

IBSEN ON STAGE

By Vigdis Ystad

For more than eleven years, the young Henrik Ibsen worked as a stage director and dramaturge. Shortly after publishing his first play, *Catiline*, he was headhunted as artistic director of the Norwegian Theatre in the small coastal city of Bergen, a position he held for six years. In 1857, he moved on to the Norwegian capital Christiania (now Oslo), where he was appointed theatre director of Kristiania Norwegian Theatre. This new appointment lasted five years. Ibsen's period in the theatre meant excellent education for a future playwright. In order to survive, the theatres had to stage a lot of musicals and French light comedies. Besides his own early plays, Ibsen also staged some Shakespeare adaptations, classical Holberg comedies and Scandinavian and German romantic tragedies. After leaving Norway in 1864 in order to settle in Italy and later in Germany, Ibsen could utilize his broad stage experience, writing what was to become groundbreaking plays for the world theatre.

In his own plays, Ibsen used what he had learned through both reading and practical work. The plot in *A Doll House*, where Krogstad's threatening letter triggers constant suspense and confusion, is closely related to the technique known from French intrigue comedies. The plot technique and stage machinery in several of Ibsen's other plays show the same influence. Also his scenography is based on older traditions. The unseen enigmatic attic in *The Wild Duck*, and the entrance to the same room, is situated at the end wall in the back of the stage. This is from where the "deus ex machina" used to enter the stage in European baroque theatre. Hedvig's suicide in the attic results in the final outcome of the play. In the same way, Krogstad's fatal letter in *A Doll House* is dropped in a mailbox situated just in the back of the stage. Also Hedda Gabler's private room, with the general's portrait, Hedda's piano and her final suicide, is placed in the back of the stage, fronting the spectators. Ibsen also retained the baroque theatre's left and right hand stage's traditional meaning. Evil forces are located on or enter from the stage's right hand side, good or positive forces belong to the stage's left side (seen from the audience).

Ibsen also learned much from antique tragedy. His famous so called retrospective technique, where most of the plot consists in the disclosure of the past, is closely related to the way in which the past reappears in Greek tragedies. As we will perhaps remember, the full revelation of the past in *Ghosts* is not finished until act three, when Mrs. Alving at last realizes her own responsibility for Chamberlain Alving's dissipated life. There was good reason for it when a contemporary Norwegian professor of classical philology compared *Ghosts* to Sofokles' plays and declared it a modern resurrection of antique tragedy.

Ibsen was however not exclusively traditional. During his mature and so called realistic period, he replaced the traditional tragedies nobility with actors representing ordinary people. At the same time, his stage directions became more and more elaborate, recreating their bourgeoisie life in detail. He did not miss anything in his exact determinations of the rooms and surroundings where the action takes place. Combining these detailed prescriptions with the dialogue's retelling of the past made some critics claim that Ibsen worked more like a novelist than as a playwright. In our time the same concern has been raised by among others the German critic Peter Szondi, who claims that Ibsen's retrospection transforms what should be dramatic action into sheer storytelling. Such objections do not however take into account the clever constructions of Ibsen's plots, where the dramatic suspense is due to the present assessment of consequences triggered by past choices of action.

Ibsen's international breakthrough started in Germany, where he experienced his first real success with *Pillars of Society*, shortly after followed by *A Doll House*. The social criticism in these plays resulted in fame, but also in resistance and almost revolt because of its harsh realism. In northern Germany, several theatres refused to perform *A Doll House* if the ending was not altered. Neither the theatres nor the spectators would tolerate a young mother leaving her children in order to develop her own personality. The unwillingness was probably triggered by the great similarity between what could be watched on stage and the spectators' own bourgeoisie life conditions. Ibsen then very reluctantly changed the ending, letting Helmer persuade Nora to stay on at home.

Naturally, this solution worked poorly on stage, and it went out of use some fifteen years later.

In Germany, Ibsen was for a long period staged first and foremost as a realist and a social critic. The stagings of his plays were faithful to the texts' realism. The Duke of Meiningen, who operated a famous private theatre which also offered public performances, staged several Ibsen plays. Among them was *Ghosts*, at a time when the play was still officially forbidden by German censorship. (Theatre censorship existed both in Germany, France and England during the nineteenth century, and Ibsen was regarded so rebellious that he at first could be performed in private theatres only.) The Duke collaborated with Ibsen in order to establish the *mis-en-scène* as natural as possible. He also made the dialogue sound more like natural speech, quitting the older declamatory style of acting. With the same intent he developed theatre-ensemble acting to replace the older tradition. The Meiningen stagings made great influence both on the later Ibsen tradition in Germany and on the early French Ibsen performances.

The German director Max Reinhardt introduced something new in the German realistic tradition. Shortly after Ibsen's death in 1906, he produced *Ghosts* at his experimental theatre Kammerspiele in Berlin, followed by his staging of *John Gabriel Borkman* at Deutsches Theater in 1917. Reinhardt concentrated the themes and "stripped the plays of the illusionistic details of naturalism" (Marker & marker 1998, 46). Instead, he had the Norwegian artist Edvard Munch to paint sketches for the scenography in *Ghosts*, aiming at a recreation of the brooding atmosphere of dead past that fills the dialogue and the play's action. This staging made poetic and atmospheric values become as important as the naturalism.

In France, the naturalist director André Antoine, who was influenced by the Meiningen realism, established his own standard of theatre-ensemble acting. He also arranged the stage like a room where "the fourth wall" (*le quatrième mur*) was missing. The performance should be experienced like an excerpt from real life. In 1890, Antoine made an groundbreaking realist staging of *Ghosts*. The year after followed his staging of *The*

Wild Duck. Not much later, the symbolist director Aurélien Lugne-Poé staged his first Ibsen play at his experimental Théâtre l'Oeuvre. During the years 1893–97 Lugne-Poé staged several other Ibsen plays, among them *Rosmersholm*, *The Master Builder*, and *John Gabriel Borkman*. Lugne-Poé aimed at presenting Ibsen as a symbolist. The performances were given on a half darkened stage, where scenery and stage properties were almost non-existent and where the actors intended to talk and behave in a stylized way. Most important to Lugne-Poé was the hidden meanings behind the text's surface. In staging *The Lady from the Sea* in 1892, he wanted the characters to act like "beings that seem to belong to another world and that speak a mystical and symbolic language full of hidden meanings" (quoted in Marker & Marker 1998, 38). Unfortunately, Ibsen did not profit much from Lugné-Poe's symbolist experiments. His plays were for a long period regarded enigmatic and incomprehensible, with characters not acting and behaving in accordance with the French view of polite and honorable conduct.

Both in Norway and in English speaking countries, Ibsen the realist was for a long period the dominating perception of both critics and theatregoers. He was staged as a radical and clairvoyant analyzer of western society, in performances keeping close to the texts. During the first part of the twentieth century, this naturalistic tendency became so dominant that it at last resulted in resistance. Ibsen was regarded as dull and boring; his tedious realism was seen as uninteresting, and his plays were accused of lacking poetic contents. Ibsen was even accused of having a preservative effect on the development of western theatre.

During the second half of the twentieth century, this picture has radically changed. Modern psychology lead to a renewal both in the theatre and in Ibsen scholarship. Psychological theories of among others Sigmund Freud, and after him of recent scholars like Jaques Lacan and Camille Paglia, just to mention some names, have made great influence both in western theatre and in international Ibsen research. This has perhaps resulted in a greater interest in the characters' psychology than in the plot structure and dramatic craftsmanship in Ibsen's writings.

Quite a few performances have however in my opinion suffered from this tendency. One example may be the Swedish instructor Ingmar Bergman's staging of *The Wild Duck* in 1972. In this performance, Bergman interpreted Gregers Werle as a neurotic case, possessed by the memory of his dead, beloved mother. His body language showed strong frustration and inability to act. As a result, Gregers's idealistic claims tended to become negligible, and the dramatic suspense was weakened. Several other Ibsen interpretations have brought a similar trend forward. Ibsen's characters are of course aberrant, some of them are even on the verge of being insane, which is for instance the case both with Ellida in *The Lady from the Sea* and Irene in *When we dead awaken*. The illness is however not to be conceived literally or as individual characteristics. Even if representation of mental suffering is taken to be a special feature of Ibsen's authorship, it may be said to demonstrate "illness" as an universal human characteristic in a world which is itself ill. The strangeness should then in my opinion rather be underlined in the performance as a whole, not just in one specific character.

Ibsen's symbolism have created new interest among scholars and theatre goers. On the one hand, it have been treated as poetic keys to the hidden meanings behind the plays' outer realism. Such interpretations were perhaps exaggerated in the early French Ibsen tradition, but in a more moderate form it has gained much support after the middle of the twentieth century. As an example can be mentioned the fire in the last act of *Ghosts*, symbolizing the necessary destruction of the rotten society represented by Chamberlain Alving and Pastor Manders. Another example may be the towers in *The Masterbuilder*, representing both Solness' *hubris* and his sexual drive. Consequently, the tower may be given a prominent location in the *mis-en-scene*, like what happened during one of the latest Solness performances in Norway. There, the whole action revolved around a stylized upright structure without any realistic appearance. Other well known symbols are the white horses in *Rosmersholm*, representing both death and eroticism. It has been common, even in realistic stagings, to underline this white colour. We do perhaps remember how Rebekka West during the whole action is crocheting a white shawl. In act four, when it is finished, it is ready to be used as her combined bridal veil and death robe. Not to mention the wine leaves in *Hedda Gabler*. Hedda's words about the wine leaves may

allude to a well known dionysian symbol in Greek antiquity, and as such it also associates to classical tragedy. The scandalous Lady Diana's existence in the same play may in the same way be read as an allusion to the goddess both for hunting and child birth in classical mythology. Modern theatre performances have made this a point, introducing classical attributes in the scenography. In a Swedish television performance of *Hedda Gabler* in 1993, the walls on stage were decorated with motives from classical antiquity. Such stagings may result in the underlining of a tragic dimension in the play, but they may as well point to the symbols as a means of escapism.

Reading the symbols as eye openers of hidden meaning involve accepting their validity. Quite another interpretation is however also possible and has gained increasing relevance during the last decades. Alternative readings perceive the symbols as the drama characters' attempts to escape unpleasant life conditions. Man is then said to use symbols as tools to beautify, cover or deny a reality emptied of meaning. This relatively new interpretative position implies that the rich symbolism in Ibsen's plays is taken as manifestations of the characters' false idealism. A false idealist can not be perceived seriously, he or she will automatically be stripped of every heroic dimension. Accordingly, such characters can no longer function as tragic protagonists. Instead, the plays are often interpreted and staged as tragicomedies or melodramas, revealing how man designs a false surface in order to camouflage depths of unpleasant truths. If there should be any social criticism left in such stagings, it is indirectly expressed through irony and comical acting.

Related to this tendency is in my view the modern German expressionist or postmodernist tradition, the so called "Regietheater", where grotesque exaggerations are used to clarify man's inauthentic, desperate and anxious life in an inhuman and meaningless world. Such stagings do not at all conform with Ibsen's stage directions. They often make use of brutal conduct, blood and weapons to underline both hidden aggression and death drive. When the young German director Sebastian Hartmann in 1999 produced *Ghosts* at the Volksbühne in Berlin, the scenery consisted of metal clouds overhanging the stage. Black and grey stairs in the background were pointing upwards,

but lead nowhere. It all seemed to symbolize a confined hell or a underworld. Oswald masturbated to Regine's erotic poses, and Regine dressed herself as a terrorist and shot Miss Alving to death. These horror scenes may be seen as an outright deconstruction of Ibsen's text, perhaps in order to strengthen Ibsen's disclosure of a brutal reality. But instead of frightening the audience, my own impression is that it points more in the direction of farce. In 2004 Hartmann also staged *John Gabriel Borkman* in an almost grotesque way. The performance was filled with baroque antics, like when Borkman himself was drawn head down into a piano, so deep that only his feet were visible over the instrument's lid. In the same way, the traffic accident where the pathetic Foldal was overrun by a tram actually took place just outside the theatre building and was in that very same moment filmed and transmitted to the audience inside the house. When Borkman died in the last scene, he was remarkably tenacious, raising four times from his horizontal position, while Ella Rentheim all the time bombarded him with snow balls. Such farcical performances have in my opinion little to do with Ibsen's serious art. The question is whether the experiments have gone too far.

In the developing countries the theatre still seems to defend Ibsen's position as serious social critic, realist and reformer. That does however not necessarily result in old-fashioned or traditional stagings. In 1991 I happened to see an Armenian staging (by Gabriel Sundukian National Theatre) of *An Enemy of the People*, performed as a tragedy where Doctor Stockman at last had to give in for the corrupt capitalist society. The main action took place surrounding a labyrinth constructed of sewer pipelines. Alongside this labyrinth, but outside the main acting area, chairs were placed in a circle where characters would sit down like silent observers instead of exiting the stage as prescribed in Ibsen's play text. The performance ended with the reformist doctor coming out from the labyrinth, only to be killed by stones thrown at him by those observers. They were all newspaper journalists and ordinary townspeople who had lost their position, income and fortune because of the health resort's contaminated water. Now they wanted revenge over the doctor who had revealed this ecological disaster

An Enemy of the People happens to be one of Ibsen's most popular plays both in Africa and Asia. No wonder, while it deals with phenomena such as regrettable pollution, media censorship and corruption.

African, Asian and South American countries also seem to be particularly interested in Ibsen's plays with strong female protagonists. In Bangladesh I have seen both *A Doll House* and *Ghosts*, adapted to local conditions. Performed in a realist style of acting, both Nora and Mrs. Alving demonstrated the suppression of women in a male dominated regime ruled by muslim morality. During such adaptations, much in the original text will of course have to be altered. In *Ghosts*, pastor Manders was transformed to a traditionally dressed mullah reading aloud from the Koran about womens' absolute and mandatory duty to obey their husbands. Nora, dressed in her sari, did of course not show her silk stockings to Doctor Rank, neither did she dance her famous tarantella. Such morally motivated adaptations are however not unique for muslim countries like Bangladesh. The scene with Nora's stockings has also been omitted in Ibsen translations the United States, where ideas of prudence and virtue traditionally have had greater influence than in most European countries. Ibsen may still be perceived as dangerous in the most different parts of the world!

I am a literally scholar, not an expert on theatre. My impression is however that countries in what traditionally have been named "the third world" still tend to perform and understand Ibsen in much the same way as the European Ibsen reception during the playwright's own lifetime. Reading and performing Ibsen as a realist, a critic of economical, religious and social conditions and a liberator of human values is therefore still the most actual reception in much of the world. That tells us much both about the world and about Ibsen.

ON HEDDA GABLER:

If Hedda is a modern character with most of her inner life hidden and unspeakable, how then is it possible to stage the play? The Canadian Drama professor Erroll Durbach has pondered on this question, without being able to give a definite answer. In a recent article from 2002, Durbach asks how to make a consecutive or homogenous performance of such an ambiguous play. He even takes the question further, asking how to stage the very ending of the drama. How should Assessor Brack pronounce the words "But God almighty, people does not do such things!" Should he (on behalf of both himself and the spectators) condemn Hedda's suicide? Should he talk in shock and disbelief? Should he be admiring her deed? Should his words reveal ambiguous feelings? Who is Brack after all, and what do his final words mean for our interpretation of the play as a whole?

Durbach's opinion of Hedda as a most ambiguous personality does not deviate much from other modern readings. He underlines however how difficult it is to stage a text where everything is fluctuating and uncertain, filled with ambiguity. He also underlines that it will be impossible to separate the assessment of Hedda from the public's cultural and historical situation. The instructor will all the time have to make choices in how to stage the play.

Durbach's conclusion may seem as uncertain as the play itself. We both can and cannot accept Hedda's character and her actions. The play is genuinely unclear, characterized by the lack of tragic catharsis. All Durbach says, is that if the play is to be read and staged as a tragedy, Hedda will have to change during the action. Approaching the ending, she must then convince us that the dreary conventionality in Brack's final words is *wrong*. She must appear liberated and able to resurrect existential action, even if that will demand the almost impossible of her. Hedda must then chose her self consciously and under full self-controll. Only in this way can a tragedy reinstate action and meaning in a world emptied by meaning. The question is however if *Hedda Gabler* really *is* a real tragedy, and also if we or Assessor Brack will ever be able to understand the play's enigmatic protagonist.

Let us at last repeat what the question is all about. Should the main character be condemned or admired? Should she not at all be taken seriously? Is or is not *Hedda Gabler* a tragedy? Does the play belong to Ibsen's social critical writing? Is it first and foremost a play showing the suppression of women? Is the play's main message a revelation of false idealism and life's meaninglessness? Such questions will perhaps never release a final conclusion. The answer is open, demonstrating *Hedda Gabler* as perhaps Ibsen's most ambiguous, enigmatic and modern play.

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