VIGDIS YSTAD:
IBSEN ON THE WORLD'S STAGE

Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) is the great classic of modern drama. Already while living, he became one of the foremost export articles of Norway, and it has continued that way up to the present time. His plays are performed daily on hundred of stages worldwide. Ibsen also keeps appearing in published form, and not only in Norwegian. Older translations are supplemented by new ones, and new languages are added to the list. New translations have recently been published in Polish, Latvian, Hungarian, Check, Farsi, Arabic, Vietnamese, French, Portugese, German, English, and more languages. Reecently, Ibsen's plays *An Enemy of the People*, *The Lady from the Sea*, *A Doll House* and *Ghosts* have also been translated into Korean, while those plays were staged here in 1998, 2000, 2005 and 2006.

Ibsen was a child of his time, dependent on the same literary impulses as his fellow authors. He helped himself freely from Norwegian, Nordic and European literature for inspiration. It could be Icelandic Saga literature, Norwegian folklore, history, philosophy. Kierkegaard, Hegel, Nietzsche, and others. But, above all, he drew on literary artists, for instance Shakespeare, Voltaire, Scribe, Goethe, Schiller, Oehlenscläger – or on his contemporaries, such as Byron, Dickens, Stuart Mill.

It is clear enough that both Norway and Norwegian personages are presented in Ibsen's dramas. But at the same time, the descriptions have been sufficiently removed from the local scene to function as general pictures of life in a European context from the second half of the 19th century.This is already evident in the fairytale drama *Peer Gynt* (1867). The action is here partly realistic, partly fairylike. The story line of how Peer meets Solvejg and afterwarsa spends a lifetime of trials, returning to her at the end of his life, can be compared to Norwegian folkstories telling of the relation between the Ashlad and the princess. These folktales always have a happy ending, but Ibsen's sense of an ending is far less certain, since it is made contingent upon Peer's existential choice beyond the final scene. If Peer does not choose to take the responsibility for being genuinely himself,

he will fall prey to the buttonmlulders annihilation and become “nobody”. Ibsen leaves the question open, a technique typical of him as a playwright. In this way, the entire drama pendulates between fairy tale and stark reality, something that is also evident in the concrete setting of the play and in the characters whom Peer meets on his way.

In Ibsen’s critical realistic dramas, we see an apparently realistic and familiar everyday life in Norway, stylished and brought to an extreme in the shaping of the conflicts. Ibsen is not occupied with exposing the private lives of individuals but with presenting the existential conditions facing human beings in general. And to that extent, it is actually irrelevant whether the action takes place in the east or the west, in the north or the south, in Norway or in another country. Ibsen describes ”ordinary” human beings. The action of his dramas takes place neither in the lower class nor among nobility. This shows that the dramatic and often tragic conflicts presented by Ibsen are commonplace *and* common ground for all human beings. Ibsen’s drama is a timeless drama. Yet he writes about different cuiltures and different time spans: Rome in the first century BC (*Catiline*), the Roman empire in late antiquity (*Emperor and Galilean*), Norwegian civil strife in the 13th century (*The Pretenders*), Norway’s situation of political dependency in the late middle ages (*Lady Inger*), the personal conflicts of a modern European in the latter part of the 19th century (the critical-realistic dramas). All of these time periods, however, have something in common. They are historical periods with significant cultural changes and social upheavals that challenge human stability. In this way, they have much in common with our own time.

In a letter of May 1880 to Ludwig Passarge, the first German translator of the fairy tale play *Peer Gynt*, Ibsen wrote: ”Of all of my books, I consider *Peer Gynt* least suitable to be understood outside the Scandinavian countries”. Ibsen holds the view that ”a very exact knowledge of Norwegian nature and Norwegian folklife” is required to understand the work. He was thoroughly wrong about that. *Peer Gynt* remains one of Ibsen’s most performed dramas on a world basis. In fact, it is only outdone by *A Doll House, Ghosts*, and *Hedda Gabler*.

The play in its entirety in this way builds a conflict on an existential set of issues that by no means are uniquely Norwegian. It is a set of issues that are far more dramatic and run much deeper than what Ibsen may have found in the lore that constitutes the point of departure for the piece. It is a question of being or not being. To be or not to be – that is the test Peer is given.

That is in a way ways also Nora's question. Nora's position of utter dependence – in her doll house – is presented in the light of a society that gives women *no* access to education and *no* independent choice of occupation. Her falsifying of a bank note is explained partly as ignorance of finacial and legal matters and partly reflecting the frayed and furtive business morals represented by Krogstad, the lawyer.

Nora is in other words bound or tight-laced in a situation that grant her no possibility of living out her life as an independent citizen. She lives in the Victorian period of nineteenth-century Europe, where women had no rights to atttend schools and universities; where they were unable to enter occupations of their own choice; where they had no right to vote; and where legislation placed the woman under financial guardianship the very moment she entered marriage. In other words, beginning with the wedding day, the husband became the woman's guardian and spoke for her in all matters pertaining to her role as a citizen. In the second half of the 1800s, home and marriage were the only normal arena for a woman wishing to find a sense of fulfilment in life, that is, for a woman of the middle class. Now women on farms and those coming from the working class did find themselves in a situation of more independence; but they were less representative of tendenceies and rules predominanting society as a whole.

In *A Doll House*, Ibsen presents – as we know – Nora as being more in tune with original, human values than the socially corrupt Thorvald Helmer, who behaves as a pillar of society and is mostly occupied with what may benefit his own social status. Nora, on the contrary, presents her own feeling as being of far greater value than the social norms gouverning Helmer's actions. In the confrontational scene between the spouses in Act three, Thorvald Helmer says to his wife: "I would gladly work day and night for you,

Nora, – bear grief and loss for your sake. But no one sacrifices his honour for the one he loves". In saying this, Thorvald gives expression to a man's code of social morality. But Nora responds with the famous line: "Millions of women have done just that".

Her words must be seen in the context of a philosophy of life that is characteristic of her conduct from the beginning to the end of the play. To Nora, the dream about love between man and woman (and between parents and children) is the one sustaining value – and for a long time she believes that Helmer feels the same way. She has been willing to sacrifice everything for his love – also her honour as defined by society. Her dream about "the miraculous" is precisely a restating of her belief that love precedes all other considerations. When Helmer, as a member of society, places honour higher than feelings for his wife, Nora's world breaks down.

Nora's actions are in other words results of true human insights and love. Rebellious Nora, it is true, is presented for a long time as a "lark", a "squirrel" and a "doll", obediantly playing the role she knows her conventional husband and society expects of her. But behind the mask there is another Nora, with an inner pride that arises from her own feeling and her own moral judgements. Her personal morals are more original, genuine and well-considered than those imposed by society. For her, love and integrity are more important than her husband's rigid concern with law and order in the external world. Nora believes that caring for her husband and children is of greater human value than the more arbitrary legal statutes. And it is through Nora's moral judgements that the plot develops, culminating in the famous scene where she leaves her doll house in search of her real self. "I can no longer allow myself to be content with what most people say, or with what it says in the books. I must think things out for myself, and try to be clear on them […] I must try to find out who is rigiht, society or me", she declares.

Given the clearly realistic imprint of *A Doll House*, it seems natural enough to interpret Nora's rebellion as a rebellion against conditions in the society of her time. In that case, her rebellion occurs as a claim to equal social rights for men and women. But from what we know of society at that time, it does not leave Nora with much hope from the moment

she shuts the door behind her in the last act of the play. The society of Ibsen's time did not hold high hopes for women exercising their rights and living out their lives. Neither a Nora, nor a Rebekka West, nor an Ellida Wangel, nor a Hedda Gabler has a social role of her own. They are all dependent on their husbands, and their urge for liberation does not allow them to gain access to the man's domain by way of occupation or socially defined positions.

Ibsen's plays is however more complicated than they appears to be on the surface, and if we dig deeper into his portrayal of women, we realise that he is doing more than just critizising society and illustrating the social position of women. There is a well-known statement by Ibsen himself, in which he guards against being perceived as a poet debating on behalf of the feminine gender. Giving a speech on 26 May 1898, at a celebration in The Norwegian Association for the Cause of Women, Ibsen stated:

> I am not a member of the Association for the Cause of Women. Everything that I have composed as a literary artist has not issued from a deliberate trend. I have been more of a poet and less of a social philosopher than one generally seems inclined to believe. I must disavow the purported honour of deliberately having worked for the cause of women. It is not even clear to me what the cause of women really is. To me it has been a human cause. And reading my books attentively, one will come to understand this […] My task has been the portrayal of human life.

Ibsen has, on a realistic level, depicted the supressed position of the European woman in the period we call the modern breakthrough; and through his rebellious women characters, he has protested against the situation. But that is not the heart of the matter in his dramas. On a deeper level we find a conception of freedom and liberation that pertains not to social or societal issues but rather to existential issues. Ibsen's women claim a fully developed human life, attaining to what may be called authentic existence. *That* is the liberation Ibsen is fighting for. But that is also far more difficult to obtain than social equality.

But even so, Ibsen often used his women characters to reveal the system of norms in his dramas to readers and audiences. Many of his women are protagonists who raise

questions about their own and men's behaviour in order to highlight the moral conflicts inherent in the play – conflictes between social and true human values. Here we are perhaps faced with one of the qualities most typical of Ibsen's women.

In societies where the fundamental norms or common moral standpoints are undergoing major changes, or are in a process of disintegrating altogether, people are faced with especially strong existential challenges and a coignizant mode of suffering as a result. Those who accept this challenge and take up a passionate search for truth and meaning, are deeply affected by it. And Ibsen's women are for sure more affected in this way than are most of his male characters. His women tend to set their lives against a backdrop of great social and ethical changes. They tend to feel alienated because they tend to have different values from the society around them. If Ibsen is occupied with an utopia at all, it is the utopia of personality. In this sense, his women characters are vehicles for his social criticisms, for example of a male dominated society's repression of women.

In Germany and Scandinavia, Georg Brandes, the brilliant European critic, did much to make Ibsen's authorship known in the playwright's own time. Brandes emphasized Ibsen's ethical idealism and wellfounded moral criticism. This view was later carried on by Halvdan Koht, a Norwegian historian and Ibsen-enthusiast, who, among other things, has written what remains one of our most important biographies on Ibsen (*The Life of Ibsen* /[English version Ruth Lima McMahon and Hanna Astrup Larsen) . - New York : W.W. Norton , 1931. - 2 Vols. Original title: *Henrik Ibsen : eit diktarliv*).

The psychiatrist Sigmund Freud was inspired by Ibsen's deep insights into the human mind and developed his theory about the Oedipus complex, among other things, on the basis of the play *Rosmersholm (*"Über Rosmersholm" in *Einige Charaktertypen aus der psychoanalytischen Arbeit* 1916). In retrospect, it looks as if Ibsen in his description of human nature may well have anticipated several other key insights and theories in Freud.

Influential German authors such as Rainer Maria Rilke and Thomas Mann were also occupied with the richness and meaning in Ibsen's authorship. Thomas Mann for

example clearly distances himself from ”the English school”, which wiewed Ibsen first and foremost as a social-realistic critic. The Russian poet Alexander Block is also among those who distanced themselves from a rationalistic and realistic interpretation of Ibsen. He saw the symbolist Ibsen as being akin to Russian mentality and the catastrophic mood that characterized Russian culture at the turn of the century. But the opposite view of Ibsen as a social critic was also prominent in Russia, as seen in the marxist theoretician Alexander Plekhanov.

In the English speaking world, James Joyce and George Bernhard Shaw stepped forth as Ibsen’s brave knights. Shaw, inspired by ideas from the French revolution, wrote his book *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891), where he presents Ibsen’s critical view of society as an essential force in the development and social progress of western civilisation. Such perspectives may perhaps have been overstated and were soon counteracted. For a while in the middle of the 20th century, the English-speaking Ibsen reception came to perceive the dramatist as a boring and outdated author. Some even called hin a ”tedious moralist”. Complaints about old-fashioned and stark realism were probably also connected to the English translations of Ibsen’s works, which failed render the fine poetic nuances of the original language. They appeared to be grey and flat, devoid of the lyrical lilt and richness of tone found in the original. This is quite deplorable, also in as much as a number of translations of Ibsen’s works into other languages have been undertaken on the basis of English translations.

William Archer’s English translation in twelve volumes, *The Collected Works of Henrik Ibsen*, 1906–12, were used as an authoritative source for translating into a third language. The Ibsen reception in England had, however, started much earlier than that. Edmund Gosse translated and published some of Ibsen’s poems in *The Spectator* in 1872. He also published an article about Ibsen’s poems in 1879 (in *Studies in the Literature of Northern Europe*). But William Archer was the first one to publish translations of the plays. *The Pillars of Society* (1877) appeared in English in 1880 (*Quicksands*). And soon after a number of translations appeared in print, stangely enough even in cooperation with the competetitor Gosse. This lead to a good many plays, especially Ibsen’s critical-realistic

dramas plus as *Brand*, becoming available in English before 1900. These editions and the performance of them in English became a grand success, although the press also offered considerable resistance.

The most spontaneously breakthrough for Ibsen occurred, however, in Germany. The early plays, *The Pretenders* and *The Vikings from Helgeland*, were the first ones to be translated and performed. This was as early as in the 1870s. And translations of the critical-realistic dramas followed suit. In fact, it happened that different translations of a play would appear in the same year as the Norwegian original. The rights to translating Ibsen into German were not protected. It was in Germany that the first collected works of Ibsen's writings first appeared. This happened in 1898–1904, when the Fischer Verlag came out with *Henrik Ibsens sämtliche Werke in deutscher Sprache* in 10 volumes. Georg Brandes, Julius Elias and Paul Schlenter served as editors. A four-volume set entitled *Zweiter Reihe: Nachgelassene Schrifte* appeared by the same publisher in 1909. To date, these remain the only collected works of Ibsen in the German language. Yet it is to be in mind that numerous German translations of single works are available from the playwright's own time and as well as more most recent times. Before 1904, there were, for example, five competing translations in German of *Nora*, or *A Doll House.* It was through the German language that Ibsen first reached an international readership and audience. The German translations, says the German Ibsen scholar Fritz Paul, were "Ibsen's gate to world literature and the basis for countless secondary translations, especially into all East European languages but also into Italian and Japanese" (Paul 1997, 66).

When we consider how and when Henrik Ibsen was translated into other languages a relatively clear picture emerges. Germany was first in line, with translations in the year of publication or a year later. Then England followed in second place, with France and Spain sharing third and fourth place. The Spanish editions came out after the turn of the century, and continued at a regular pace up to 1915.

In Russia Ibsen was introduced by the performance of *A Doll House* in 1883. This did not, however, cause the same sensation there as elswhere in Europe. The performance of *An Enemy of the People* followed in 1891. Ibsen's Russian translator, Peter Emanuel Hansen, was a Dane who had married a Russian woman. Initially, the Russians viewed Ibsen's dramas as having a strong moral message, while also being somewhat sinister and frightening. It was not until 1895, with A.S. Suvorin's establishment of "The Little Theatre" in St.Petersburg, that Ibsen became an outright trend in Russia. At this theatre, Ibsen was staged as a symbolist together with plays by Gerhard Hauptmann. At Konstantin Stanislavskijs "The Artist Theatre" in Moscow, founded in 1897, Ibsen's plays were also gradually introduced to the Russian audience, notably with *An Enemy of the People, The Wild Duck, Brand* and *Peer Gynt.* By the turn of the century, Ibsen's breakthrough and success had thus been assured on the Russian stage.

In 1889, Otto Brahm founded his experimental theatre, Freie Bühne, in Berlin. His staging of *Ghosts* triggered an innovative European trend in the theatre, with spin-offs in France, England and Russia. To Brahm and his cohorts, Ibsen stood out as the foremost modern realist dramatist and his plays were consequently performed at high frequency in their experimental theatres. André Antoine, the French theatre director, did much to promote Ibsen as a *modern* realistic dramatist. His staging of *Ghosts* at his naturalistic Théatre Libre in Paris in 1890 was the first French Ibsen performance. It became a smashing success for playwright and director. A year later, Antoine also staged *The Wild Duck.* At the same time, however, the instructor and anti-realist Aurelien Lugné-Poe set up several Ibsen plays as pure symbolic dramas at his experimental theatre Théatre d'lœuvre. The first one was *The Lady from the Sea* wich premièred in 1892; this was incidentally also the first Paris performance authorized by Ibsen himself. As one might expect, Lugné-Poe was criticized by those who wanted greater clarity or transparicy in what was performed on stage.

In 1906, Max Reinhardt staged *Ghosts* at his Kammersppiele at Des dutschen Theater in Berlin. Reinhardt had worked together with Brahm, but wanted to create a more intimate theatre, stressing the *athmosphere* more than the realism. His *Ghosts* became first and

formost a play about the *mother* and her deep pain. Edvard Munch had painted the decorations for this famous performance, concentrating on the *colours* as an expressive medium: a black chair in the middle of the sitting room was in focus, contrasting the white mountain peaks and the raising sun in the background.

From this time forwards, it is, in somewhat simplified terms, possible to speak of at least two branches of Ibsen reception. Some want to see Ibsen as a creator and master of realistic portrayals in dramatic form. Other want to see him as a creator and master of modern symbolic, poetic dramas that are far ahead of their time., Today, the emphasis in the western world is on the ”modern” Ibsen, who inspired the symbolic, the expressionistic, the absurd, and other modes of the theatre. That is of course not to deny that more than a hundred years after his death, Ibsen is still highly recognized for the technical realism of his plays and for their powerful social message. The rest of the world is beginning to catch up also on the symbolic Ibsen but there can be no doubt that it is Ibsen, the social reformer and whip, who is most prominent in the developing parts of world today.

It is perhaps no cocincidence that two of the most popular Ibsen plays in the third world today are *A Doll Hose* and *An Enemy of the People.* I have had the opportunity to watch both *A Doll Hose* and *Ghosts* in a country like Bangladesh, and could noticed the extremely strong impact these plays make in the audience. The plays were of course adapted to the target culture: Nora, dressed in her sari, did *not* performe her tarantella, and she did *not* show her stockings to doctor Rank; missis Alving was told by Manders as a mullah, reading from the Koran, that a woman’s first and foremost duty is to obey her husband. The pain felt by the two women were immense. The realism in both these stagings was stark, and I remember having the impression that the audience’s response probably could be compared to the European response when the plays were first performed.

I have also wathced an Armenian staging of *Ean Enemy of the People,* performed like a symbolic, expressionistic play where doctor Stockman was captured in a sewage

labyrinth, surrounded by anonymous newspaper readers centered around him and finally killing him – making this a tragedy more than a tragicomedy. I also remember a *Peer Gynt* performance from Burkina Fasi in Southern Africa, where the stage was dominated by a huge campfire, surrounded by actors, all taking their part in telling a fairy tale about Peer, accompanied by rythmic drum beats. In this performance, the central scene with the Boyg was ommitted; Peers most dangerous enemy was the Dovre Troll, with his slogan "be thyself enough". That perhaps made the play less existentialistic and more a play about Peers egoism, but important aspectes of Ibsen's Peer nevertheless came through.

These are examples of how Ibsen's 19th century European plays about women, marriage, ecology, media etc. apparently may be "translated" or adopted into different times and cultures. They still make great theatre, which must mean that they must carry a *core* of meaning, not dependent on time or specific culture.

But not *everything* in the plays can be "translated". During the Ibsen memorial year 2006, a Norwegian-Ehyptian *Peer Gynt* was staged at the Giza plateau outside Cairo, produced by a Norwegian instructor. The stage was set just in front of the great Sfinx, which also is a "character" appearing in the fourth act of Ibsen's play. But not all the characters in this act made it on the Ghiza scene. In this performance, Peer the profet was – one would rather say of course – omitted. Neither were there any erotic Anitra to tempt him. Other parts of the play were however kept in accordance with Ibsen's text – not least the last scene, where Peer requests his beloved Solvejg's testimony and seeks shelter in her lap. Ibsen probably meant this as an allusion to the Christian *pieta*-motive, and as such it has been staged in numerous European performances. That would in our European perspective function as a logical element in a play where Christian romanticism lies behind the rest of the action. Also the church bells, ringing Peer out of the Dovre mountain and freeing him from the Boyg's hold, were to be heard in the Egyptian desert. The Giza Peer was in other words very different from the Burkina Faso Peer earlier mentioned, and much more in accordance with the Ibsen text than this other African staging.

Doubt have however been raised whether the Cairo performance was not an expression of postcolonialism and lack of intercultural consideration. Was this staging somewhat of an abuse in the Egyptian and muslim surroundings? Was it not a sign of European subjugation? This is what the Ibsen scholar Frode Helland has criticized it for in an article in the last issue of the journal *Ibsen Studies*. I am however not sure about Helland's conclusion. In a global world, it should at least be theoretically possible to stage plays from different cultures, still keeping what is the important ideological mainspring in the original text. This does not necessarily mean that the aim is getting the audience to share the playwrigths perceptions. On the contrary; meeting alien ideas may often show prolific, creating doubts and new thoughts. A play about a suicide does *not* mean that the writer's and the instructor's motif is to persuade the audience acting in the same way; nor do it suggest that suicide is the best of all solutions on life's endeavours. Tragedies may on the contrary create *katharsis* and teach us something about *real* values in life – even if they at the moment should seem unobtainable in the world we actually live in.

I suppose that is what happens when Nora in *A Doll House* and doctor Stockman in *An Enemy of the People* make their victoriuos journey all the way through countries like India, Bangladesh, China, Egypt, Kenya, Mexico and the rest of the world. What happens is maybe that Ibsen's faith in the human personality and his craving for values like love and freedom of thought is revealed as *universal* values, possible to translate into cultures very different from the world Ibsen himself lived in.

Not without problems, however. This is what also makes Ibsen so *dangerous.* His plays have been banned in many countries (Kenya and China offer examples), and there have been more than one example of strange "accidents" and deaths connected to staging Ibsen in countries like for instance Bangladesh and Iran. This does not however mean that one should stop staging Ibsen outside Europe. It only shows that Ibsen has the power to transgress all geografic and cultural boundaries. His authorship is so rich in meaning and possible significations that it lends itself to quite different perceptions and interpretations. Ibsen seems to have something to tell every human being, every culture, and every time

period. His era is hardly passé. We can no doubt look forward to many new and exciting interpretations of his authorship in years and decades to come.