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REVITALIZATION OF IBSEN'S PEER GYNT IN OSLO TODAY: INTERTEXTUALITY IN A SCENE

Apstrakt: *Tekst ispituje mogućnosti revitalizacije i prevodenja dramskog teksta Henrika Ibzena (Henrik Ibsen) u otvorenu formu performansa. Na primeru predstave Per Gint (Peer Gynt), koja je premijerno izvedena 17. septembra 2009. godine u Novom Centralteatru (Nye Centralteater) u Oslu, istražuju se dodirne tačke devetnaestovekovne drame i savremenog kulturnog konteksta. Ibzenova drama Per Gint, u režiji Svena Sturla Hungnesa (Svein Sturla Hungnes), postavljena je kao "moderna, urbana verzija", prema oceni kritike. U analizi su izdvojeni ključni intertekstualni elementi novog čitanja i izvođenja Ibzena u kontekstu masovne medijske kulture. Na temelju Bartovih (Roland Barthes) teorijskih stavova, iznetih u eseju "Smrt autora", u fokusu je komunikacija na relaciji scena/performans i gledalac/učesnik.*

Ključne reči: *Henrik Ibsen, Rolan Bart, Sven Sturla Hungnes (Svein Sturla Hungnes), teatar, performans, medijska kultura*

The ongoing research project "Ibsen in Performance" at the Centre for Ibsen Studies is based on four questions. The first two questions presume a historical approach: how Ibsen's theatre was produced, who Ibsen was producing for; whereas the latter two focus on the aspects of contemporary productions of Ibsen's works: how Ibsen has been re-produced in performance and finally how Ibsen can be revitalized in performance ("Forskningsprosjekter", Centre for Ibsen

Studies' web site, 2009). Ibsen's texts are still a constant source of inspiration to theatre directors worldwide (for the number and variety of performances worldwide see Repertoardatabase, Ibsen.net, 2009), and the contemporary productions of Ibsen's nineteenth-century dramas generally offer interesting new interpretations making them topical and relevant in varied cultural contexts in which they are played. Therefore, as a contribution to the topic focusing on "how Ibsen can be revitalized in performance", I will make an analysis of a scene in Svein Sturla Hungnes's production of *Peer Gynt*, called *Peer Gynt – en vandreforestilling*, which had its premiere on the 17th of September 2009 at *Oslo Nye Centralteater*. This performance was extraordinarily open for analyses from different perspectives, but due to the limitations of this paper, the scope of my attention has to be narrowed to only one scene.

Before going to see this production, I was intrigued to see whether and how Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* was "revitalized", or, what made *Dagbladet's* reporter declare that the play was "forfriskende annerledes" – refreshingly different (Forestillinger, *Oslo Nye Teater's* web site, 2009).

Taking that the concept behind this performance is expressed on the *Oslo Nye Teater's* web site, the play *Peer Gynt – en vandreforestilling* should be a "modern, urban version" of the drama (Forestillinger, 2009). If one disregards the bombastic nature of these terms here used for marketing purposes, they may in fact give some interesting directions for analyzing the performance. What do they really mean? Is this performance perceived as "modern", and in what way can it be qualified as "urban", i.e. does a *spectator* find it "modern" and "urban"? The problem becomes clear once we define the terms. *The New Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language* defines the adjectives "modern" and "urban" as: "of or pertaining to present and recent time" and "of, pertaining to, or comprising a city or town", respectively (*The New Webster's*: 1997). Are there, therefore, reasons to claim that this performance is imbedded in the contemporary Oslo-culture? Indeed, this production gives a contemporary approach to Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* making it pertinent and topical for its particular 'here and now' by establishing a dialogue be-

tween the nineteenth- and twenty-first-century intertexts. Thus the question that I will address in this paper is: What are the intertextual elements of this production that make *Peer Gynt* appeal to the spectator in Oslo today? Roland Barthes's idea on *intertextuality* from his essay "The Death of the Author" imposes as the necessary theoretical background for my research. I will, thus, explore what that "tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" (Barthes 2008: 146) is, i.e. try to disentangle the dense network of contemporary and historical citations in a scene of this theatre production, in order inquire what prompted me, as a spectator, to find it a good modernization and revitalization of the nineteenth-century Ibsen's text.

I have seen this performance on two occasions. First I saw a preview, a day before the premiere, i.e. on the 16th of September 2009, and on the 1st of October I went to see it for the second time. Before going to the preview, however, I have already been acquainted with some of the peculiarities of this performance through advertisements, and by attending to an open interview with the director of the play at *Litteraturhuset*, Oslo, on the 14th of the same month. On the occasion, the director Svein Sturla Hungnes was introduced as "probably the one who knows *Peer Gynt* best in and out" (Hungnes, 2009). Namely, Hungnes is an experienced theatre director who has in the last twenty years both acted as *Peer Gynt* and directed the play, which is certainly one of the reasons why I found this performance thoroughly thought through, playfully juxtaposing the nineteenth-century textual basis with numerous and diverse contemporary cultural citations. However, "[t]o give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing" (Barthes 2008: 99). As the result of Barthes's epochal dethronement of the Author, I will not turn to the director when pursuing particular citations and associations with the present in this theatre performance. I tried to set aside the director's ideas and interpretations as much as possible, and see how the performance converses with me.

[A] text is made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations of dialogue, parody, contestation, but there is one place where this multiplicity is fo-

cused and that place is the reader, not, as hitherto said, the author. The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination (Barthes 2008:100).

A text (and also a performance), according to Barthes, never conveys a single meaning, since every single spectator has a different perspective, or in Gadamer's terms: horizon. Moreover, the viewer may choose the amount of engagement of her intertextual horizon she wishes to employ when encountering a text or, in our case, a performance. Thus, when we return to the question posed in the beginning of this paper, namely, what are the elements of this production that make it plausible to call it a successful revitalization of Ibsen's drama into a contemporary context, it is in relation to the spectator that one should look for the answer. Therefore, the question should be reformulated: what are the elements of this performance that *a spectator* finds topical considering *his/her cultural perspective*, or horizon? Before moving on to the analysis of the intertexts in the actual performance, it is called for a classification of the audience of the production, and more specifically, for an explanation of my position as the spectator.

On both occasions that I went to see the play, the audience was coming from various cultural contexts, indeed, which is a feature of the multicultural Oslo today. According to a rough classification, the vast majority of the spectators were adult, native Norwegians. There was also a smaller group of foreigners who did not speak Norwegian, and had little knowledge of Norwegian culture, consisting mostly of my fellow-students. Finally, there was a third group, that in a way a combined the two, made out of foreigners who possessed knowledge of the Norwegian language and culture, to which I belonged. Naturally, I cannot be entirely objective or claim to know what meanings any spectator, other than myself, attributed to the performance, or its scenes. However, I will present my impressions of it, supplemented with experiences of the members of other two groups that I have obtained through discussions with them in class and after the performances.

In my opinion, this particular production was, maybe more than performances in general, made for a particular space and an audience imbedded in its specific cultural context (Oslo today).

One of the most striking elements of *Oslo Nye Teateret's* production of *Peer Gynt* is its particular bond to the space where it unfolds. In my opinion, it can be even called a site-specific theatre production. It literally occupies the whole building of *Oslo Nye Centralteater*. Nearly all the spaces available within (as well as outside) the theatre-house are subordinated to it and adapted so as to serve its requirements. The side-walk in front of the theatre, the foyer, main stage, auditorium, corridors, dressing-rooms, the back-yard, theatre's café in the cellar, backstage, staircases, lavatories etc. are all spaces where the performance unfolds. As the audience follows the action of the play, it moves through different architectural spaces of the theatre that more or less correspond to a scene in the play. Never, during the whole course of the performance, is the audience comfortably seated in the darkened auditorium facing the stage. The wandering of the main character is mirrored and paralleled with the audience's wandering through the different spaces of the theatre-house. As a result, the spectator cannot for the most part discern where she is, or what elements from the scenography are parts of the performance, and which aren't.

As a case-study of the performance, and due to the limits of the study, I will take the scene in the play where the dramatic action unfolds in Egypt. In that scene, *Peer Gynt* is, as we know, a rich, successful businessman, surrounded by sweet-talking admirers and hailed as a prophet, who meets the beautiful *Anitra*, only to finally psychologically and economically collapse. That scene in the play comes rather abruptly, and has always been problematic for staging (Hungnes, 2009). In this particular production that was not the case. Conversely, in my opinion, it was very well solved and logically followed the progression of the performance. What is more important for our subject-matter, however, is to analyze the specific elements in this scene, such as the ambience and timing in order to pin down the cultural referents that the spectators could recognize and relate to in that particular scene.

The scene unfolds in the cellar of the house, in the theatre's café. As was the case with all scenographies in this production, it was a blend of the "real" architectural space of the theatre café, and elements that indicated that it might be a scenography. All this made it a specific site for this performance. As the spectator enters the site, she notices the smell of incense. In the centre of the site, there is a stage covered with a heavy oriental carpet, with pillows and lanterns in vivid colors all around. Pieces of oriental furniture are mixed with "regular" chairs. All around the stage, and above it, are cameras, and a couple of cameramen are busily arranging their equipment. At the end of the stage is a big sofa, a chair beside the sofa, with cushions all around. To the right from the sofa is a niche with various instruments: drums, keyboard, bongos, a saxophone etc. On the ceiling several television screens are hanging, with the vividly colored logo: "Heute Tonight". There is a woman dressed as a belly-dancer who mingles with the spectators, and presents herself as a hostess. The bartender is pouring drinks, the audience relaxes and sits on the chairs unaware that the "break" is actually part of the performance, and that the oriental decoration is not part of the regular look of the theatre café. The music starts playing, the belly-dancer starts performing her act, there is a host and cameramen casually start shooting a "reality-show" and unnoticeably, everything reveals to be part of the performance. It is only when the host announces Peer Gynt as the special guest of the night that the spectator loses all doubts, and realizes that she has been fooled to believe that it was a "regular" break, in a "regular" theatre café, but that she has been, unknowingly, made part of the performance.

It is important, however, to point out that the successful effect of bewildering the audience in no longer knowing what is "real" and what is a performance, was achieved primarily by relying on the spectators' former knowledge, experience and expectations. Let us first carefully examine the settings of this scene, i.e. the time, locale and overall circumstances in which it takes place, since they are, as we will see, bearers of significant quotations from the present-day life.

The scene occurs, as in the original drama, in the middle of the performance; after the audience has left the site of the emotionally charged scene of Peer Gynt's mother Åse's death. During my second viewing of the performance, I observed the clock, and it was after exactly one hour after its start that the audience went down to the cellar of the theatre into the "café". Since every scene in this performance had to be done with minute precision, due to the fact that there were three performances simultaneously unfolding in the theatre house with in all three different Peers. This was another peculiarity of the performance which demanded full engagement of the actors, because the majority was impelled to change from one character to the other, and from one costume to the other with very little time. During one night, three performances were unfolding with only thirty minutes' intervals, therefore, good timing was essential. The whole performance lasted precisely one hour and fifty-five minutes; therefore, this scene took place nearly exactly in the middle of it. From the spectator's vantage point, this was unquestionably the time when she was expecting a break.

In Norwegian theatre houses it is, namely, a common practice to have a break in performances, no matter how long they take, which is not the case in all theatres world-wide (for example in Serbia). The breaks take place around the middle of the play, usually after the climax, or an otherwise particularly engaging scene. The spectators leave the auditorium, i.e. the place where the performance unfolds, and go into the café. There they relax, take a glass of water, go to the toilets, and discuss the performance. It is most important that in that period of time the audience, so to say, "takes a break" from the performance and for a quarter of an hour dwells in the "real" world. Thus, for a Norwegian theatergoer, as well as for the viewer with some experience from Norwegian theaters, there was no doubt that when we left the site of Åse's death-scene and entered a "café" it was time for the break. Certain of my fellow-students expressed some doubts to me upon entering the site, but the waiter who welcomed us at the entrance of the "café" cleared them by saying loudly that the audience should take a little break here, before we resume with the performance. The hostess dressed as a belly-dancer made us lose all

doubts by offering us drinks and asking whether we liked the play. However, judging from my fellow-students' uncertainty, I would say that expecting a break in the performance was a culturally predisposed reference point, reinforced by the other circumstances in the locale of the "café". Those were, for instance, the familiar behavior of the bartender, waitresses, and hostesses, as well as other members of the audience.

The relaxed atmosphere that usually distinguishes a break in the performance was not even disturbed by the presence of several cameras, both on the ceiling and beside the stage, oriental decorations, that the spectator did not notice consider alien, at first. People were chatting, ordering drinks and mingling, i.e. acting in accordance to the well-learned pattern of behavior in this situation. However, as the time was passing, it became apparent that the whole "break" was part of the performance, but it was impossible to say when the break stopped and the performance started. The spectator's illusion of being in a "real" situation was, thus, successfully transposed to the performance, so that the Egypt-scene gained more credibility and was observed more attentively than if it had come after the break.

However, the, in my opinion, successful modernization of this scene is due also to a number of other quotations from the contemporary (Norwegian) culture. Since the space is very limited, I will attempt to single out and analyze the most important components of this *mise-en-scène*. What follows is a more detailed analysis of the staging of this scene (including costumes, props, etc.) and of how the actors interpreted the characters.

As previously said, the spectator had an illusion that the locale she has entered was not a *mise-en-scène*, but a regular interior of a café. However, at one point during the performance, the "break" turned into a television variety show, where the audience was suddenly given the role of the "live audience" from the shows. Thus the meaning of the cameras, stage, television screens, cushions and oriental decorations surrounding the audience became clear: the audience who came to see *Peer Gynt* suddenly realized that it found itself in a stereotypically furnished setting of a

talk show. While the spectators were consuming their refreshments or chatting among themselves, suddenly a man appeared on the carpeted stage. He introduced himself as the host of the tonight's show: "Heute tonight", and announced the belly-dancer. A, in my opinion deliberately overly Norwegian-looking, drummer was playing an introductory melody on bongos. The blond and somewhat corpulent hostess – belly-dancer performed for the spectators and the actors while the host was coaching the audience to clap and laugh when being shown signs saying "clap" or "laugh". The cameras were on a number of occasions pointed directly to the spectators, so that the reference to a television variety show also had indications of a reality show. The peak in this double illusion was when a member of the audience (during my first and second seeing of the performance, it was one of my fellow-students) was being picked out to perform for the rest of the audience and the actors.

For the second time in this production of *Peer Gynt*, the audience was thus being given an active role. The first time was when the audience more or less willingly participated with the actors in the scene of wedding on Hegstad gård in the beginning of the performance. However, in this particular scene, the audience was nearly forced to partake. The spectators obediently clapped and forcedly laughed when the "host" was ordering them to, some of them still unsure what was taking place and what they were being part of. Yet again the audience was systematically bewildered into no longer being able to discern the boundary between reality and performance. This obvious reference to the wave of talk-shows and reality shows popular in the Western media today was unquestionably understood and recognized by the audience. This setting which created a background for the appearance of the character of Peer Gynt was an accessible and easily decodable semantic field. The shallowness, kitsch, pretense, artificiality and false glamour that characterizes television shows was well evoked in this scene, thus modalizing, or modernizing the Act IV of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, retaining, however, the same meaning. It is this particular reference to a contemporary cultural phenomenon in Norway that has, in my opinion, among others, "revitalized" the scene. Moreover, it was forced upon the spectators as

a first-hand experience. The audience was, thus, taking the part of Peer's admirers Mr. Cotton, M. Ballon, Herren von Eberkopf and Trumpeterstråler from the Act IV of the play.

Therefore, when the host announced Peer Gynt as the guest of the evening, and when the latter nonchalantly walked his way through the audience towards the sofa at the end of the stage, the spectators were suggested to interpret his character as that of a dubious successful businessman, a tabloid star, judging from their system of references transposed to this *mise-en-scène*.

Now we come to the interpretation of the characters which was also dense with references to the contemporary society and culture. They were richest in the interpretation of the character of Peer Gynt. However, most of them were, in my opinion, only available to the spectators who had good knowledge of particularly Norwegian contemporary culture. As we shall see, there was a layer of contemporary citations which was more or less understandable to all members of the audience. However, there existed another layer, which was decodable only by the Norwegian audience, or the spectators instructed to it, that was opening an even richer semantic field to the spectators who, thus, inevitably found this scene even more pertinent to their network of citations.

I do not have the opportunity here to analyze all the characters that appear in this scene, but who are nonetheless all bearers of various references to contemporary Norway, and are thus significant for the overall understanding of the scene. I will, therefore, but narrow my analysis to two, in my opinion, most prominent characters. Those are Peer Gynt and the host of the talk show pleonastically called "Heute Tonight"¹.

The host's behavior: gestures, body language, narrative and diction were all very easily recognizable for they imitated to the smallest detail the behavior of typical hosts of low-quality light entertainment television talk shows in Norway. As described earlier, the

¹ The name of the show "Heute Tonight" itself is also an allusion to the contemporary fashion of using foreign words in the popular shows in Norwegian media.

host was, before Peer Gynt entered the stage “warming up” the audience, by instructing them when to clap and when to laugh. During that session, the host was behaving as a off-stage “segment producer”, thus taking a role easily recognizable by all spectators, regardless of their cultural background, since this behavior pattern is more or less a code for all variety show hosts in the media in the whole world today. Also, the fact that the host was frequently using English words and expressions made a clear reference to that fashionable trend in the countries where English is not the official language, Norway included.

The host introduces Peer Gynt as “the man whose name is constantly in the media”, and he announces that this is the first time that this “successful Norwegian is giving an interview”. Thus, in this performance we see Peer Gynt, the rich slave merchant from the Ibsen’s text, transposed into a contemporary successful businessman. This staging makes, in my opinion, an excellent topicalization of his character from the Fourth Act of the play. The audience, in spite of its multicultural profile, could easily decode Peer Gynt’s character as that of a superstar, as he nonchalantly throws himself into the sofa, his shirt carelessly unbuttoned and his bowtie undone. Peer is displaying his dominance on the scene by his every gesture, movements and behavior. For example, as he answers to the host, Peer throws lemon and ice cubes from his drink at him. However, there was another important reference to the contemporary Norwegian cultural context that the character of Peer Gynt was suggesting to the audience, but which was only accessible to the spectators who had good knowledge of the Norwegian society today. His character was, namely, making a direct reference of Petter Stordalen, one of Norway’s richest men, owner of the chain of “Choice” hotels. The connection was not only achieved by imitating the clothing, behavior and hairstyle, the actor interpreting the character of Peer Gynt was frequently using the English word “choice”, even stressing it, thus making the citation apparent.

This particular reference was one of the many in this production that were directed specifically to a Norwegian spectator embedded in his ‘here and now’. Nevertheless, as I hope to have shown in the analysis of this one scene from the performance, a very large

part of the intertextuality was understandable and decodable to all spectators, regardless their cultural background, precisely because the performance was quoting phenomena present in most of the world today. However, the very richness in citation might have been at times distracting as well, demanding a short attention span. Nevertheless, I believe that the dialogue between the nineteenth-century dramatic text which it uses as a basis, and the contemporary twenty-first century cultural referents, in spite of their occasional overload, did all in all not seem to inhibit the understanding and appreciation of the performance. The performance did not urge the viewers to make a decision whether to label this performance as ironizing, satirical or whether it was simply making Ibsen's text funny. They needed not even dwell on the thought whether it is "urban" and "modern" version of the drama or not. The performance was in itself multidimensional enough, it was an open multimedia spectacle for both a non-engaged and an engaged spectator, regardless of her cultural background.



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Summary

The text explores possibilities of revitalization and translation of Henrik Ibsen's play into an open form of performance. On the example of *Peer Gynt*, first performed on September 17, 2009 at the Oslo Nye Centralteater, common grounds of the 19th century drama and contemporary cultural context are considered. Ibsen's drama *Peer Gynt*, directed by Svein Sturla Hungnes is, according to critics, staged as "a modern, urban version". The analysis singles out the key intertextual elements of a new reading and performing Ibsen in the context of media culture. Relying on Roland Barthes's theoretic views from the essay "The Death of the Author", our text focuses on stage/performance and viewer/participant communication.

Key words: *Henrik Ibsen, Roland Barthes, Svein Sturla Hungnes, theatre, performance, media culture*