poor'. The same year Henrik's sister Hedvig joined a revivalist, Free Church congregation, much to her father's annoyance. She was soon followed by another brother, Ole, and also by a number of members of other families who had been close to the Ibsens. The youngest brother, Nicolai, had to give up a small business in 1863, and he too left for North America. In 1864, the Ibsen parents split when Marichen moved to stay with Hedvig. After the 1850 visit, the

first direct contact between the by-now Scandinavian celebrity Ibsen and his family was in 1869, when Hedvig informed him that their mother had died. After three months, the playwright sent a warm response, while also warning Hedvig not to make any ‘attempts at converting me’.<sup>2</sup> Although never having written to his mother, it seems that Ibsen sent a few letters to his father, which the old man allegedly wore in his jacket for the rest of his life. After the younger brother Ole died, Hedvig unequivocally stated that the main reason Henrik never came back to Skien was his dislike of the religious convictions which had shaped not just her life, but the lives of so many of his old acquaintances, as well as the town in general.

### Kristiania

Kristiana had been the capital of Norway since independence in 1814. The Napoleonic Wars brought not just economic hardship to Norway, they also ended the centuries-old union with Denmark as well as absolutist rule. Norway became a constitutional monarchy and entered, as a separate state, into a new royal union with Sweden. With a weakened merchant class and no nobility, the civil servants became the politically dominant group in the new state. They recruited the government and for some decades controlled the new parliament (Stortinget), although freeholders and tenant farmers became the largest voting group.

By the middle of the century the Norwegian capital was still a town of only 30,000 inhabitants. Norway had barely had any aristocracy since medieval times, and centuries of Danish rule had left few traces of grand architecture in the city. Among the new buildings that stood out was Christiania Theater from 1837. By 1848, the Royal Palace was finished and a few years later the buildings of the university, founded in 1811 as a concession to Norwegian demands in an effort to keep the union together. These new buildings all contributed to making Karl Johans gate [street], named after the new Swedish–Norwegian king and running up towards the palace, the new central boulevard. In 1866, the parliament building added to the reconstruction of the area. As for ordinary people, the sociologist Eilert Sundt discovered that out of 285 Kristiania families whom he visited in the 1850s, 233 lived in a single room each.

Arriving in Kristiania, Ibsen attended a private educational institution to prepare for the university entrance exam. There he met three other major representatives of the new Norwegian literature which was to emerge in the following decades. The oldest was Aasmund O. Vinje, a pioneer of the newly codified Norwegian written language based on rural dialects

(*landsmål*), and a stylistic reformer. The second was Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, four years younger than Ibsen, who became his colleague, patron, rival, sometime enemy, and eventually his son's father-in law. The third, Jonas Lie, went on to become a lawyer before he turned professional writer and helped establish the native novel as a serious literary genre.

Ibsen did not pass his entrance exam, failing in Greek and arithmetic. *Catiline* was not a commercial success either, and he and Schulerud eventually sold most of the edition as scrap paper. But Ibsen had gone on to write a new play, *The Burial Mound*, inspired by Oehlenschläger. Christiana Theater accepted it and produced it on 26 September 1850, the first Ibsen play to reach the stage.

Even though he had failed to get into university, Ibsen was entitled to call himself 'student' and engage in student activities. In the spring of 1851, he joined in the publishing of a satirical periodical with Vinje and Paul Botten-Hansen, a man of letters whom Ibsen became close to, particularly during his second period in Kristiania, 1857–64. After first appearing only with an Ibsen drawing of a running man on the front page, the periodical was eventually entitled *Andhrimmer*, so-named after the cook in Valhalla.

Ibsen had hailed the 1848 Europe-wide revolution already while in Grimstad. By 1849, the revolution had got a Norwegian offspring, the so-called Thrane movement, named after its leader Marcus Thrane. Universal male suffrage was one of this movement's main demands. In Kristiania, Ibsen contributed to the movement's periodical and other activities as well as befriending one of its leaders, Theodor Abildgaard. In 1851, Abildgaard tried to build an alliance with the liberal opposition in parliament, but in the end the parliamentarians backed down, referring to the final defeat of the European revolution in Hungary. In the summer of 1851, the police crushed the Thrane movement, arrested its leaders and sentenced them to several years in prison. Ibsen scorned the liberals, satirizing them in his two-act parody on parliamentary debates, *Norma, or: The Love of a Politician*, inspired by Bellini's opera running in Kristiania at the time. These events fed into what became Ibsen's contempt for liberals, which was to grow even stronger during the 1870s.

### Creating a Norwegian Theatre

Even though it ended in defeat, the 1848 revolution came to shape Ibsen's career in a very direct and decisive way by inspiring the efforts at creating Norwegian theatres. After 1814, Danish continued to be Norway's written

language and it had also heavily influenced the spoken language. The language of the urban elites was largely Danish in vocabulary, but Norwegian pronunciation differed from Danish. On the stage, however, Danish pronunciation was still the norm. Norwegian theatres therefore continued to hire mostly Danish actors and the repertory continued to be made up of plays largely imported from Denmark, both originals and translations.

By the beginning of the 1850s, inspired by the ‘People’s Spring’ of 1848, ‘Norwegian’ theatres were founded in Bergen and Kristiania, aiming to train Norwegian actors using spoken Norwegian on the stage and to encourage the writing of Norwegian dramatic literature. The Bergen initiative came first, and they used the city’s famous violin virtuoso Ole Bull as their front figure. When the Storting turned down the application for a state grant from this theatre, the Kristiania students organized a support concert in October 1851, for which Ibsen wrote a prologue as well as lyrics to which Bull put music. Bull took part in the event, was impressed by the young writer and offered him a job in Bergen. At the age of twenty-three, with one play published but not performed, and another performed but not published, Ibsen had acquired a full-time job at a theatre.

On his arrival in Bergen, for centuries Norway’s largest city and just recently surpassed by Kristiania, Ibsen’s responsibility was specified as ‘assisting the theatre as dramatic writer’, and a bit later he was appointed ‘stage director’. In 1852, he signed a contract allowing him a grant to travel to Copenhagen and Dresden to study theatre, while obliging him to stay in Bergen for five years. In 1853, his duties were again expanded and he was appointed ‘stage manager’. During these years, Ibsen became acquainted with almost every aspect of theatre management, from directing to accountancy.

In 1857, Ibsen left Bergen to take over a position as artistic director at the corresponding Norwegian Theatre in Kristiania, while Bjørnson took up his colleague’s Bergen post. Ibsen stayed in his new position in Kristiania until the theatre had to close for financial reasons in June 1862. From the beginning of January 1863, he had a part-time post as ‘aesthetic consultant’ at Christiania Theater, which was now once again the only theatre in the capital, but with a growing number of Norwegian actors it was about to realize the ambitions of nationalizing Norwegian theatre, at least in terms of stage language.

Ibsen’s last years in Kristiania were overshadowed by institutional and personal economic worries, contributing heavily to the negative assessment of this period of Ibsen’s career, both by the author himself and in later

accounts. Ibsen had managed to raise the theatre's income substantially, but the expenses towards a new building were even higher. When the Norwegian theatre had to close down in 1862, the artistic director lost his regular income and once again had to write occasional poetry and newspaper articles. His last address in Kristiania before going abroad was in a 'slum-like' neighbourhood.<sup>3</sup>

This negative image needs nuance, however. On the purely financial side, we should note that Ibsen's financial troubles had started already by the late 1850s. He had married Susanna Thoresen in 1858 and their son Sigurd was born in 1859, but his salary was more than high enough to provide for a small family. His reputation for drunkenness and the criticism he sometimes received for neglecting his work suggest that his troubles had as much to do with his spending as with his income.

As for the more general pros and cons of his theatrical experience, we should note, first, that as long as Ibsen stayed with the Norwegian theatre, he identified with its national ambitions and the accompanying national-cultural discourse. Most importantly, he contributed substantially to Norway's national aspirations through his productions. After his first play in Bergen, *St John's Night* (1853), which had a contemporary setting, his second contribution was a revised version of *The Burial Mound* (1854). The next Bergen plays were *Lady Inger of Ostrat*, subtitled 'historical drama', *The Feast at Solhaug*, inspired by medieval ballads, and *Olaf Liljekrans*, based on legends and ballads of the Black Death. In Kristiania he wrote *The Vikings at Helgeland*, relying on Icelandic 'family' sagas, but with invented characters and intended to give a picture of life in the age of the sagas more generally. After the contemporary verse drama *Love's Comedy* (1862), Ibsen concluded his national-historical cycle with *The Pretenders* (1863), subtitled 'historical play' and with characters and events taken from early thirteenth-century Norwegian history, generally considered the high point of the Norwegian medieval state. Moreover, besides learning all the practicalities of the theatre business, Ibsen had the privilege of seeing all his historical plays brought on stage.

Secondly, what in one sense was a failure – that the Norwegian theatres were not even close to nationalizing their repertoires – could also be seen as an advantage. French and Danish plays, and the 'light' repertoire more generally, continued to dominate the Norwegian theatres. The most frequently played dramatist in Bergen was, by far, Eugène Scribe. In Kristiania, Ibsen was accused of running a 'vaudeville theatre', but countered that every theatre in Europe relied on French imports. The struggle for a national theatre took place, in other words, in a transnational context,

which was also surprisingly synchronized. The stars of the French theatre, like Émile Augier and Victorien Sardou, were often performed just a year after or even in the same season as in Paris. Scandinavian theatre, like Scandinavian literature, was a translation culture taking part in ‘world literature’ and ‘world theatre’. Bjørnson’s and Ibsen’s dramatic ambitions were in fact all from the start articulated in opposition not just to the Danish but also to the French hegemony over the European theatre. Their commission was not just to produce national drama but also to make the theatre into a literary institution, a task not easily realized at the time.

Thirdly, while Ibsen’s financial situation at home in the end got worse, his literary work improved continuously and peaked with *Love’s Comedy* and *The Pretenders*, as well as the long poems *On The Heights* (1860) and *Terje Vigen* (1862). So did his literary status. When Ibsen left Norway, he was an acclaimed author and celebrated as such.

Finally, what would Ibsen’s chances have been like in a more ‘advanced’ society? Available data on the social characteristics of leading playwrights hardly suggests that they would have been better in France. The leading French dramatists tended to be sons of Paris professionals, having attended prestigious educational establishments and mostly gone on to study for degrees. They had good connections in theatrical and literary circles, but would still often struggle for years before breaking through. Sardou, who became one of the richest of French playwrights, lived in outright poverty in the last half of the 1850s. The three-years older Ibsen would hardly have stood a chance in the theatre capital of Europe, while in Norway the national theatre project recruited what talent there was.

In 1863–4 Ibsen’s fortune in many respects turned. He was awarded both a domestic travel grant and a grant to go abroad. He had significant income from the publication and later performance of *The Pretenders*, and a private campaign organized by Bjørnson and others brought him a substantial amount of money. In June 1864, Ibsen left for Rome and began what would turn out to be a twenty-seven-year stay in Italy and Germany.

### Notes

1. Edmund Gosse, *Ibsen* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1907), p. 8.
2. Henrik Ibsen, Letter to Hedvig Stousland, 26 September 1869, in *Letters and Speeches*, ed. Evert Sprinchorn (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1965), p. 87.
3. Per Kristian Heggelund Dahl, *Streiftlys: Fem Ibsen-studier* (Oslo: Ibsen-museet, 2001), p. 40.



## CHAPTER 2

*From Theatre to Book*

Narve Fulsås

In literary scholarship, Ibsen's *oeuvre* is usually treated as a whole, delineated by internal references and developing in a continuous way. But if approached from institutional, political and other contextual perspectives, it is rather characterized by a number of major ruptures and reorientations. The middle of the 1860s saw one such rupture, when Ibsen did not just leave Norway but also left the theatre as the institutional setting for his writing and focused his attention on the book market. From then until 1877, he only wrote one new play explicitly for the theatre. In this period he also broke with Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, befriended and then detached himself from the Danish critic Georg Brandes, and eventually adopted an outspokenly conservative position. By the late 1870s, the emerging new generation of Scandinavian authors thought of Ibsen as having lost his original sting.

**Moving Abroad**

Leaving Norway, Ibsen himself emphasized how he had become alienated from his home country. The year he left for Rome, 1864, was the year of Denmark's defeat by the allied forces of Prussia and Austria, leading to the loss of the southern duchies under the Danish crown, Schleswig and Holstein. Since Denmark received no military support from Norway or Sweden, Danish defeat was at the same time a crisis for pan-Scandinavianism. Ibsen made these events into the major context for his departure. He claimed that hostile reactions to his works, as well as to his call for solidarity with Denmark, had isolated him and eventually driven him into exile. In writings and letters, he castigated Swedish and Norwegian cowardice and betrayal, and his first major work written in Rome, *Brand* (1866), has often been seen as his major showdown with Norwegian pettiness, while the succeeding *Peer Gynt* (1867) has been seen to demonstrate his ruthless dissection of a Norwegian 'national character'.

However, Ibsen was far from the only Norwegian author or artist going abroad. Norway had no educational institutions for the arts, and authors and artists were expected to go to the continent in order to train and study. The stated purpose of the travel grant Ibsen had been awarded by the Norwegian state was to allow him to study 'art and the history of art and literature'. Politics certainly entered the picture, although on a more general level than the disillusionment of 1864. The combined effect of living in a small country with a small capital and a literature still in its initial stages was that the borders between literature and politics were porous. Almost every writer was engaged in journalism or occasional writings of a more or less political kind. Literature was still far from being a relatively autonomous field of cultural production; living in Kristiania as a writer, it was almost impossible not to get involved in political controversy.

This was the situation facing all of Ibsen's contemporary colleagues, but they perceived it and responded to it in very different ways. For Ibsen, the pressure from politics and the defeats of 1848 and 1864 resulted in a position of outright anti-politics: he became hostile to politics and to the expansion of political power in general. Staying abroad gave Ibsen a distance to domestic controversies that became vital for his ability to write. To Bjørnson, at the other extreme, politics was not just a major interest; he immersed himself in it. In 1866, he founded the *Norwegian People's Magazine*, which he made into a central press organ for the liberal opposition. From time to time, Bjørnson too needed to go abroad for the sake of his literature. He was repeatedly in Rome, Munich, southern Austria and France – his longest continuous stay was in Paris from 1882 to 1887. But from abroad Bjørnson still kept on following and intervening in affairs at home. His combination of literature and politics became central to his achievement and made him one of the most important public figures in Norway in the late nineteenth century. The novelist Jonas Lie represents a third stance. Lie resembled Bjørnson in his deep interest in politics and his growing liberal sympathies. Unlike Bjørnson, however, he felt that he had to choose, and he chose literature. That meant, he concluded, that he had to stay away from Norway, and he spent even more years abroad than Ibsen: three years in Rome, four years in Germany, and twenty-four years in Paris (1882–1906).

Abroad these authors socialized mainly with other Scandinavians and made few literary or other acquaintances in their foreign environments. Rome, where Ibsen stayed from 1864 to 1868, had a Scandinavian society that was at the centre of their social and cultural life. The Ibsen family