

The Making of a World Dramatist: Ibsen and Det Norske Theater

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Abstract This article assesses the roles played by the city of Bergen and Det Norske Theater in making Ibsen a world dramatist by examining the cross-cultural influences the twenty-three-year-old Ibsen encountered there. In codifying Bergen and Det Norske Theater as spaces that permit a transgression of the national into the international, the article suggests both spaces as valuable points of departure for mapping Ibsen across nations and cultures.

Key words Bergen; Det Norske Theater; cross-cultural; early career; space

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In an October 1902 report in the Viennese *Neue Freie Presse*, Ibsen claimed in a conversation with Felix Philippi, “anyone who wishes to understand me fully must know Norway. The spectacular but severe landscape which people have around them in the north, and the lonely shut-off life” (Meyer 17). To understand Ibsen fully as a world dramatist, readers and theatre patrons not only need to know Norway, but two specific spaces: the city of Bergen to which Ibsen moved in October 1851, and in which he resided for the following six years, and Det Norske Theater, the Bergen theater at which the young dramatist served an intense apprenticeship at that time.

Both of these spaces are, of course, iconically Norwegian: Bergen the geographical space nestling on the west coast of the country between seven mountains. And Det Norske Theater as a cultural space played a prominent role in the project of nation-building that was taking place in the early and mid-nineteenth century during the Norwegian National Romantic movement. The violin virtuoso Ole Bull founded the theater in 1850 in deliberate opposition to the Danish-influenced Christiania Theater, and precisely, as he stated to the theater board in the “Uforanderlige Grundregler” [unchangeable ground-rules¹. so that the theater in Bergen should present opportunities to establish and develop an independent dramatic art in the mother country] “give Anledning til, at en selvstændig dramatisk Kunst kunde fremkaldes og udvikles i Fædrelandet” (Figueiredo 125). Moreover, Bull considered that, “Theatrets Virksomhed, den musikalske derunder indbefattet, saavidt muligt bør fremkaldes gennem nationale Elementer” (Figueiredo 126). The national enterprise of the theater made evident by its very name “Det Norske Theater,” The Norwegian Theater was

echoed in its fundamental commitment not only to a Norwegian ensemble, but also to the use of the Norwegian language on stage, something that due to the success of several of the Bergen actors, later meant that the Bergen dialect came to be considered by many as Norway's theatrical language. The national program of the theater is something that also accounts for the very hiring of the young Norwegian dramatist, Ibsen, who by the time of his employ had seen the premiere of *Kjæmpehøien* [*The Warrior's Barrow*], at the Christiania Theater (Sept. 26, 1850) and had published *Catilina* (1850), the only Norwegian play published since Henrik Wergeland's *Venetianerne, eller Venskab og Kjærlighed* [*The Venetians, or Friendship and Love*] seven years previously.

My interest in the two spaces of Bergen and Det Norske Theater lies, however, not in codifying them as national spaces, but rather to suggest that they might also be spaces that permit a transmission of the national into the international. A reading that suggests this transgressive potential would explain how these spaces allowed Ibsen to expand his cultural and geographical horizons beyond his native country and map out the young writer's development as a world dramatist, a development later reinforced by his twenty-seven-year exile outside of Norway and the global appeal of his corpus.

The geographical space into which Ibsen moved in 1851 was characterized on the one hand by a staunch national spirit that had led to the establishment of a the very theater to which Ibsen was recruited by Bull, the city being regarded as less influenced, or in some minds, corrupted, by Danish influence than its eastern counterpart, Christiania. On the other hand Bergen was filled with a cosmopolitan spirit that had its roots in the history of the city as a major Hanseatic trading post, the heart of the urban space being the Vågen harbor, the nexus of economic activity, an area with an openness to the sea and frequent visitations from foreign ships, sailors, and tradesmen, or even, as Ibsen was to experience first-hand in 1856, royal visitors from abroad.² In the 1850s Bergen developed into an important import hub beyond its well-established Hanseatic connections with, for example, grain coming in from the Black Sea region and coffee coming directly from Brazil (Ulvund 21). With the additional arrival of the telegraph in the latter half of the decade and the consequent ease with which international news could reach local newspapers and hence the general Bergen populace, the city became increasingly aware of the affairs of countries beyond the Norwegian borders. According to Ivo de Figueiredo in his biography *Henrik Ibsen Mennesket* (2006) [*Henrik Ibsen The Person*], the city of Bergen was during Ibsen's residence there

et annet sted—større enn Grimstad, så vidt mindre enn Christiania, men likevel ikke noe midt imellom. Med de vestlandske fjellene, striler og landsmål i ryggen, var byboernes blikk vendt mot seg selv og mot havet. Vannveien til verden gikk om Hamburg, og i århundrer hadde byen vårt preget av kontinental kultur og mentalitet. Bergenserne var kosmopolitter. (121)

[a different place—larger than Grimstad, if smaller than Christiania, but nevertheless not something in between. With the western mountains, strils³, and landsmål⁴ at their backs, the citizens turned to themselves and to the sea. The

waterways to the world went via Hamburg and for hundreds of years the city had been characterized by a continental culture and mentality. The Bergen people were cosmopolitans.

While we do not know exactly the persons whom Ibsen encountered while in Bergen, we might surmise that during his residence at the Sontum Pensionat, the dramatist met at least visitors from Great Britain, as the guest house was a preferred residence for travelers from that country, who were even afforded the luxury of a traditional British breakfast if they wished. Additionally Ibsen's encounters with individuals from different cultural backgrounds might also be suggested from at least two of the members of the theater itself: the actress and purportedly best singer of the ensemble Madame Prom Wiese, whose father was from Malaysia, and the Czech-born musician in residence at the theater Ferdinand Giovanni Schediwy, who was to arrange the music for Ibsen's own *Gildet paa Solhoug* [*The Feast at Solhaug*] and *Olaf Liljekrans*.

Culturally Bergen offered a variety of private and public venues, ranging from literary salons (such as the one hosted by Ibsen's future mother-in-law, Magdalena Thoresen), clubs, associations and several newspapers, all of which showed influence from abroad. Cultural institutions such as *Det Harmoniske Selskab* [The Harmonic Society] and *Det Dramatiske Selskab* [The Dramatic Society] dated back to the 1700s, and became increasingly professionalized during the 1850s. Ibsen's own involvement with the exclusive literary society, *Forening av 22. desember* [The 22 December Association], is but one example of an ambitious cosmopolitan agenda within the cultural framework of the city. One of the two lectures Ibsen delivered to the society concerned the influence of Shakespeare on Nordic literature. All in all, it appears that the city of Bergen was able to "*oppvise et omfattende kulturliv, på samme måte som en hvilken som helst større by på kontinentet—om enn stadig preget av det halvoffentlige selskapslivet og bare dels institusjonalisert, dessuten dilettantisk og, selvsagt, umiskjennelig bergensk*" (Figueiredo 122) [provide a comprehensive cultural life just like any other large city on the Continent—though that cultural life was at the same time always characterized by amateur entertainment and was only partly institutionalized, along with being dilettante and, of course, unmistakably from Bergen].

One important aspect of cultural life in Bergen was the theater, something that the nineteenth-century theater historian T. Blanc in his book *Norges første Nationale Scene* (1884) [*Norway's First National Stage*] attributes to an almost intrinsic theatrical spirit on the part of the Bergen citizens, suggesting that

[d]et viser sig jo endnu den Dag i Dag, at Bergenserene er de af vort Lands Befolkning som fortrinnsvis er i Besiddelse af dramatisk Begavelse; allerede i sin naturlige Kvikhed, og Smidighed, sit medfødte Lune og sin Gemytlighed, sit Sprogs Blødhed og Bøielighed, besidder de Egenskaber, der kan hjælpe den dramatiske Kunstner et godt Stykke på Vei. Bergenserne havde ogsaa fra gammel Tid af havt et stort Ry som Privatskuespillere, og det Bergense Privattheater, der er mindre paavirket af de danske Traditioner, end Tildf? Idet var med Hovedstadens, havde hævet sig til en høi Rang og omtales med Ros baade af Inden- og

Udenlandske. (607)

[even to this day, it seems that people from Bergen are those citizens of our country who to their advantage are in possession of dramatic talent. Their natural wit and flexibility, their inbred good humor, and the softness and malleability of their language give them the qualities that can help a dramatic artist a great deal. The people of Bergen have from times past had a good reputation as amateur actors, and Bergen's amateur theater, which is less influenced by Danish tradition than is the case in the capital, has been ranked highly both nationally and internationally].

If we look at the entire repertory of Det Norske Theater we gain a better understanding of exactly what kinds of dramatic art were being practiced in Bergen, and how diverse that art was in terms of cultural origins. In total three-hundred-and-forty different plays were performed in the thirteen-and-a-half years the theater was in operation, with an average of twenty-five premieres a year and usually two or three performances on each of the two show nights, Wednesday and Sunday. Forty-five percent of the plays performed were one-act pieces with one or two-act vaudevilles or comedies being the most popular forms of entertainment followed by musical comedies and then farces. Only eight percent of the repertory was more serious drama such as that of Ibsen and Bjørnson. While Nordic plays were frequently performed pieces, with C. P Riis' *Til sæters* being performed twenty-nine times over the seasons, and H. Nielsen's *Slægtningerne* twenty-seven times, the most played single dramatist was by far Eugene Scribe with forty performances of seven different plays.

While Ibsen worked at the theater, five of his own plays were performed, each being premiered on the founding day of the theater itself, *Sancthansnatten*, *Kjæmpehøien*, *Fru Inger til østeraad*, *Gildet paa Solhoug*, and *Olaf Liljekrans* [*St John's Night*, *The Warrior's Barrow*, *Lady Inger of Østeraad*, *The Feast at Solhaug* and *Olaf Liljekrans*]. And while these plays generally only had two performances, they did play to large crowds, something that attests to the high expectations of the young Norwegian dramatist. *Gildet paa Solhoug* was Ibsen's most popular play, being performed five times in the 1856 season alone and five more times between 1860 and 1862. If we turn specifically to plays with which Ibsen was involved as a scenic director, we know that the young dramatist witnessed the performance of one-hundred-and-twenty-two new dramatic pieces, of which sixty-two were French, twenty-eight Danish, sixteen Norwegian, eleven German and five anonymous. These figures alone are an indication of the international extent of the theatrical activity with which Ibsen was engaged.

The origins of the plays are but one indication of the international flavor of the theater. Additionally one might consider the thematic focus or setting of the pieces, which we unfortunately do not have adequate time to investigate here. As one example, I would however like to briefly mention the Danish playwright Henrik Hertz' *Scheik Hasan*, a three-act comedy with a "Turkish" setting written in 1851 and inspired by *One Thousand and One Nights*. First performed in Bergen in February 1854, Ibsen not only served as the stage director for the production, but he also de-

signed some costumes for it. While the drawings show a conventional nineteenth century theatrical interpretation of Oriental dress rather than any specific historically-researched representation of the East, they do reveal an awareness of cultures beyond Western Europe and suggest an expanding geographical referencing on the part of the young dramatist.

This cursory look at the repertory of the theater indicates its status as a space in which local and foreign come together, although there are incidents in which the meeting of the two was less than fortuitous. Most Bergen theater-goers were, as has been explained by several scholars culturally competent and had cosmopolitan expectations of the theatrical experience.⁵ And yet, at the first performance of Henrik Wergeland's *Fjeldstuen* in 1850, Ole Bull's zealous demands for authentic Norwegian folk-life almost led to a debacle, as the local dancers he brought to the theater from Hardanger, Lærdal, and Nordfjord were so authentic in their national costumes, that they followed the custom of not wearing any underclothes, much to the dismay of the audience who glimpsed to dances' bare buttocks as the girls were swung around in dance. Marie Midling Bull's comment that "dansen hadde ikke gått gjennom den nødvendige foredlingsprosess" (Memoir) (the dance had not gone through the necessary refinement process), along with the shock of the expectant audience and the confusion of the dancers who resisted being led offstage by any of the theatrical staff, is on the one hand evidence of a kind of cultural disorientation as local and global expectations were not commensurate, but the success of the event on the other hand indicates that such cultural collisions were not insurmountable within the theatrical space that Bergen provided.

An important expansion of Ibsen's geographic and cultural spaces instigated when a mere three months after his arrival, the Theater Board sponsored Ibsen to travel to Europe to travel to Europe. According to the archives, Ibsen's mandate was an examination of "*Arrangementet af Alt, hvad der henhører til Scenens Indretning, Utstyr og Decorationer, de spillendes Dragter, mv.*" [the arrangement of everything that belongs to the mise-en-scene, equipment and props, the costumes of the actors etc] (Rudler 236). This trip took Ibsen (along with the acting couple Johannes and Louise Brun) to Copenhagen via Hamburg, and then on to Dresden. Popular scholarly opinion often concludes that the most important and lasting impact of this international experience was Ibsen's encounter with Hermann Hettner's book *Das moderne Drama*, about which Halvdan Koht in *The Life of Ibsen*, for example, enthusiastically states, "nothing else held Ibsen's interest as did this declaration of a program by Hettner" (Ewbank 60). In line with Inga-Stina Ewbank, I would like to suggest however, that the reading of Hettner's program for revitalizing theater, which is a rather dry, academic text that for Ibsen was in a foreign language, must have at least been matched, if not surpassed, in terms of influence to seeing live professional theater performed at the Royal Theater in Copenhagen and afterwards at the Hoftheater in Dresden. In Copenhagen Ibsen readily understood the language and he was exposed to an acting ensemble that was held in high esteem during this the Golden Age of Danish acting, an ensemble that included Johanne Luise Heiberg, the tragedian Michael Wiehe, the comedian Joachim Phister, and the relative newcomer, Frederik Høedt famous for his

modern, psychological acting style. Given Ibsen's later pronouncements on acting, it is possibly Høedt's more nuanced, realistic acting style, that most struck the young dramatist. It challenged the pervading theatrical aesthetic of the time as exemplified in the work of Mrs. Heiberg, As Michael Meyer suggests, the 1856 reviews of the Trondheim visit of the Bergen company that noted with interest the way in which the actors kept upstage and turned to each other rather than the audience when conversing, are evidence of the fruits of Ibsen's trip to Copenhagen and Dresden (Meyer 127).

The Copenhagen stay, which took place from April 20 to June 6 1852, likely exposed Ibsen to twenty-four of the fifty-six plays that were part of the repertoire of the 1851-52 season at the Royal Theater. Included in these twenty-four plays are four by Shakespeare (*Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *King Lear* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, although the latter in an adaptation by the Danish Sille Beyer called *Livet i Skoven*).⁶ In examining the repertory, it appears that Ibsen would have seen three Shakespearean tragedies within two weeks of his arrival in the city, even if those texts would, as according to the custom of the time, be cut a good deal. Ibsen also saw four plays by Holberg (*Henrik og Pernille*, *Barselstuen*, *Pernilles korte Frøkenstand*, and *Den Vægelsindede*), a tragedy by Oehlenschläger (*Hakon Jarl*), Mozart's opera *Don Juan*, and numerous vaudevilles, comedies, musicals, and ballet pieces. Quantitatively vaudevilles and comedies constituted the majority of the Royal Theater's repertoire in line with the popular tastes of the time. Ibsen was likely also struck by the national character of much of the repertoire he saw at the Royal Theater as "here—unlike in the case of Christiania Theater—Holberg and Hertz dominated over Scribe" (Ewbank 67), and many of the vaudevilles, such as *Recensenten og Dyret* [The Reviewer and the Animal] by Heiberg and *En Søndag paa Amager* [A Sunday on Amager] by Johanne Luise Heiberg were bound not only to Denmark by virtue of their authors, but more specifically to the city of Copenhagen and its surroundings in their settings.

Ibsen again witnessed the Copenhagen-style acting when he continued on to Dresden and its Hoftheater, which featured some of the most exciting staging and acting of shakespeare that Europe had to offer. In addition to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Richard III* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Ibsen attended performances of pieces by Fredrich von Schiller, Johan Wolfgang Goethe, and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing. Considering the less familiar language, we can conclude that Ibsen concentrated more on the visual features of performance here, and, as Rudler states that "*de nye realistiske tendenser innen tysk scenekunst og kravenedet stille til regiarbeidet market han især*" (243) [he especially noticed the new realistic tendencies in German stagecraft, and the demands that put upon directorial work]. Another major aspect that would have struck Ibsen was the acting style of the Polish-born Bogumil Dawison. On loan from the pioneering Vienna Hofburg Theater (which H. C. Anderson had recommended Ibsen visit, in fact, but for which the Bergen theater board was unable, or unwilling, to provide additional financial support,) Dawison was playing both *Hamlet* and *Richard III* in a fierce and unpredictable realism, a style that Ewbank suggests must have "brought out the ironies and ambivalences in these 'sacred' texts and thus

been a pivotal experience for the young Ibsen that went into the matrix of possibilities from which his own later plays would emerge” (71). Ibsen’s experience not only of Dawson, but also of Høedt and even of Hettner were certainly decisive for his later theatrical development as each in its own way pointed to a new direction in theatrical aesthetics, one characterized by a more radical realism and emphasis on the psychological.

The actual European experience that Det Norske Theater afforded Ibsen was only one part of the dramatist’s growing internationalization. Other factors are undeniably Ibsen’s meeting with the city of Bergen and Det Norske Theater, spaces that were to have a decisive effect on his future career. In his letter of resignation to the board of directors dated July 23, 1857, Ibsen wrote that he would never forget what he owed Bergen theater. In my opinion traces of the theatrical and cultural experiences of his six-year stay on Norway’s west coast may be found in Ibsen’s later oeuvre, and Bergen and Det Norske Theater provide valuable points of departure for a mapping of Ibsen across nations and across cultures.

【 Notes 】

1. All translations from Norwegian are the author’s own.
2. In 1856, both the Swedish Crown Prince Carl Bernadotte and Prince Napoleon, visited Bergen respectively, and both were entertained by the Norwegian players of Det Norske Theater.
3. *Striler* are people, usually farmers and fishermen, from the rural areas in Hordaland County who were considered different from the city dwellers in dress and speech. The term was often used to denote someone who might row into Bergen within one day.
4. *Landsmål* is the written Norwegian language established in the nineteenth century by Ivar Aasen as an alternative to the Dano-Norwegian, or riksmål, that was prevalent in the country.
5. See for examples in Kari Gaarder Losenedahl, “Theatermannen,” *Ibsen i Bergen*, ed. Johan Fredrik Kroepelien (Bergen: Bodoni Forlag, 2006) 89 – 122; Ellen Gjervann, “Tretten år i teatret—triumf eller tragedie,” *Hovedfagsoppgave Universitetet i Bergen* (1998); Roderick Rudler, “Ibsen som teaterstipendiat i Dresden,” *Edda* 66 (1996): 236 – 43.
6. This is the only Shakespeare play that Ibsen staged in Bergen during his residence there.

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