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Peer Gynt by Henrik Ibsen. Dir. Kjersti Horn. Den Nationale Scene, Bergen. 30 June 2012.

Abstract: For Den Nationale Scene's Peer Gynt, directed by Kjersti Horn, audiences were promised a 'controversial, vital and nightmarish version of the original play', an experience of it 'from a completely new angle', as well as a show which speaks to universal human concerns. This review evaluates the extent to which these two objectives were achieved, with particular reference to ongoing European politics and the aesthetic traditions of contemporary European theatre.

Norwegian nationalism or pan-European production? *Peer Gynt* at Bergen's Den Nationale Scene

Given Henrik Ibsen's place at the centre of Norwegian drama, it was hardly surprising that Den Nationale Scene's production of *Peer Gynt*, directed by Kjersti Horn, (in Norwegian but titled in English), as part of the Festspillene - Bergen's annual international festival - should be hyped up. The marketing was desperate to draw in new spectators, whether local or international, to an old, familiar play - first performed at the *Christiania Theater* on 24 February 1876. Audiences were promised a 'controversial, vital and nightmarish version of the original play', an experience of it 'from a completely new angle' (Festspillene 2012a). Yet, while defamiliarizing the play, the festival director, Anders Beyer, was also contrarily eager to prove that it is relevant to today's audiences, speaking to universal concerns regarding human life, values, and benevolence.

There is no doubt that the performance I attended, on 30th June 2012, was exceptionally well received by its audience. Yet, rather than representing a startlingly original take on this Norwegian classic, its success was rooted in the excellent application of established conventions from modern European theatre. As delineated by Paul Prescott and Simon Stephens (both 2012), these include the incorporation of popular culture into canonical plays (particularly through

music and dance); frank, even graphic treatment of sex and sexuality; and explicit representations of the alleged 'social ills' besetting today's youth bemoaned by conservative governments and papers alike, from alcohol and drug abuse to the wearing of 'inappropriately' sparse, tight or casual clothing.

Describing this production as pan-European is potentially controversial. Norwegian nationalists from politics and culture alike have asserted the country's distinctness and independence from Europe, resisting, for example, suggestions that it should be absorbed into the European Union. Indeed, Ibsen and Grieg (who composed a score used in early productions of the play) are frequently identified as belonging to the Norwegian romantic nationalist movement of the mid-late nineteenth century, with its emphasis on the country's unique landscape and culture, and mission of strengthening a sense of Norwegian national identity.

The foremost way in which the director's 'fresh' perspective was evident involved the use of staging and aesthetics (visual, musical, and kinaesthetic) to cut away from the romantic (indeed, Romantic) tradition and produce 'effects that force the actors to react so that they actually have to relate to what is happening on the stage and not just pretend', says Horn (Festspillene 2012a). Arguably, this is one way of avoiding the nostalgia for which Norwegian Romantic

works have, in recent decades, been criticised. To this end, the action took place, not in a lush, leafy Norwegian forest, but in a shallow pine box inserted into the regular proscenium arch playing space and strewn with falling green ticket tape. All the actors were on stage for the duration of the show, which included quiet pre-show partying, signalling Gynt's Sybaritic nature, before the play began and after the interval - where Morocco's beaches looked like the playground of so many decadent bright young things, crowded with an inflatable banana and gorilla boogying to the ghetto blaster Gynt (Glenn André Kaada) carried on his shoulder. The whole cast was present on stage for the duration of the play: actors melted discretely into and out of the action and the audience's attention, variously standing, crouching or sitting upstage when not speaking, so the scenes flowed seamlessly along as time spent on entrances and exits was pared down to a bare minimum. Interestingly, the stress on visual aesthetics (including the set, costuming, props, and scene-setting pre-show) as an essential part of the narrative is demonstrably faithful to, rather than breaking with, Ibsen. After all, an exhibition on Ibsen at Bergen's Cultural History museum noted, in a commentary on one of the playwright's landscapes, that 'Ibsen's work with a brush and palette seems to have been of great value to him as a poet and dramatist. The visual stress is evident in his dramas'. Ibsen himself described writing as 'mostly seeing'. In another act of possible fidelity, Grieg's

music wove in and out, rather than accompanying the action as it did in the original production. It was also augmented by occasional sound effects, such as Solveig's palpitating heart.

In terms of casting and costuming, any potential sweetness in, and sentimentality evoked from, the character of Gynt's 'little mother' Åse was undercut by cross-gender casting, in which a burly, bearded Svein Harry Schottker Hauge dressed in wig, frock, and apron, lisping his lines in an alternately doting, pleading, and scolding falsetto voice. For the mythical, physically gruesome trolls, there were instead recognisably human actors whose gestures towards bestiality came in the main part from their actions (urinating into goblets to produce the 'home brew') and voices (caverns were created through the use of echoey microphones), rather than costuming - which consisted of cheekily seductive pink bunny ears for the troll princess and a solemn-looking deer head (which, at the start, had been draped across the stage as the animal poached by Gynt) for her father. This provided a clear directorial answer to Gynt's question concerning the difference between man and troll: it is not physically apparent nor inherent, but comes from within. Gynt and Solveig (Nina Ellen Øderdård) were inhabitants of the twenty-first century: he in smart casuals comprising a rakishly-perched panama, turquoise linen shirt, and velvet jacket, she

practically kitted out for rural mountain life in a blue puffa jacket and jeans.

Gynt's style of wooing was just as contemporary (and brutal) as other elements of the production. In fact, 'wooing' is completely the wrong term to describe his intercourse with the female characters: his women were magnetised in slow, robotic figures rather than traditional folksy flings, pinned to the shiny walls, rolled on the floor, and penetrated during gyrating dances. The scene in which Anitra (Mariam Idriss) took Gynt for a prophet and declared her enslavement to him was graphic - a common directorial shorthand, one tool among many, with which to flag up the modernity of a production (Prescott) - with him repeatedly forcing her head onto his groin, until she finally bit out at him. Gynt was then ironically invested as Kaiser. This was staged with the delusional Dr Begriffenfeldt forcing him into a strait jacket. It was the one occasion on which this Gynt, who towered a good head above the rest of the cast, was truly physically overpowered. As Gynt pondered the nature of the self, after the shipwreck and his selfish, fatal combat with the cook, using the metaphor of a many-layered onion skin, he tossed paper to and fro in a rather over-literal interpretation of the verse. What Gynt threw about the stage in his mental tumult, however, were not papery peelings, but the green tissue paper that had earlier cascaded onto the set to

represent the pastoral setting of his hometown. Gathered up then flung from his hands, Gynt appeared to be enacting a Freudian fort-da game of retrieval and loss, testing out his remaining options before actually returning to his birthplace.

Watching the production at a time when the European economic crisis dominates television news viewing, I left feeling that Gynt's realisation that his treasure was at home all along, not in the far-flung regions he journeyed to, potentially offered a resounding and timely justification for Norway's decision to stay out of the European Union. In that sense, Horn's production achieved the desired political and social resonance, allowing for a reconnection with the nineteenth-century Norwegian nationalism of its best-known artists. Additionally, as the festival director had hoped, it retained an obvious, universal appeal despite playing in an age sceptical of sphinxes and trolls. It emphasised the human, both good and evil, over the fantastical - highlighting the ways in which Ibsen drew on his own real experience as well as imagination. In the excellent portrayal of Solveig, it was easy to see the young Ibsen who gave one unrequiting lover a note in an edition in one of his plays after her marriage, beseeching her not to forget him. The audience held its breath through the one scene where Gynt uses his wild imagination for unselfish reasons, storytelling and make-believing his mother through her final, painful moments. Solveig's final speeches

spoke chillingly to the abiding fear of death, ageing, and abandonment: she sang and spoke youthfully of waiting for Peer, then in an instant she aged, her voice all at once deeper, broken, crackly, her body bent over a dying Gynt. In this scene, Øderdård's acting fulfilled precisely her director's expectation that the actors would react to the sights before their eyes, and relate very immediately to the action rather than 'just pretending'. Indeed, the ploy of keeping all actors on the stage throughout the performance seemed to have contributed to their collective success in realising Horn's Stanislavskian aim. They were perhaps able to embody the characters' emotions so successfully because they were made to literally embody their roles for the entirety of each performance. The standing ovation the actors received is tangible evidence of excellence of the acting as well as the way in which the production engaged with the enduring concerns of audiences.

However, it is important to note that while some of the directorial decisions that I have discussed above may not previously have been applied to Ibsen at an international celebration of Norwegian's canonical theatrical talent, they cannot be considered ground-breaking within the conventions of European theatre more generally. Paul Prescott wrote of a recent Polish theatre company's *Macbeth* at Shakespeare's Globe (part of the Globe to Globe season): 'Look at the production

photos and you will see...many of the classic expressions of the sub-branch of stage Esperanto that we might affectionately call EuroShakespearean. EuroShakespearean productions will tend to include some combination of the following:

transvestitism, simulated sex, binge boozing, karaoke, ghettoblasters, grubby furniture, tracksuits, flip-flops, unexciting underpants, leather jackets, sadism, sunglasses, sexual violence, techno techno techno, narcosis, nudity, and, for a finale, some more karaoke...Pop culture is everywhere'. Horn's production similarly checked off many of these requisite elements of Eurotheatre - for, perhaps, these staging shorthands are applied not just to Shakespeare, but any 'classic' of the European dramatic canon? Transvestism was evident in the casting of middle-age men as old women; simulated, sadistic sex and sexual violence oozed from this, if not wooden O, wooden box - although skimpily clothed porn-style choreography was substituted for 'real' nudity; actors glugging from bottles and blaring electronica denoted that parties and feasts were underway, while North Face-style outdoor wear was a variation from the usual Addidas get up (which was sported by 'the ugly brat', who limped painfully and was thus ironically unathletic).

Writing about German theatre today, the playwright Simon Stephens observed recently that 'theatre workers there are not concerned with the pursuit of private sponsorship, nor the

possibility of a successful commercial transfer but rather with art and provocation. Their actions are to unsettle and undermine. This is not a culture of staged literature but of the physical force of dance, the visual energy and intellectual daring of contemporary art, the thrust of rock'n'roll'. To Horn's credit, this approbation could equally be applied to her work. I have traced already the physicality of Gynt, where sexual and dance movements collide; and the striking, sparing Scandinavian design, dominated by the pine box, influenced by regional art and architecture of this production. The marketing soundbites cited earlier, combined with the actuality of the explicit presentation of sexuality, demonstrate its intention to shock and outrage. Furthermore, the website boasts the following anecdote: "When Ibsen was interred, someone should have had the presence of mind to place the coffin in a kind of rotating mount. It would have made it easier for him to turn in his grave", suggested a reader in a Stavanger newspaper'.

The production was asking, defiantly, if not quite to be criticised and condemned, at least for a fight. However, the unanimous ululation of the audience on the night I attended suggested that far from feeling antipathetic to or estranged from this much loved play, they were cognisant of and enjoyed the slick application of modern European theatrical conventions to this classic of Norwegian drama. If Horn truly

wanted to provoke, she needed to demonstrate more 'intellectual daring', to push beyond tapping into an aesthetic that has become a tradition (or even cliché) in its own right. Moreover, the attention both in promotional material and on the stage to supposedly novel and richly symbolic, aesthetic choices distracted from both the director's intended *meaning* for these decisions and other ways in which she was genuinely updating or reworking the play: textually, for example. This production took no more than three hours, yet on occasion the play has been staged over two nights. The website blurb embodied my experience of the production as both a visually and kinetically arresting spectacle and something which largely failed to convey (or perhaps masked its own) true innovativeness: 'This central part of theatrical history is shown from a completely new angle - you can expect to see a quilted anorak, a shell suit and line dancing' (Festspillene 2012c). Such a description of the play is an oxymoron. The use of a 'quilted anorak, a shell suit and line dancing' does not equate to directorial innovation. Rather, it represents a Norwegian director adopting and extending existing theatre traditions from Europe. What the marketing should have concentrated on is that this *Peer Gynt* represents the very best implementation of these practices, making the play vivid to eye, ear, and heart.

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