

Ibsen in the Globalized Society: Multiculturalism—or the Lack Thereof—in Norwegian Ibsen Performance

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Abstract This paper discusses Ibsen performance in a contemporary Norwegian context. Despite popular stereotypes of ethnic and cultural homogeneity, Norway is in reality a multicultural society. This multicultural reality, however, has been slow to penetrate Norwegian Ibsen performance, with actors of minority background rarely seen in Ibsen productions. This paper investigates the reasons behind the underrepresentation of multicultural actors in Norwegian Ibsen performance as well as the Norwegian institutional theatre performance in general, focusing on notions of realism, conceptions of Ibsen in Norway, and structures behind the Norwegian theatre system.

Key words Ibsen; multiculturalism; performance; institutional structures

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This paper discusses Ibsen performance in a contemporary Norwegian context by first problematizing this simplistic notion of a “Norwegian context,” or any national context for that matter. So often we speak of what is happening with Ibsen in a “German context” or a “Japanese context,” but do such generalist statements truly hold in the twenty-first century, in both our globalized and increasingly connected world, as well as our globalized, multicultural home societies?

To many, the word “Norway” brings up images of blonde, blue-eyed, Vikingesque creatures. We think social welfare state; we think fairness or even sameness; we think equal opportunity for all. Such was my impression, in any case, before I moved to Scandinavia.

The fact is, however, that Norway is not excluded from the global migration phenomenon. In fact, Norway has always experienced some incidence of migration, even though substantial non-Western, and even non-Scandinavian immigration was slow to impact the country. The first larger waves of immigration began in the late 1960s, and today, the immigrant population totals 8.3% of the country’s total inhabitants. When the criteria are expanded to include all persons of immigrant background. What

Statistics Norway defines as “first-generation immigrants with no Norwegian background, persons born in Norway with two foreign-born parents, persons born abroad with one Norwegian-born parent, persons born in Norway with one foreign-born parent, [and] persons born abroad with Norwegian-born parents” (Mathisen 15). The population of inhabitants with immigrant background comes to 13.5%. In Oslo, the Norwegian capital and my current home, 25% of the population is of multicultural background.

Norway’s multicultural reality, however, has been slow to penetrate Norwegian Ibsen performance. Actors of minority background are rarely seen in Ibsen productions, contrary to the equal opportunity myth, and as Anne-Britt Gran notes: “Ibsen’s Solveig continues to be white and blonde” (“What is new,” my translation). The reasons for this phenomenon are multiple. First of all, we can look at the status of Ibsen in Norway: despite the playwright’s critical view and self-imposed exile from his own country during his lifetime, Ibsen is a major national cultural icon for Norway. It pays to construct him in such a manner that connects him to a stereotypical Norwegian identity or cultural values, as the Norwegian government, recognizing the playwright’s cultural capital, has done in their international exportations of Ibsen. Some initiatives may be well-intentioned, such as *Nora’s Sisters*, an international seminar series using Ibsen as a starting point for discussions on equality and women’s rights issues in different countries and cultural contexts. But some are ambiguous in their intentions, such as the now somewhat infamous *Peer Gynt* performance in Giza for the finale of the 2006 Ibsen Year. Anyway it is difficult to believe the Norwegian foreign minister Jonas Gahr Støre when he claims that the government is “not trying to ‘use’ Ibsen to ‘sell’ Norwegian goods and services” (translated by Regjeringen.). Støre maintains that the government’s objective is rather to “help Ibsen audiences and readers to trace the links between the content of his plays and their Norwegian backdrop. . . [and] to encourage the large number of people who are fascinated by Ibsen to learn more about Norway and all things Norwegian.”² These euphemistic statements do little to give the impression of a Norwegian cultural backdrop that reflects its present multicultural reality. For that matter, neither does it reflect Norway’s long-standing diversity with the indigenous Sami and other national minorities.

Further, if Ibsen represents—or is constructed to represent—Norway, he also represents a particular and pervasive theatrical tradition in Norway. This “Ibsen tradition” broadly implies a realistic tradition—Ibsen is after all hailed as the father of modern realistic drama—that is often regarded negatively as a barrier to innovation, and even inclusion, in the Norwegian theatre. “The fact that we don’t see Pakistani actors in Norwegian Ibsen productions,” writes Gran, “owes not least to the fact that realism on stage is the norm.” She continues, “Both *Peer Gynt* and *Nora* were white and Norwegian in Ibsen’s plays. A black *Peer Gynt* is quite simply not realistic in the artistic conception.”³ Rather, when a *Peer Gynt* of non-ethnic Norwegian background is seen on the Norwegian stage, it is most often in the “acceptable” form of an international production invited to Oslo. This is most apparent at the Ibsen Stage Festival held biennially at the National Theatre in Oslo. The festival is a showcase of both national and international Ibsen performance, where multiculturalism is generally con-

tained to the international guest performances. The Norwegian productions, to a handful of exceptions, remain played by entirely ethnic Norwegian casts. In the few exceptions where a Norwegian actor of minority background appears on the festival stage, the part is not blindly-cast, but rather cast as such because the specific interpretation calls for it; for example, in a 2006 production of *Hedda Gabler* by the State touring theatre Riksteatret that was invited as a Norwegian guest performance to the festival, Hedda was played by a Norwegian actress of Indian heritage, as the production specifically set Hedda and Jørgen in an interracial marriage. Riksteatret's press releases claimed that the interracial relationship heightened the drama's traditional conflict ("*Hedda Gabler*," "*Høst 2006*"). Realism thus becomes doubly discriminatory to actors of multicultural background: either they remain shut out of Ibsen productions, or brought in to play "the immigrant."

Unfortunately, it is not just Ibsen performance that poses such problems for actors of minority background, such is the general pattern of Norwegian theatre performance. Actors of minority background have for years faced particularly difficulties in accessing the stages of the country's large institutional theatres.

The term "institutional theatre" is used in Norway in reference to theatres funded by the government on a permanent, ongoing basis. The Norwegian theatre system is one of the most highly subsidized in the world, with even independent theatres becoming increasingly reliant on public funding. However, public funding to independent theatres cannot compare to the amount of funding institutional theatres receive, especially the national touring theatre Riksteatret, and the four national institutions, The National Theatre, The Norwegian Theatre, The National Stage, and The Norwegian Opera. In 2008, these five performing arts institutions together received over 779 million Norwegian kroner, the equivalent to over half of the total State budget for the performing arts. Along with this privileged funding set-up, these major institutional theatres also enjoy benefits such as being regarded as "serious" or "high-quality" theatres, as well as extensive media coverage and publicity for their work. As national institutions, they also acquire the status of bearers of Norwegian culture and tradition—a culture and tradition that is rapidly evolving with increased immigration to the country—yet are to large degree still not reflecting this multicultural national reality in the actors they are hiring. And why not? When I first began my research into this question, I concentrated on the issues earlier discussed: long-standing traditions of Ibsen and realism. As I started to dig deeper, however, I began to hit not only such artistic or conceptual barriers, but also structural barriers within the institutional theatre system that limit minority actors' opportunities. Yet perhaps more aggressive way. Skin colour was just the tip of the iceberg—like all minority issues, I realized this was about access. And access, or rather, obstacles, to acting education institutions plays a major role in the problem of the continuing underrepresentation of minority actors on the institutional stage.

For years acting education in Norway has been dominated by one school: The State Theatre Academy, established in 1953. The oldest and most prestigious theatre school, for a long time it was the only professional theatre school in Norway, which had contributing to a monopolizing effect on the Norwegian theatre scene. Graduating

acting classes from the State school fed more or less directly into the acting companies of the State institutional theatres. High numbers of applicants to the academy's acting program, which range between 400 and over 800 applicants each year—thus spawned the rise of alternative acting schools in Norway.

Despite the presence of these newer theatre schools in Norway, however, prestige, status, and ultimately employment preference remains concentrated on the State Theatre Academy. Aspiring actors know that if they want to make it onto the big stages of the country, they have to go through this channel—other theatre schools, no matter how good their programs may be, just don't provide the same filter into the established theatres. This was confirmed by the empirical research I conducted, interviewing over twenty individuals and groups in the Norwegian theatre community, from representatives from all of the major institutional theatres in Oslo, to acting students and teachers at different theatre schools. Every representative of the institutional theatres I contacted named a strong preference for graduates of the acting program at the State Theatre Academy, with one representative fittingly calling it an “unwritten contract” between the academy and the theatres. As Per Mangset describes, the tradition has always been that representatives from institutional theatres are to follow the academy's students during their education through internal performances at the school, and are expected to give them a chance after graduation by hiring them for at least a period of time (Mangset 26 – 28). There is strong criticism against theatres that fail to follow this norm.

The eight to ten lucky graduates each year of the State Theatre Academy are thus almost guaranteed a job, while their non-academy counterparts from other theatre schools in Norway have to fight through the system which presents further barriers considering that auditions are not common practice in Norway. Rather, institutional theatres either go, as mentioned, to the State Theatre Academy when they are looking for new actors, or hire professional actors they have worked with, known previously, or seen and liked in other productions. This second method of recruitment, however, is closely linked to the first: if graduates of the State Theatre Academy receive more interest from institutional theatres, how will the alternatively-educated actors get the chance to make it onto the professional stage to be seen by representatives from other institutional theatres?

In Norway there is also a difference between State-funded schools and private schools, and not just in regards to funding. In addition to the State Theatre Academy, there are two newer State theatre schools, although they too rank lower in status than the academy. These schools, however, like the academy offer three-year educations leading to a Bachelor degree. The private schools, however, do not work under this Bachelor degree system. As a result, their degrees are not “approved” by the Norwegian actors union. Graduates from these non-approved institutions must, according to the actors union's regulations, have a minimum of three-year's work experience on the professional stage in order to become full members of the association.

Graduates of private theatre schools thus face another *Catch-22*. If their education does not warrant them the opportunity to join the professional actors union and receive the aid and benefits of membership (such as being listed in the union's member

catalogue, a resource that the institutional theatre representatives also named as a tool in actor recruitment), they will have even less chance to complete the professional work.

Such structural barriers within the Norwegian institutional theatre system thus make it difficult for non-State school educated actors, and in general non-State Theatre Academy educated actors, to get the chance to prove not only themselves, but also the quality of their educations, on the institutional stage. In such a closed theatre system, alternatives to the State Theatre Academy—professional theatre schools in their own right—will continue to remain undervalued.

The system and its barriers also make their impact acutely felt on the situation of minority actors in Norway. For example, if the State Theatre Academy route is still the way of getting onto the institutional stage, it becomes a problem when in their now over 50-year history, they have only accepted a handful of acting students of minority background into the acting program. Further, the private schools in Oslo that I spoke to possess a demonstrated openness and inclusive attitude, matching the number of multicultural students the State Theatre Academy has accepted in their entire history, in a single program year. But when all students from private and non-State Theatre Academy schools, regardless of what nationalities they possess, face such difficulties in the Norwegian institutional theatre system, it is no wonder why the problem of lacking minority representation on stage persists.

I emphasize again: the problem is not as obvious as discrimination against minority actors on the basis of their skin colour. Rather, this is a more indirect and invisible, and thus even more aggressive form of discrimination, precisely because of its invisibility. Gran terms this phenomenon well as “institutional racism,” asserting, “even though the individuals in cultural life are not racist and exclusionary, rules, norms, and actions in the field lead to racist consequences” (“*Giskes rolle*”). These rules, norms, and actions in the Norwegian institutional theatre scene must be re-assessed and re-structured; this would be the most effective and efficient way to increase the level of minority representation on the Norwegian stage, not to mention levelling out the playing field of the institutional theatre to become a fairer place for all actors working in Norway.

In 2006, the Norwegian government announced that the year 2008 would officially be “The Year of Cultural Diversity,” an integration initiative directed towards increasing awareness as well as the level of minority participation in Norwegian cultural life. The theatres made some efforts during this year, especially Riksteatret which hired a number of multicultural actors for their productions, as well as organized a multicultural theatre festival in conjunction with two independent theatres. However, the future of such efforts to incorporate cultural diversity and culturally-diverse actors into the theatre remain uncertain, as the Year of Cultural Diversity made no concrete, structural changes to the system. The government, despite holding so much power over the theatres considering that they are funding the majority of them, remains hesitant to set concrete measures such as setting quotas for minority artists to increase representation, or instate budget cuts for institutions failing to incorporate cultural diversity into their operations. The responsibility to multiculturalize is therefore still up to

the theatres, but now with the Year of Cultural Diversity over, along with the lack of real consequences from the government, what impetus is there for them to change?

This is the biggest reason as to why multicultural Ibsen performances in Norway are so few and far between. Because the rules of the Norwegian theatre system govern also the way the playwright is produced in the country. In order for a multicultural Ibsen performance tradition to be established in Norway, we must begin looking at the system as a whole.

【 Notes 】

1. Hereafter, unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Norwegian are mine.
2. See J. G. “Støre. Ibsen’s calling is to ask questions, not to give answers”. *Dagbladet*, January 28, 2006.
3. See A. Gran. “Giskes rolle i det nye Norge,” *Aftenposten*, March 17, 2006. < <http://www.af-tenposten.no/meninger/kronikker/article1251120.ece> > accessed 10 November, 2007.

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