

schaubühne am lehniner platz

Reading and Staging Ibsen

by Thomas Ostermeier

Introduction

I would like to give you some idea of my approach to Ibsen's plays. These thoughts are based on my work since 2002. Roughly every 2 years I have directed an Ibsen play: *A Doll's House* in 2002, *The Master Builder* in Vienna in 2004, *Hedda Gabler* in 2005, *John Gabriel Borkman* in 2008, and *Ghosts* which I shall be directing in Amsterdam at the end of 2010.

My speech will be divided into two parts. First of all, I would like to give you some idea of why in my opinion Ibsen's work has a special value nowadays. And then I would like to talk in a more general way about the problems you encounter in the dramaturgy, in the writing and in the directing of Ibsen's plays.

Money and Soul

In Germany, especially in the German »Regietheater« of the 70s, 80s and early 90s, Ibsen was always known as the writer who reveals the mysteries of the soul. This led to a special tradition in putting Ibsen on stage, and actors often had a typical way of interpreting Ibsen's characters in their mind. It was a way of trying to portray the inner landscape of the character. Ibsen was widely interpreted as the writer who had put the ideas of Freud on stage before Freud himself developed them. The consequence was that the actor would try very hard to make believe that his feelings on stage were sincere, and Ibsen's plays have often been performed with a lot of pauses, emotional seizures and passionate looks out of windows. Presenting Ibsen's work in this way can be very boring or at least risks being very boring, especially as this belief in feeling completely destroys the play and leads to performances in which the characters no longer act in the sense of taking action. What directors have to face when approaching Ibsen's plays is a problem which every director has to face when approaching a classical writer or a classical play: even before we read the play for the first time we already have lots of clichés of interpretations in our head and lots of ideas of how an Ibsen play should be done.

When I first stepped into the world of Ibsen's plays, and now I am talking primarily about the plays I mentioned before which I directed or am going to direct, I was struck by the fact that the characters are under huge economic pressure and that Ibsen always uses



this economic pressure as the motor of the play. And for me this is the link to today's time which makes this writer so contemporary. In Germany – and I suppose this is also transferable to the rest of Europe – since the beginning of the 90s the prime neoliberal ideas of our societies are threatened by growing economic fears, meaning that people are obsessed by the fear of dropping down the social ladder and of losing their social status. This can mainly be seen in the middle class, which until the 90s was the winner of the so-called glorious »Wirtschaftswunder of the 50s«. In the 80s we had to face mass unemployment for the first time since the Second World War, and in the 90s and the zero years the economic crisis meant that the middle class were confronted with the danger of losing their jobs, their wealth, their social status. And a society where jobs and money are everything is a society where religion, nation and family have lost their power. Somebody who is jobless and has no money is faced with being a complete nobody with no reason to go on living. Or they try to find a meaning in life in values which were most important in the golden age of bourgeois society, like family values, in marriage, in Christian religion, in having children and being a good mother to them. This is something which is very popular in Germany at the moment and in our generation has created a new kind of bourgeoisie known as »die neue Mitte«.

I mentioned two very important subjects which I found in Ibsen's plays. First of all the overall issue of economic pressure and financial worries. Second, the aspect of family, the pressure on the role of a woman in the time of Ibsen and nowadays, especially in the new conservative spirit we have to face now and which impacts on society, where I see parallels in the difficulties of being a couple, having children and trying to solve the problem of having a family life then and now.

First of all I would like to give you some examples regarding the economic pressure:

A Doll's House: Helmer, bank director and the loans. The fact that Nora does not want her husband to know about the loans she got from Krogstad.

Hedda Gabler: Tesman's career as a professor put into danger by Løvborg. The house he bought which he cannot afford if he does not get the job.

John Gabriel Borkman: Of course, him speculating and losing everything. The magic belief in the power of money to solve all our problems is the core of the play.

So what we have here – and there are more examples in the other plays, but I would like to concentrate on these examples – is that the characters are completely preoccupied with constant worries about financial or economic issues. This unwavering belief in the power of money destroys every human relationship. Especially the male characters



become more or less narrow-minded and blind to other needs around them. Career, social status, money, status symbols like the house in *Hedda Gabler* are more important than the human beings around them, more important than emotional relationships, more important than love, friendship, even family bonds in the example of the two sisters in *Borkman*. For financial reasons Borkman decides to marry the woman he does not love and gives the woman he loves to another man, sacrificing her for his career. He destroys even the tie between the twin sisters, which is traditionally considered the strongest possible tie between human beings. So, in contrast to the cliché of characters in Ibsen's plays and the interpretation of them in German theatres let's say from the late 50s until beginning of the 90s, the characters have sacrificed their souls, their emotions, their passions, their love or their ability to love to their financial desire. They are living in a rationalized, secularized cold world where some of them still try to maintain other values but then suffer total shipwrecks in this world like Elvsted, like Nora, like Mrs. Alving. Actually, and this is one of my main points, as you may already have understood, I am fascinated by this writer because he shows how bourgeois individuals try to find a way in a completely cold world without abandoning the ideals that the bourgeoisie pretends to have. But as we know since Richard Sennett's *The Corrosion of Character* («Der flexible Mensch») this is difficult and becomes more and more difficult as shown by Engstrand in *Ghosts* or Brack in *Hedda Gabler* – the cynical and less emotional characters in Ibsen's plays tend to triumph. So what's interesting to me as a director is to have a writer who shows how human beings with all their emotions try to survive with their souls intact in a completely materialistic and rationalized world, where only the power of money rules. And I think these are things which can be observed in our daily life: our physical appearance, what the body expresses or doesn't express or the way what it expresses is no longer readable – how this is influenced by our brave new world. Very often modern societies, especially western democracies, have to face physical and mental problems. Physical problems such as not feeling well in our bodies, having problems in our modern system, having to fight diseases like illnesses of the nervous system, burnout syndrome, the complete loss of the connection to our bodies, depression. We have to face the fact that our materialistic view of the world can be re-discovered as symptoms in our bodies. And this is the very interesting link in staging Ibsen's dramas nowadays, examining how this way of life affects our physical appearance, what kind of social and physical approach we have to each other.

And now, this leads me to the second part of my thoughts which are more common points in the drama of Henrik Ibsen and how these are linked to my passion for special



sociological views of the human being or of theatre as a sociological laboratory that examines the behaviour of human beings.

The Writer of the Exposition and the Two Dramas

For 2500 years, text-based theatre has had the idea that the human being reveals his capacity for being good or bad especially in situations which can be considered dramatic, like after an airplane crash when a few people have survived on an isolated island and they have nothing more to eat or drink. This is more of a Hollywood dramaturgy in which we soon find out through the development of the story that people are capable of sacrificing themselves, giving the last water to others, but also capable of killing someone in order to survive. In Ibsen's plays the dramatic situation is usually much more difficult and complex. This is due to the fact that, after the bloody medieval times in which conflicts until the end of the 19th century could be solved by weapons, in duels, bourgeois society is less violent. So the complexity of the conflicts is much more complicated than in a Shakespeare drama where »I kill in order to become the king«. The conflict of Hedda Gabler for example, is, actually, quite difficult to describe: even if we cannot describe it easily, everybody amongst us can recognise Hedda Gabler's feelings: living the wrong life, being together with the wrong person, not being courageous enough to live an independent life, hating the others around her because they show her, like a mirror, how miserable and small her courage and ideals are.

So in order to tell you about all this, the writer Ibsen often decides to make an exposition out of half of the play (sometimes even more), which means preparing the drama, which is then done in one long breath of one or one and a half hours. And now I am coming back to the point in my first chapter: I think this exposition in Ibsen's plays is the biggest danger and trap every director risks in staging an Ibsen play. Because what mostly happens in this section of the play is that you play the drama and are overdramatic and emotional while the drama actually is not there yet. Most of the time Ibsen has one character who tells everything that is important for the audience to know to another character, and primarily we have the situation of simple conversations. As a lot of directors don't take this as an opportunity but try to put something into the scenes that is not there, they are caught in the trap.

And there is my point: I think this part of the play is for the director who is obsessed with sociological observation of human behaviour in daily life. Here lies the chance you can take when you direct Ibsen's plays. Because while directing you can be very nuanced



and show how a body moves in space, how a body approaches another, how people shake hands, talk to each other while not watching each other, how they try to perform their happy life and so on. You have a laboratory without drama and this can be very exciting for directors like me, who are also interested in the appearances of daily life where you can already observe the effects of modern times. What Ibsen himself does in order to improve this situation of simple conversation a little bit is that often the characters tell the stories of the last years to the protagonists. The character confronts the protagonist with things from the past he or she would love not to be confronted with any more. This is true of Hilde Wangel in *The Master Builder*. This is true of Pastor Manders and Mrs. Alving who confront each other with the love they had. This is true of Løvborg in *Hedda Gabler*, who confronts Hedda with the ideals and the passion of her past. This is true of Christine Linde and Krogstad in *A Doll's House*. And it is certainly true of Ella and her effect on Gunhild in *John Gabriel Borkman*. So what Ibsen does is to confront the main characters of the play with ghosts from the past, to quote the title of one of his plays. And here we are facing the main topic of Ibsen's plays – something which is not a big surprise to anyone who knows Ibsen – that bourgeois society is built on lies and hypocrisy, or, to say it in German, on a »Lebenslüge« (life lie). And when these characters are confronted with the ghosts from the past, there is anxiety. This transforms the very nontheatrical situation of the conversation into a theatrical situation in which they are confronted with their younger self of the past via the ghosts who »appear« and the younger self is represented in this »Gengänger« (Wiedergänger). Confronted with the fact that »when I was young I never wanted to become like these lying and hypocritical grown-ups«. So it is as if you were meeting your subconscious or as if you were meeting your emotions which are not meant to live in the house, but in the cellar.

And meeting these emotions can, of course, be very painful because it calls your whole life in question. The appearance of these characters is a challenge and at the same time a gift to the director: they can be in your living room and you don't recognize them, just as Nora doesn't notice Linde, they are coming out of the fog, which was what I tried to show in *John Gabriel Borkman*, they appear like Chimera behind glass like Løvborg in *Hedda Gabler* or they even fly from the sky, which is what I did with Hilde Wangel in *The Master Builder*.

So these are all theatrical effects or ways of staging this dramaturgy which improve the on the whole not very dramatic situation of the first half of Ibsen plays. It is as if there were two dramas happening: the drama which took place 5, 10, 15 years before the play



starts and the drama in the second half of the play. And to create this passage, this sequence at the beginning of the play until the drama can really happen, to make this interesting - this is the true challenge for everybody directing Ibsen's plays.

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