

Ibsen's Compass: Points of Dread and Desire

Anne-Charlotte Hanes Harvey

Abstract By studying the emotional charge of the extended virtual milieu in Ibsen's last twelve plays as a body, patterns are revealed which contribute significantly to the plays' analysis, interpretation, mise-en-scène, and performance. The "here"—the virtual space evoked on stage—in Ibsen's mature dramas is easily identified and falls within a fairly limited range (the plays are all set in contemporary Norway, largely in private spaces, and—with the exception of *The Wild Duck*—in separate dwellings rather than apartment buildings). But the "there"—the extended virtual milieu—is far more extensive, and reaches in all directions of the compass. This extended sphere includes not only specific places found on a geographical map (Paris, America, the Alps) but also vaguely defined areas or general directions ("the sea," "the north"). Specific or general, they are not so much physical as mental and spiritual *loci*, assigned certain qualities evoking strong emotional responses. They exert a power to attract or repel. No analysis of Ibsen's plays is complete without an understanding of this spatial "push and pull," these compass points of dread and desire. Although some of them have been noted in individual plays, the patterns and congruences emerging by studying the entire cycle give greater weight to each instance and focus attention on hitherto unnoticed riches in Ibsen's text.

Key words virtual space; vectors; spatial; "push and pull"; compass points

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How often do we have the opportunity to read, see or produce Ibsen's plays the way he wanted? Ibsen insisted that "only by grasping and comprehending my entire production as a continuous whole will the reader be able to conceive the precise impression I sought to convey in the individual parts of it. I therefore appeal to the reader that he not put any play aside. . . experiencing them intimately in the order in which I wrote them." ¹ In 2008 I had the opportunity to do precisely that, working with Ion Theatre, San Diego, on a year-long project producing monthly concert readings of Ibsen's last twelve plays, from *Pillars of Society* in January to *When We Dead Awaken* in December. ² In the process I was made vividly aware of certain aspects of Ibsen's dramaturgy, among them what I call Ibsen's "compass."

I observed that Ibsen's last twelve plays—his "realist cycle" (Brian Johnston's term)—are strikingly concerned with locations, spatial relationships, and directions. In contrast to the roughly contemporary plays of Strindberg and Chekhov, Ibsen's plays are filled with references to places and areas—*loci*—and directions—vectors. ³ These *loci* and *vectors* are carefully selected and artfully included. But a look at any

one of the twelve plays hardly alerts the reader and audience viewer to their existence and significance. Only some loci are flagged by proper names. Only a few *loci* and vectors are discussed at length by the characters. The rest are general in nature and included in the dialogue in such a seamless way as to be nearly invisible. But when the cycle is considered *in toto*, when the twelve plays are read or seen in sequence, the cumulative impact is undeniable. How many Ibsen characters do not express their feelings about “the north”? Characters go north, or come from the north, or go back up north. What is it about “the north” that warrants referring to over and over again? And what about “the south”? How many characters long to go south? How many have returned from the south, changed?

In this paper I will discuss *loci* and *vectors* in Ibsen’s “realist cycle,” their nature and function, and why I see them as enriching the plays and deserving attention and analysis by theatre practitioners. To do so I will first inventory the body of *loci* and vectors. What are they? Which ones recur most often? How are they charged, positively or negatively? How do they impact the characters? I will then suggest how, when the plays are being moved from page to stage, *loci* and vectors—if noted—will subtly add dimension to the characters, inform blocking and scenography, and make the virtual milieu more “real.”

Loci are either “here”—the virtual place created on stage by the actual set and visible to the audience—or “there”—any place off stage, be it next door or across the Atlantic. *The locus* “here” for each of the twelve dramas is easily identified and falls within a fairly limited range.⁴ The plays are all set in contemporary Norway, largely in private domestic spaces, and—with the exceptions of *A Doll House* and *The Wild Duck*—in separate dwellings rather than apartment buildings.⁵ The geographical location is unspecified: “*Handlingen foregår. . . i byen. . . ude ved fjorden. . . i en kystby. . . i en liden fjordby. . . udenfor hovedstaden.*” Six are set in a town, three of them in a substantial villa; two in a major city; two on country estates; one on an estate at the outskirts of a city; and one in nature. All but *A Doll House* and *The Master Builder* are set near a fjord, or in or near a coastal or fjord town, reachable by steamer.⁶ It is worth noting that the plays gradually incorporate more and more nature, from the *havestue* (garden room) in *Pillars of Society* (1877) and the *havestue* and *blomstervervelse* (garden room with conservatory) in *Ghosts* (1881) to complete exteriors in the later plays.⁷ In *Lady from the Sea* (1888) and *Little Eyolf* (1894) the only interior set is, in fact, a *havestue*. Note also the movement from interiors to exteriors and upward in *Master Builder* (1892) and *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896). Ibsen’s last play, *When We Dead Awaken* (1899), is set entirely out of doors, moving from domesticated sea level to untamed mountain heights. As Ibsen intended his cycle plays for the stage and not just for the reading public, his move away from interiors to exteriors must be seen as significant, as it was taking place at a time when theatre technology had perfected the box set creating lifelike domestic interiors but was still unable to satisfy demands for “realism” in exteriors and was not yet ready to move into symbolism or expressionism via the New Stagecraft.

On the other hand, references to any *locus* “there”—any place in the extended virtual milieu, the entire unseen world outside the *locus* “here”—are far more exten-

sive and often specific. In addition to frequent references to general areas (“the sea,” “the north,” “the mountains”) and spatial relationships, directions and points of the compass (up, down, in, out, “up north,” “in the south,” “over on the coast”), they include named areas and places. Ibsen anchors the extended virtual milieu with references to actual natural geographical or topographical features (the Ortler Group, the Dolomites, the English Channel, the Brenner Pass, the Ampezzo Valley, Capri, Lake Taunitz, the Arctic Sea), manmade places (Paris, London, Rome, New York, Halifax, Archangel), and areas, nations, and continents (Tirol, Italy, England, California, China, Australia, America).

Some *loci* are defined or described in terms of polarity (“up there” vs. “down here,” “home” vs. “abroad,” “Old World” vs. “New World,” “countryside” vs. “city”) where spiritual and cultural life, physical size, and relative modernity factor are included. E. g., it is understood that, compared with Paris, Rosenvold has little to offer Osvald Alving. In *Pillars of Society* “our” Norwegian engineers are compared with the pragmatic ones of “the larger countries” (the industrialized nations of Europe) when the railway coming to town raises the question of the human cost of progress.

Both the *locus* “here” and the *locus* “there” act on the characters, attracting or repelling them. When characters “here” (all characters tend to be “here”; the reactions of absent characters are largely uninteresting to a dramatist) are attracted “there,” a vector of desire is created. Although reaction to the present “here” can be strengthened in performance in that it is directly presented and kinaesthetically available to the audience, a character’s ongoing yearning for a distant “there” can be a very powerful vector.

Loci also have varying emotional charges, depending on who is speaking. Not surprisingly, the “here” is viewed favorably by the conservative characters in the place where the action is set, while the “there” is correspondingly criticized. No surprise, then, that Rørund in *Pillars* praises Norway and denounces “the great nations of today” as kalkede grave, “whited sepulchres.” The rebels, conversely, criticize the “here” and are attracted to the “there,” yearning for change or escape. (I shall return to the effect of the *loci* and vectors on the characters in the following.)

As far as vectors are concerned, some are oriented to explicit compass points: West, North, East, South. Others are implied, depending on the “here” of the speaker. If “the sea” is mentioned, it usually means West or South,⁸ “the mountains” imply East or North or possibly West (as in *Master Builder*, which is set in an inland valley).⁹ “Down there” can mean ‘southern Europe’ or ‘southern Norway’ or simply ‘down below, at a lower level, on the floor below.’ “Out there” refers to the sea, “up there” to the north or up in the mountains, and so on. The context clarifies and charts the thoughts and movements of the characters, including whether they are going away or coming home and how they have arrived “here” or “there”: on foot or by steamer, train, sleigh, or streetcar. We almost get a time table for some of the traffic—in *Ghosts*, for example, we are told that the morning steamer usually arrives around lunch time, necessitating Manders’ stay overnight on the Rosenvold side of the fjord to be in time for the dedication ceremony, which al-

lows Ibsen to include the delicious moment when Manders declines Mrs. Alving's invitation to stay overnight under her roof.

"The North," "north," is the most frequently mentioned point on the compass. Not surprisingly, in view of Norway's shape, location, geography and climate zones, 'the north' is almost always viewed negatively. Dr. Stockmann in *Enemy of the People* rings particularly eloquent variations on the theme of the north as a cold backwater. In *The Wild Duck* and *Lady from the Sea*, however, the north is also the place of clean, clear air, "quite fresh" contrasted with "stale city air."¹⁰ Hilmar Tenneson in *Pillars* romanticizes the North Pole as an "invigorating" area—but only to read about.

A special case is Finnmark, an area in the far north associated with untamed, differently gifted "others" believed to have magic powers. Rebecca West comes from Finnmark. The Stranger in *The Lady from the Sea* is a *kven* (sami) from Finnmark, though born in Finland.¹¹ Irene in *When We Dead Awaken*, we are told, speaks with a northern accent, a tiny reference hinting at her uncanny powers.

"South," "down south" are recurring references, often concretized as places in southern Europe (Italy, Capri, Rome, Paris), and almost always positively associated with warmth and culture.¹² The young Karsten Bernick had to go to Paris and London to see the world. Torvald Helmer was dying—it was only by going south to Italy that he could be cured. It is only in Paris that Oswald can truly grow as an artist, and down south that Lyngstrand can become a famous sculptor and Frida Foldal get conservatory training as a pianist.

There are very few references pointing to eastern Norway. In one draft of *Enemy of the People*, one of the journalists speaks with an eastern dialect, denoting lack of sophistication. Areas east of Norway are generally ignored. There are no references to Sweden—in spite of, or perhaps because of, the Union—and none to the Baltic. Finland is mentioned only as the birth country of the Stranger in *Lady from the Sea*, and Russia—adjacent to Norway in the north—is mentioned only as a possible home of rich yacht owners in *Ghosts*.

"West," on the other hand, is often mentioned, referring to the coast of Norway and, beyond it, the sea, England, and—the ultimate wild west—America. West is overwhelmingly positive, associated with the sea, connections to the outside world via the sea, and the wealth resulting from these connections. The estates Rosenvold and Rosmersholm are both located near a fjord in western Norway.

"America" occupies a special position. (The city New York is mentioned once, but the country is never politicized or concretized as the United States, always referred to simply as "America.") Dr. Stockmann in *Enemy* sees it as escape via Captain Horster, who regularly sails to America. For others, especially in *Pillars*, America inspires a variety of responses. It is "the New World," on a par with "the South Sea" and "a Primeval forest" when it comes to fanciful escape, but also an iconic place of red indians where you hunt buffalo with bow and arrow. To Johan Tønneson it is a place where women are entitled to independence and income, to Karsten Bernick it is "*et opagiteret samfund*," a (politically) aroused society, in contrast with "*vor lille kreds*," our little circle, of seemingly and modest women. To Martha Bernick

it is a place where Johan has had a “life in bright shimmering sunlight, drinking in youth and health” while she has aged prematurely in Norway. America is natural and unspoilt, but it is also wild and bestial, the place of unscrupulous business deals with profit as only motive. The American shipowner in *Pillars* is ruthless and immoral, the American sailors perpetually drunk “wild animals.”

Some vectors are not horizontal but vertical. Unless combined with “north” in “up north,” the numerous references to “up” usually refers to the mountains. Elevation is generally positive. “Up,” however, is positive or negative, depending on who is speaking and how they view centers of culture. If you desire to “get away from it all,” mountains offer the surest escape. If you crave culture, as the Tesmans both do in *Hedda Gabler*, the mountains, from which Thea Elvsted and Løvborg have come down, are a negative backwater.

In the later plays, the up-down movement becomes more pronounced, the sets being what Brian Johnston calls “scenic metaphors of ‘vertical liberation’.”¹³ Mines and mining are mentioned in *The Wild Duck* but central to John Gabriel Borkman, who declares his love for the veins of ore deep underground. Ascending, actual climbing, occurs in *Lady from the Sea*, *Master Builder* “up into the free air” (253), *Little Eyolf* (Allmers’ cataclysmic mountain hike), *John Gabriel Borkman* and *When We Dead Awaken*. There is even vertical imagery echoing the late nineteenth century interest in ballooning—Jules Verne’s *Five Weeks in a Balloon* had appeared in 1873—in a brief remark of Ballested’s in *Lady from the Sea* but more notably in *John Gabriel Borkman*. Likening himself to the captain of a balloon, Borkman explains to Ella how he felt when he wrestled with all the projects that he was about to launch:

I imagined that I was some kind of captain of the sky—I walked the sleepless nights preparing my giant balloon for the battle, ready to sail out over an unknown, perilous sea. . . I wouldn’t take you or your belongings with me in the balloon. . . you don’t take what’s dearest to you on such a journey. . . life isn’t always the dearest thing. . . . (*Ibsen Volume III* 158)

The most powerful of all attractive loci “there” is the “out there” of the open sea or the liminal sea board with its free open horizon. Eight of the twelve plays are situated by a body of water, and especially the open sea and fjords opening out to the sea act on the characters as powerful magnets, pulling their bodies and filling their minds. The water symbolism is especially well developed in *Lady from the Sea*, comparing the open sea to the tepid fjord to the stagnant pond.¹⁴ The sea is one of the two major forces in Elida’s life.

All these references are not included in order to transmit information about a locale. Ibsen is not interested in mapping the geography of Norway or any part of the earth. His “Norway” is a metaphoric world.¹⁵ In other words, specific or general, the loci are not so much physical places as mental and spiritual constructs assigned certain qualities which evoke strong emotional responses in the characters. The vectors are lines in a virtual forcefield, attracting or repelling them. No analysis of Ibsen’s plays is complete without an understanding of this spatial “push and pull” on

the characters, these compass points of dread and desire.

At the same time the wealth of references, anchored by references to named places and features, create an illusion of solid “reality.” They create a consistent virtual world with its own internal logic. Ibsen has an unerring sense for spatial relationships, placement, and movement, both within the confines of a theatre set—perhaps developed during his days as stage manager in Bergen—and within the larger metaphoric world created in each of his plays.

This internal logic must not be ignored. The more precisely Ibsen pinpoints a spatial relationship, the more damage a careless translation may do, as seen in this example from *Hedda Gabler*:

Tesman: . . . How could she stand it holed up out there, so far from everything, hm?

Hedda: . . . Doesn't he live out that way, Eilert L? vborg, I mean?

Tesman: Yes, right up in that area.¹⁶

A translation that alternates between “out there” and “up in that area” confuses reader, theatre practitioner, and audience alike. Did Thea come in to town from the coast, or down from the mountains? Ibsen, on the other hand, is crystal clear: the place of the Elvsteds where Løvborg has been staying is *der oppe* (“up there,” i. e., in the mountains or north of the capital).

As Ibsen was writing—the first eight plays of the cycle were penned on the Continent—of course memories and impressions of the Norway he had known colored his metaphoric map. But he deliberately moved from specificity toward universality. The specific actual inspiration became submerged, hidden in the general. As Janet Garton has pointed out, what is spelled out in an early draft often disappears from the text, absorbed into the subtext, in the final version.¹⁷ For example, *The Wild Duck* takes place in the unspecified “*byen*.” But the fact that Werle is able to assemble three chamberlains for his dinner party—twenty-five percent of the total number in the entire country—coupled with the layout of the apartment building including a studio attic suggest a major city. In fact, one draft of *The Wild Duck* specifies “Kristiania.”¹⁸

How can Ibsen be so detailed as to include specific place names and at the same time strive for universality through general descriptions of locations (“*I byen*”)? One clue to this paradox may be the fact that in the published texts, specific names never appear in the Nebentext, the stage directions, only in the dialogue. The specific names, put into the mouths of the characters, are not designed to inform about an actual area—some of the Norwegian place names are even invented—but to give specificity and validity, color and substance, to a virtual world as seen by its virtual inhabitants. In the stage directions, on the other hand, aimed at the theatre practitioner or the reader imagining the location, actual place names would limit rather than encourage the dramatic imagination and claim for the virtual world a verisimilitude that is not only impossible but undesirable.

An interesting aspect of *loci* and vectors is the respective force, eloquence, and

persistence with which Ibsen's characters express their emotional responses. Often they make brief, formulaic or cliché statements, not expecting to be gainsaid. But once in a while Ibsen has a character elaborate, clarify and embroider. "The north" provokes such strong and eloquent negative responses. In *Rosmersholm*, Rebecca explains that Dr. West was broken down by "those winter storms we get up there in the north. . . no hope of resisting. . ." (220)—and that they came down from Finnmark to "a great new world" south (213), though she also speaks lyrically of the north's "tranquility like that of an island of birds at rest under the midnight sun. . ." (221). In *Enemy*, Dr. Stockmann describes his life up north in great negative detail, "stuck up there in the grey north" (131), isolated from civilization in "an awful bit of foul weather," where "half-alive creatures need a veterinarian, not a doctor" (182).

Why this insistence? Why this repetition? Ibsen's elaboration on the theme of the awfulness of the north certainly conveys the degree of Dr. Stockmann's revulsion for the north. But above all, the nature of that elaboration helps convey his character—a Norwegian audience member would understand what kind of person Stockmann is from the way in which he expresses his unhappiness with the north.

It is, in fact, primarily as subtle character descriptors that the *loci* and vectors function. A character is fleshed out by the location of his or her response to a *locus* or vector on one or several spectra. Stockmann's disgust with the north is a case in point. "The north is such and such"—Stockmann goes on and on. On a spectrum of "voluble-taciturn" he places at "voluble." On a spectrum of "enduring-complaining" he is no stoic. On a spectrum of "culture loving-culture insensitive" he is culture loving. On a spectrum of "timid-adventurous" he is adventurous. On a spectrum of "realist-idealist" he is a blue-eyed dreamer; when threatened, he rejects the north as a possible retreat and instantly settles on "America" as the locus of his desire. (*Enemy of the People*, in fact, has two negative *loci* for Dr. Stockmann; "a little backwater like this"—bad—and "up north"—worse.) Ibsen often uses a character's response to a *locus* to place that character on a spectrum of sophistication or naiveté. Someone who has been to Paris does not mythologize it as readily; Regine's Paris is not Oswald's. When talking about Paris and in comparison with Oswald, Regine comes across as simple and a little foolish—but also focused, diligent, and ambitious.

Some persons are emotionally charged through their association with *loci* and vectors. They may live in or have come from a certain place ("the Americans"), or they may be professionally tied to it (artists in Paris or Rome). Some persons are emotionally charged precisely because they are not tied to any place at all. Sea captains, travelers, and artists are especially rootless or free in opposition to the rooted or trapped.

Take, for example, the character of the ultimate traveler: the actor with a touring theatre company, who is not only rootless but whose forced travels rarely result in financial gain or respectability. One such actor, who has stopped touring and remained in a provincial town as a bird of foreign plumage and jack-of-all-trades, is Mrs. Dorf in *Pillars of Society* (once with Møllers' theatre company), another is Ballested in *The Lady from the Sea* (once with Skive's theatre company). Even Ulrik

Brendel in *Rosmersholm* was once with a theatre company. Mrs. Dorf and Ballested both stopped traveling and tried to sink roots. He became his town's all purpose artist: painter, tourist guide, band leader and French horn player. She took in washing and opened a dancing school. He is useful and the town is receptive to "foreign" influences, at least in the tourist season. She is a woman without a man, abandoned or having jumped ship, neither of which is respectable, in a town which once supported the arts but now is too moral to do so. He survives, she goes under. Their different fates reflect not so much their own characters—both are described as honest and hard-working—as the prejudices of their respective communities.

But while actors, artists, and travelers—especially single female travellers¹⁹—are suspect, sea captains like Horster in *Enemy* are a special breed, simultaneously rootless (which is suspect) and respectable (because responsible for communication, transportation, and the country's commerce). Rootlessness equals freedom, which is both alluring and frightening. "Sea people don't care what happens on land," asserts Hovstad. Dr. Stockmann agrees: they are "like birds of passage . . . at home both north and south"²⁰—a questionable trait. But sea captains and the ships they man (steamers, tourist ships) connect the farflung parts of the country and link it with other countries. They partake of the openness and freshness of the sea.²¹ On the other hand, captains or owners of yachts and cutters—rich Englishmen, Russians, Americans, foreigners (*Ghosts*) or landowners (*When We Dead Awaken*)—pursue their own pleasure and do not benefit mankind. Ibsen makes use of images with sufficient grounding in reality to motivate the longings of his characters, in this instance to make viable the rumor of Regine's paternity.

Are any of the opinions expressed by the characters Ibsen's own? Not necessarily, though some generally held opinions of the time were certainly shared by Ibsen. America as the land of the free—the land of opportunity, rough and tumble, high risk, and instant riches—is hardly an original idea. Kurt in Strindberg's *Dance of Death* as well as the Stranger in his *The Burnt Lot* have returned from America, both tempered by the experience. Kurt vigorously defends America when Edgar dismisses it as "*något rysligt busland*" (some god-awful land of thugs).²² If there was ever a generally held image based on equal portions of non-experience, propaganda, hearsay, and wishful thinking, it was surely the image of "America" (not the political unit USA) in the 1880s–90s. Who in Scandinavia at that time did not, at least to some degree, embrace this image? America was alluring and distant enough to function as much as a magnet, *livsløgn*, and impossible dream, as a solution, escape hatch, and unassailable option.

Ibsen's own opinions do not figure openly, but resonate beneath the opinions, prejudices, and condemnations expressed by his characters. In plays dealing with social politics and family—the first four plays of the cycle—Ibsen's opinions are fairly clear. But in the last four plays, his opinion—say, of Borkman or Rubek—is elusive and, perhaps, irrelevant. The no-nonsense, openminded female characters who are least convention-bound—Lona Hessel, Nora Helmer, Dina Dorf, Petra Stockmann, Hedvig Ekdal, Mrs. Berta Sørby, Hilde Wangel, Asta Allmers, Fanny Wilton, Frida Foldal, Irene—may say a thing or two that strikes one as spoken by Henrik Ibsen.

But there really are no true *raisonneurs* in his cycle.

In so far as Ibsen's take on a character is ironic, the character is in the course of the action exposed as foolish, crooked, sly, misguided, "moral." But Ibsen increasingly avoids heavy satire; for example, in *Ghosts*, *Regine*, *Manders*, and *Engstrand* are all cleverly and subtly revealed. (The fact that they are often played with heavy-handed satire and stereotyping is another matter.)

Why is the "compass" important? For each character, the "here," the site of the action, is the center of his or her own world and compass. For each compass Ibsen informs us about locations, directions and spatial relationships, making sure to capture in words what is intended to be conveyed simply and powerfully and—possibly primarily—gesturally on stage. He does so for three reasons: first, because he writes for a reading public as well as a theatre audience; second, because gestural intentions obviously cannot be communicated to actors entirely without textual cues; and third, because the information in question is of vital importance. That information is about the characters' "compass," how they are aligned by Ibsen to their world, to places far and near, to the sea and the mountains. The real payoff of the compass is how it benefits the actor by adding another character dimension to be explored.

This exploration contributes to a production in performance because almost all of the sites in the twelve plays are situated by a body of water or on or near mountains, or both. (*Ghosts* and *Little Eyolf* are set between fjord and mountains.) The only plays not set near either water or mountains and without a strong link to nature are *A Doll House* and *Hedda Gabler*.²⁴ Sea and mountains are the major magnets in Ibsen's plays and his characters are aligned to their force fields like iron shavings.

The clearest example is Ellida in *The Lady from the Sea*, whose relationship to the sea informs her whole being. There is not a moment when she is not aware of the direction of the sea, and hardly a moment when she is not drawn there. (All the town residents in *The Lady from the Sea* know where the tourist steamers dock and are attuned to their comings and goings.) A director or actress who does not know the direction of the sea and the fjord for each set of that play not only misses the opportunity to explore a most significant and powerful influence on Ellida's character, but also confuses the audience by ignoring the logic and map of Ibsen's virtual milieu. Similarly, do not Rosmer and Rebecca know where the millrace is located and feel its fearful pull? Who in *Pillars of Society* does not know where the harbor is, where the shipyard? Who in *Enemy of the People* does not know where the polluted effluent is emptying into and poisoning the sea? Who living at Rosenvold does not know where the morning sun hits the mountain peaks at a given time of year? Allmers knows in his bones where his desired mountains are, just as he and Rita have internalized the dreaded direction of the dock where Little Eyolf drowned.

Not all characters are aligned with the constant powerful magnets of water and/or mountains. Some are temporarily drawn to something in their immediate surroundings. Hedvig, Hjalmar Ekdal and Old Ekdal covertly focus on the wild duck in "*havsens bunn*." Kristine Linde is tuned into the Consul's party upstairs. And is not Gunhild Borkman aware every waking moment of the location of her husband above her head? Every one in *John Gabriel Borkman* knows the direction of the city and,

beyond it, the beckoning south. Gunhild and Ella hear from which direction Fanny Wilton's silver sleigh bells are rending their hearts.

However metaphoric the map, Ibsen's characters are oriented and aligned according to their desires and fears and the actors portraying them must act accordingly. The extended virtual milieu, the external landscape, is echoed as an internal landscape. Whatever "-ism" or aesthetic filter is used in the scenography—realism is not required,—and whatever natural features are signified or shown to be visible to the characters, the actors must know the layout of their virtual world and internalize it. It is not a question of an actor physically pointing, broadly indicating where things are. It is more a question of "mentally pointing," the actor being aware of the forces acting on his or her character and being willing to align the portrayal accordingly. A nod, a shrug, tilt of the head, a lifted chin, a quick upward look—that is all it takes to communicate to the theatre audience the integrity of the great reckonings in Ibsen's "little rooms." Whether this alignment is clearly visible or otherwise directly evident to the audience is of secondary importance. Of primary importance is the subtle effect it has on the actor, expanding the inner world of the character, which, in turn, reverberates in performance in numerous intangible ways.

There are three functions of the compass.

First, although the "map" is not a map, the information not information, the specificity of Ibsen's metaphoric map lends substance and credibility—"reality"—to the world of each play. And only by having "reality" can this world be contested, gradually undermined, and exposed as unreal—a grand scheme, glimpsed only by looking at the entire 12-play cycle.

Second, the emotions expressed about the points of the compass reveal the characters uttering them. Their responses to the map fill in the characters in far more subtle ways than the usual givens (sex, age, profession, hair color). Background, inherited traits, family story, expectations, significant relationships, interest in culture; character traits like fortitude and adventurousness, as well as gifts like artistic talent and quickness of mind; hopes, dreams, projects—all is highlighted through references to the map. Ultimately these maps are Ibsen's own. He is, after all, the master draftsman of all the maps, which, when taken together, reveal the grand map in his 12-play dramaturgical master plan.

Third, the specificity and detail of a character's compass gives the actor a very particular challenge and opportunity to contribute to the complete work of theatre art. As director Rick Davis sees it, the actor's task is to consider—beyond the basic understanding of action and situation (vital building blocks though they be), and well beyond motives (always present) and psychological tics (usually invented)—the ways in which he or she as an interpretive artist can give "human shape to this large reservoir of meaning that shadows the overt level of the play's action . . . to communicate something of the scale and audacity of these works [Ibsen's plays] to a contemporary audience."²⁵

Exactly how this is to be done, Davis does not say. He approaches a recognition of what I call Ibsen's "compass" when he hints at interplay between characters, virtual milieu and extended virtual milieu; Ibsen's "landscape" (which includes the sea-

sons) is, as he puts it, “echoed as an internal landscape within the responsive characters” (Davis and Johnston 57). But he is silent about the implications for either the translation, study, rehearsal, or performance of the text. I suggest that in his “compass” Ibsen provides one way—a way deserving further exploration—of giving human shape to “this large reservoir of meaning,” inviting actors to truly do what Henry James termed “the deep and delicate thing.”

[Notes]

1. See Rick Davis and Brian Johnston, *Ibsen in an Hour* (NY: Smith and Kraus, 2008) 55.
2. Ion's artistic director Glenn Paris chose to use the translations of Brian Johnston and Rick Davis for the project. Unless otherwise indicated, translated passages in this paper reflect this choice. The twelve plays are contained in three volumes: *A Doll House, Ghosts, An Enemy of the People, and Hedda Gabler* in *Ibsen 4 Major Plays*, trans. Rick Davis and Brian Johnston (Lyme, NH: Smith and Kraus, 1995); *Pillars of Society, The Wild Duck, Rosmersholm, and The Master Builder* in *Ibsen Volume II: Four Plays*, trans. Brian Johnston (Lyme, NH: Smith and Kraus, 1996); and *The Lady from the Sea, Little Eyolf, John Gabriel Borkman, and When We Dead Awaken* in *Ibsen Volume III: Four Plays*, trans. Brian Johnston and Rick Davis (Lyme, NH: Smith and Kraus, 1998). In the following, these volumes will be abbreviated *FMP*, II and III, respectively.
3. Lake Como in *Miss Julie* and Copenhagen in *Dance of Death* as well as Moscow in *Three Sisters* and Paris in *The Cherry Orchard* function more as concepts than as physically orienting magnetic poles.
4. Four of the plays—*Pillars of Society, A Doll House, Ghosts, and Hedda Gabler*—have only one virtual milieu, one set; *Wild Duck and Rosmersholm* have two, and the rest have multiple sets. Only *Wild Duck, Lady from the Sea* and *When We Dead Awaken*, however, have more than one location, one locus. (*Master Builder*, for example, has three sets but only one locus, namely Solness' house.)
5. The only truly public spaces are the newspaper office in *Enemy of the People*, “Prospect Park” (*Udsigten*) in *Lady from the Sea* and the spa park and mountain sites in *When We Dead Awaken*. Semi-public areas are included within a home in *A Doll House* (Torvald Helmer's office with separate entrance from the landing), *Enemy of the People* (Captain Horster's meeting room), *Wild Duck* (photo studio), and *Master Builder* (architect office).
6. This is in itself not surprising; most towns in Norway are located on waterways or the seaboard.
7. One might consider the lofi “havsens bunn” in *Wild Duck* (1884) with its “forest” and animals as a version of “nature.”
8. Or possibly East, seen from any area west of Oslo fjord.
9. Hilde, in the company of some other young women, had made the acquaintance of Dr. Herdal up at a mountain lodge in the summer. The other women headed westward, to the coast, while Hilde continued alone, down from the mountains, to visit Solness.
10. Note the difference between these two references to the clean air of the north: In *The Wild Duck* it longingly refers to a locus “there,” in *Lady from the Sea* it refers approvingly to the “here” of the speaker.
11. This piece of information about the Stranger explains part of his fascination and power. Johnston and Davis suggest “This little exchange can be omitted” (III: 74) without explaining what it conveys or implies and why they feel it could be omitted.
12. Clearly there are personal experiences of Ibsen's informing the attitudes of his characters when it comes to the south of Europe, especially Italy.
13. See *Ibsen Volume III: Four Plays* xii.
14. The potential flow of water between sea and fjord makes for interesting possibilities in the fjord,

resulting alternately in dangerous undertow or fresh new water from the sea.

15. Brian Johnston makes this point in “The Reality of Ibsen’s Dramas,” III: viii.

16. Rick Davis and Brian Johnston, tr. , in *FMP* 223.

17. “Translating Ibsen—From Page to Page—to Stage?” in *Drama Translation and Theatre Practise*, eds. Sabine Coelsch-Foisner and Holger Klein (Oxford; Peter Lang, 2004) 89 – 98.

18. Nasjonalbiblioteket, Avd. Oslo, Håndskriftsamlingen, Ms. 8:o 1944, p. 5.

19. The amount of luggage of a female traveller is in direct proportion to her rootedness, i. e. , respectability. Ibsen carefully notes Hedda’s mountain of trunks, Rebecca West’s brown sealskin trunk, Hilde Wangel’s and Lona Hessel’s knapsack. Kristine Linde travels light because she has few possessions, Thea Elvsted because she has deserted her home and husband.

20. See *Four Major Plays (FMP)* 134.

21. Captain Alving in *Ghosts* is an army captain, not a sea captain.

22. August Strindberg, *Dödsdansen* in *Samlade Skrifter* 44 (Stockholm; Bonniers, 1988) 38.

23. The press as mouthpiece for public opinion is prominent in *Pillars, Ghosts, Enemy, Rosmersholm*, and *JGB*, and implied in others, e. g. , *A Doll House* and *Hedda Gabler*.

24. Nora mentions that she would like to eventually “get down to the ocean again” (*FMP* 12 – 13), but the sea does not pull her. The “freezing black water” (39) Krogstad dismisses as a way out for Nora may be a local millpond or stream but beyond its function as a potential tool for suicide nothing is made of it. Hedda’s view of nature seems fully processed into picture postcard format. Interestingly, *A Doll House* and *Hedda Gabler* are the only plays without a visible window on the set. Hedda looks out through a side door to see the yellow leaves of September, but the audience is not described as seeing them. On the other hand, the attic in *The Wild Duck*, though located in the capital, includes “havsens bunn,” the bottom of the sea, which is a powerful magnet for Old Ekdal, Hjalmar Ekdal and Hedvig.

25. See “A Translator’s Note”, *FMP* x.

[Works Cited]

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