

## THE YOUNG IBSEN'S THEATRE AESTHETICS – A THEATRE OF THE OLD, FREE AND MOUNTAINOUS NORTH

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Ibsen's dramas are today world dramas – not primarily as literature or printed books, but as theatre – on stage. The main point of this article is to show two historical examples for how theatre has functioned as a community building institution and to underline the fact that before Ibsen, drama *as theatre* had played an important part in the making of a common world among Norwegian citizens. I will also suggest how the young Ibsen profited from these established theatre traditions during his practical theatre career – before he dissociated himself from Norwegian theatre and the Norwegian national character in 1864.

This means that I disagree with Benedict Anderson (1991, 44) when he argues that the development of *printed* national languages laid the basis for national consciousness and accordingly also for the modern nation state. When Ibsen and his contemporaries were fighting for a *Norwegian* theatre and theatre aesthetics in the 1850s and early 1860s, a written Norwegian language, which was distinctly different from written Danish, did not exist. The literary market was marginal compared to the market for theatre performances. Thus, theatre was the most important institution for strengthening the national consciousness. This position is underlined by Ibsen's artistic career: Until the early 1860s, Ibsen got most of his income from the theatre and his dramas were first performed on stage and then printed later on – if printed at all.

When the Norwegian constitution was made in 1814, the written language was Danish. Yet the founding fathers and the leading social classes in Norway expressed a strong national consciousness. While most European constitutions are results of revolutions, the history of the Norwegian constitution is quite different. The 20<sup>th</sup> of May 1814 – after six weeks and before any revolutionary situation had developed – the whole process of making a constitution was performed. The constitution was carried unanimously – and the legislative assembly promised to be “united and faithful until Dovre crumbles” (Enige og troe, indtil Dovre falder!) (Fure, 1989, 389).

This means that Anderson's theory about the relation between *printed* national languages and national imagined communities simply does not fit with Norway. In order to explain how the Norwegians could have a common imagined community before 1814 and the background for the young Ibsen's theatre aesthetics, it is necessary to take a look at the *theatre* traditions Ibsen and his generation of 1848 inherited from what is often referred to as the generation of 1814. It is also necessary to establish a perspective, which does not focus on *written* or *printed* language, but on *theatre* as human *action*. To understand how a common world could be developed without a common written or printed language, I will therefore apply a theatre historical perspective. This perspective implies a focus on human action and makes it possible to see how an imagined community was expressed through socio-cultural and aesthetic practices in and around the theatre.

### **To have a world in common**

According to Hannah Arendt, to have a world means to have a world *in common* with one's contemporary fellow citizens, a world which is planned to last for several generations. A world cannot be made in isolation. The world is *in-between* men (Arendt, 1998, 182). *Action* is the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter. While *cognition*, thinking and imaging, are done in isolation, *action* is impossible without others. Action, is thus the only activity that can constitute a political sphere and is the political activity *par excellence* (Arendt, 1998, 9).

Theatre, in contradiction to literature, consists of people and objects that appear in a specific way. Theatre always includes a dimension of reality. Although the actors are "playing", the audience are also participants and present in the same room at the same time, they are all gathered as a more or less temporary *community*. For this reason theatre can never be separated from the participants and their social reality. The aesthetic and the socio-political always coincide in theatre, according to Erika Fischer-Lichte. Theatre as performance is not about passing a message to the audience, but is a possibility for *interaction* (Fischer-Lichte, 2008, 51).

This definition of performance corresponds to Arendt's concept of action. The actual presence of participants who appear in a specific way makes Arendt declare theatre to be "the political art par excellence; only there is the political sphere of human life transposed into art. [...] it is the only art whose sole subject is man in his relationship to others" (Arendt, 1998, 188). Following Arendt's definition, worldly interests constitute something which *inter-est*, which lies between people and therefore can relate and bind them together. The ephemeral character of speech and action requires that they are transformed into a being, which has greater durability than a human life; like a written page, a painting or a monument. Otherwise it would not be possible to have a world in common with future generations.

In Norway the interaction between theatre, the public sphere and political action took place within the structure of the dramatic societies. The dramatic societies were founded in cities and towns in Southern Norway from 1780 and onwards, and they soon developed into arenas where the members got experience in speaking and acting in a public space of appearance. Within the absolute monarchy of Denmark-Norway the dramatic societies were political arenas where the members could build a world *in common* with contemporary fellow citizens. In the dramatic societies the members could develop and express an imagined community based on national monuments, which again was a condition for founding a modern nation state in 1814 (Andersen, 2010).

### **The generation of 1814 and the Norwegian mountains as national monuments**

In the dramatic societies the mountains – and first of all the mountains of Dovre – were established as a symbol for solidity and eternal promises. The mountains were natural objects transformed into national monuments – and by this – into a part of the human world. Compared to other things in the human world, the mountains became a kind of monument with stronger durability than any hand-made object.

From an industrial point of view, the importance of the Norwegian mountains was

unquestionable. To develop the Norwegian mining industry and to keep the mines running was looked upon as an important patriotic project in the twin-kingdom since the early 1500s. Although Norway still was Denmark's lesser partner in the twin-kingdom, the mining industry underlined the national differences between Denmark and Norway in a positive way. The Dane Tyge Rothe (1788, 14, 18, 34) emphasized the geographical differences between the two parts of the twin-kingdom. The mountains made Norway into the industrial part of the kingdom, while Denmark's flat country had better agricultural conditions. The mountains gave copper, silver and iron, while the heaths gave food. This radical geographical difference between the two parts of the kingdom made it legitimate to point at the differences between Denmark and Norway, between Norwegians and Danes. In the late 1700s not only the Norwegians, like Johan Nordahl Bruun (1773, 3), emphasized the relation between the Norwegians and the mountains and the differences between Norwegians and Danes. According to Rothe (1788, 13, 61–62) the differences between the Danes' and the Norwegians' national characters, between the inhabitants of the lowlands and the mountains ("Sletternes og Fieldenes Beboere") was given by the difference in the physical nature. The Norwegian mountains were already established as a common Danish-Norwegian patriotic symbol. The mountains – and above all Dovre – were both in Denmark and Norway accepted and celebrated as the source for the Norwegian national character. Danish nobilities praised the Norwegians as the "mountain-people" and admired the Norwegian "mountain farmers" describing them as "the nature's own family" and as "the sons of the rocks" (Sars, 1967, 220). As Tine Damsholt (2000) has pointed out, the celebration of the national differences between the two parts of the twin-kingdom was not necessarily looked upon as something unpatriotic. Celebrations of the Norwegian mountains could therefore be performed openly *both* by Norwegians and Danes *together*. At the Royal theatre in Copenhagen, the Norwegian actor Michael Rosing was praised as an actor formed by Norwegian nature. He was celebrated due to his artistic calmness, as calm as the Norwegian mountains. Rosing was also celebrated because of his sonorous (literarily "ore rich") voice got its tone from the copper ore in the mountains of Røros, where he grew up (Bernhoft, 1855, 12).

The patriotic performances within the dramatic societies in Norway added a symbolic value to the mountains that reached far beyond the material wealth caused by the mines. The common interest between the members of the theatre societies and the national assembly in 1814 was the building of a Norwegian nation of fellow citizens, founded on a common *inter-est*. The prologues, epilogues and descriptions of the performances in the theatre show how the mountains as patriotic symbols were staged. Since the 1790's the Norwegian mountains or "the Nordic Alps" were celebrated (Huitfeldt-Kaas, 1876, 149). Particularly during the Napoleonic Wars the national narratives were expressed in prologues, songs, poems and performed dramas. Women dressed in white were often used as a personification of the nation. Since the 1790's and particularly during the Napoleonic Wars the Norwegian mountains and spruce forests were celebrated (Wilse, 1790, 199; Platou, 1809, 3 and 7; Schmidt 1810, 349). Typical stage descriptions were a Norwegian valley surrounded by mountains covered by spruce forests ("En norsk Dal omgiven af granklædte Fielde") (Platou, 1809). *Dovre* was a central part of the performed celebrations

of national symbols in the theatre. According to a theatre prologue from Christiania in 1811, Norwegian mountains in general were depicted as the eternal guarantee for safety and resistance in war and peace. *Dovre*, with its “crown covered with snow”, is explicitly depicted as resistant against everything. Supported by their mountains, the Norwegians would not fear anything, but be solid as rock in their duties towards the Danish king (Det dramatiske Selskab, 1811). *Dovre* was the cornerstone for the mutual promises of faithfulness to the constitution. By anchoring the Constitution deeply in the mountains of *Dovre*, the Constitution was from the very beginning closely linked to the perceived Norwegian national character.

In the building of a common world in Norway before 1814, theatre played a role, which other arts and media could not possibly do. The dramatic societies were not the only arenas where the common national narratives were expressed, but there were no other arenas where the narratives were expressed, acted out and celebrated *in common* by such a large number of influential citizens. What the members of the dramatic societies acquired through their membership, was a common experience of the narratives, which created an imagined community. These narratives were performed within a democratic and public space of appearance.

After 1814 the social class who had run the dramatic societies went bankrupt. As a result the dramatic societies and the patriotic theatre traditions dissolved – until the generation of 1848 made an attempt to revitalize these traditions by including them into the new national theatre movement.

### **The generation of 1848 and the mountains as the source of Norwegian theatre**

The tradition from the dramatic societies of acclaiming the mountains as the foundation for the future was repeated in the national theatre movement of the 1850s. The continuity between the new theatre and the traditions from the dramatic societies was expressed in the opening performance of the theatre, the 2<sup>nd</sup> of January 1850. The Norwegian mountains were presented as the very source of Norwegian theatre. A voice was sounding from the inside of the mountain. After a while, it turned out that this voice belonged to the Norwegian spirit – who was locked up in the mountain. An angel appeared and the mountain opened and revealed a lady in white, representing the liberated Norwegian spirit - the guardian of Norwegian art. The new theatre was presented as the liberation of the national arts and the spirit within the mountain (Anonymous, 1850).

Three years later, the 2<sup>nd</sup> of January 1853, Ibsen carried on the understanding of the mountain and nature as the source of the national character and the national arts. In the prologue for the opening night of *St. John's Eve* Ibsen presented the mountains and the spruce forest as the surroundings where the national art was to find its home. He underlined the image of the mountains as the origin of Norwegian-ness by appointing spring water from the mountains to be the Norwegian equivalent to wine from southern countries (HU XIV, 152 -153). In the second act, scene five of *St. Johns Eve*, restrained music is heard from back stage – the mountain opens and in its interior a large, splendidly illuminated hall is seen. The mountain king (Bjergkongen) is sitting on his throne in the background (HU II, 64). Again, Ibsen presented the mountain as a kind of mine containing different kinds of

raw Norwegian-ness, just waiting to be brought up in the daylight and refined into a national value. Like theatre, minerals – or pure water.

A similar acclamation of the national values inside the mountains was repeated during the inauguration ceremony for the Bergen waterworks, the 17<sup>th</sup> May 1854, where Ibsen might have performed as the “Man in the mountain” (Bergmanden) (Lorentzen, 1955). The “Man in the mountain” entered from an opening in a theatre-mountain and performed a speech. The speech seems to have been inspired by Ibsen’s prologue for *St. Johns Eve* as the healthy water from the mountains was acclaimed again (Anonymous, 1854).

From 1850 to 1864 Ibsen was a prominent representative for a movement that wanted to develop a national theatre. The function of this national theatre was to be a mirror that could help the nation to correct itself and to strengthen the national self-consciousness. The theatre was to be an arena where the Norwegian people could experience an inner unity and an external demarcation of the nation. Ibsen participated in this national theatre project both as a theatre critic, as a playwright, as the author of prologues, epilogues and songs filled with national sentiment – and he struggled for governmental support for the Norwegian theatre on this basis.

Starting in 1851, Ibsen argued that there were major differences between European national characters. German and French dramas had a different impact on Norwegians than on the people in their culture of origin. He even argued that the ethic of French dramas would offend the ethical, and thus also the aesthetic, taste of a Norwegian audience. By offering a Norwegian people these kind of French sweets, draped in tinsel, Christiania Theatre was running the risk of corrupting the audience’s ability to treasure the sight of the true National on stage. (HU XV, 245-246). Ibsen’s answer to the question about how to develop a real national theatre was to make the theatre search for and find the people’s own collective aesthetics - the “keynote” of the nation, sounding from the mountains and valleys, from hillsides and shores, but first of all from the people’s own hearts (HU XV, 130-132).

Ibsen’s claim to the Parliament (Stortinget) was always the same in this period: If Norway was supposed to be a nation, not only in the political sense, but also culturally, it would be necessary to develop the theatre as a national art. He claimed that no other art could ever have this educating function for the nation. The advantage of the theatre, according to Ibsen, was that theatre was a *collective* form of art, based on *real* human bodies in interaction in *real* spaces. Other forms of art, like painting and plastic arts, could be exported or isolated in private homes so that just a few could enjoy them. Ibsen’s most important argument for governmental subsidies for what he wanted to be a true Norwegian theatre was that this kind of national theatre would be embedded in the nation and that it would function as a community-building institution (HU XV, 229-230).

### **In 1864 Ibsen not only left Norway, he also abandoned the theatre forever**

In 1864, however, Ibsen experienced that the provinces of Southern Denmark were invaded by Prussia. Neither Sweden nor Norway tried to help their brother in the south. Ibsen had to admit that the national idea he had promoted was fake and without substance. The image of



the strong Norwegian “mountain-people” protecting their Danish brothers was just a romantic idea without any political reality. Consequently he had to dissociate himself from all the national symbols inherited from the dramatic societies, which were continued in the national theatre movement.

Almost simultaneously Ibsen experienced that the audiences let the national theatres down. All three of them, in Bergen, Christiania and Trondheim, went bankrupt. In Christiania the premises of the Norwegian theatre were opened for a German opera troupe and, to Ibsen’s disappointment, the audience swarmed to the *German* performances at the former *Norwegian* theatre (HU XV, 318). As a result 1864 was the year when Ibsen not only left Norway, but also abandoned the theatre - forever. From *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* onwards Ibsen wrote for the book market. He questioned critically the national myths, which had previously been the very reason for his participation in the Norwegian theatre project. He expressed his dissatisfaction with Norway and Norwegian-ness. The Norwegian national symbols were exposed and turned inside out. Ibsen found that his former aspirations for Norway and the Norwegians were nothing but lies and dreams. In *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* Ibsen revealed what was hidden behind the symbolic surface of Dovre and the mountains. And now, Ibsen found that there was something rotten within the Norwegian mountains.

### **Individual intentions, collective interpretations**

According to Arendt, a common world between men is made out of human action and durable objects, which makes it possible to have a world in common with future generations. In Norway, the actions of celebrating and interpreting Dovre as the symbol for Norwegian deeds and values *embedded in theatre* – had become a part of a common world that lasted for several generations.

From a theatre historical perspective, the stage history of *Peer Gynt* underlines the fact that what determines the interpretation of a performance is not the literary text. What determines the interpretations is the imagined community, implicitly expressed through socio-cultural and aesthetic practices in and around the theatre. Theatre lost its central position after 1864. Still the common world or the imagined community which the theatre had contributed to the establishing of, proved to be durable and strong, much stronger than the critical view presented in one single *book* – Henrik Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt*.

*Peer Gynt* was intended as a critical, ironic and anti-romantic play. But contrary to Ibsen’s intention, *Peer Gynt* has been interpreted as a major national romantic work in Norway. In Ibsen’s interpretation *Peer Gynt* represented the opposite of the patriotic vision of the strong, independent and brave Norwegian farmer, as solid and reliable as the mountains. Peer Gynt is the coward running away from all responsibilities and living and acting like a troll, being himself – enough. Despite this fact, every year the Peer Gynt festival in Vinstra appoints the title “Peer Gynt of the year” – as a title of honour to prominent Norwegians. The lady in white had represented the (liberated) Norwegian spirit and the guardian of Norwegian art. In *Peer Gynt* she is turned into the lady in green leading Peer Gynt astray and bringing him into the mountains and the world of the trolls. In the valley of Gudbrandsdalen – parishes and firms of all kinds use Peer Gynt and names from

Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* in their marketing – as if they were positive brands. We have Peer Gynt roads and cabins, Bøygen Camping, The hall of Dovregubben, - and above all, the Peer Gynt festival in Vinstra has received the patented right to use certain words and names from *Peer Gynt* as trademarks.

What Ibsen experienced both during his practical theatre career and as the author of *Peer Gynt* was the power of theatre as a collective form of art and the impossibility of controlling the audience's response and interpretations. The image of Dovre, as an untouchable and impregnable part of the imagined community of Norway, was and is, too strong.

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### Biographical note

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### Summary

The overall perspective of this article will be how drama *as theatre*, plays a part in the making of common worlds. I disagree with Benedict Anderson when he argues that the development of a *printed* national language was a basis for an imagined community and a condition for the modern nation state. When Ibsen and his contemporaries were fighting for a *Norwegian* theatre and theatre aesthetics in the 1850s and early 1860s, a written Norwegian language, which was distinctly different from written Danish, did not exist.

In order to explain how the Norwegians could have a common imagined community before 1814 and the background for the young Ibsen's theatre aesthetics, it is necessary to take a look at the *theatre* traditions Ibsen and his generation inherited – from, what is often referred to as the generation of 1814. It is also necessary to establish a perspective, which does not focus on *written* or *printed* language, but on *theatre* as human *action*.

From 1850 to 1864 Ibsen was a prominent representative for a movement who wanted to develop a national theatre. The function of this national theatre was to be a mirror that could help the nation to correct itself, to strengthen the national self-consciousness. The theatre should be a place where the Norwegian people could experience an inner unity and an external demarcation of the nation. Ibsen participated in this national theatre project both as a theatre critic, as a playwright, as the author of prologues, epilogues and songs filled with national sentiment – and he was struggling for governmental support for the Norwegian theatre on this basis.

### Keywords

Drama *as theatre*, theatre as human *action*, imagined communities, Norwegian theatre history, dramatic society, Ibsen, common world, Norwegian constitution.