

OTTO BRAHM'S IBSEN CYCLE AT THE LESSING-THEATER IN BERLIN

Jens-Morten Hanssen

On 22 January 1909 *The League of Youth* was presented at the Lessing-Theater in Berlin as the inaugural performance of an Ibsen cycle comprising all of Ibsen's thirteen contemporary dramas up to *When We Dead Awaken*. The plays were performed consecutively in chronological order in the course of six weeks. The cycle was repeated two times, up to the end of the season, and performed seven times throughout the seasons up until 1912/13. The cycle was theatre director Otto Brahm's major work, his *magnum opus*. Brahm's venture was one of a kind. Never before nor after has a theatre audience had the chance to attend Ibsen's *oeuvre* from A to Z, so to speak, brought to life on stage.

In this paper I will examine this performance cycle from different angles. Although the cycle is well known, two aspects have so far escaped scholarly attention. Firstly, the label of Brahm's project – Ibsen cycle – is in fact puzzling and intriguing. What is an Ibsen cycle? And what happens when a cyclic pattern is applied on Ibsen's works? Secondly, one gets the impression that Brahm was the only one who mounted an Ibsen cycle. His cycle was the most prominent, it had the biggest scope and received far more critical and public attention than any other, but it wasn't the only one. He was not the first, he was not the last. There was a strong tradition of Ibsen cycles in German theatre in the period before World War II.

What is a cycle? The Oxford Dictionary gives three definitions of the noun "cycle". According to the second of these, which is the one relevant to our subject, a cycle is "a series of songs, stories, plays, or poems composed around a particular theme, and usually intended to be performed or read in sequence" (<http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/cycle>). Wagner's *Ring Cycle* is stated as an example. There is, however, a striking difference between Wagner's *Ring Cycle* and Brahm's Ibsen cycle. Wagner's *Ring of the Nibelung* was created as a cycle, consisting of a trilogy and a prelude. Ibsen did not create a drama cycle – or did he? I would claim that he didn't, although there is a strong tradition within Ibsen scholarship to interpret and depict – in monographic form – Ibsen's collected works as constituting a cycle. Brahm's Ibsen cycle shows that this holistic approach to Ibsen's works had an early equivalent also inside the theatrical world.

I believe that Ibsen himself, to a large degree, contributed to the making of this image of the consistency and coherence of his own works. When in 1898 the Gyldendal Publishing House in Copenhagen issued the first volume of Ibsen's collected works, a preface by Ibsen was printed with the heading "To the readers". "Only by grasping and comprehending my entire production as a continuous and coherent whole will the reader be able to receive the precise impression I sought to convey in the individual parts of it" (Ibsen, 1965, 330). This citation is often taken at face value, as if establishing an authoritative norm we have to follow when approaching Ibsen's works. In my opinion the citation has to be interpreted within its context and judged critically. The citation is a clever kind of advertisement, disguised as a friendly appeal to his readers. You are now about to read the first volume of my collected works. Purchase and read all the following volumes as well!

This may seem like a banalised interpretation of Ibsen's sentence. But the fact is simple. Ibsen's works were not created as a cycle. They may be – for one reason or another – construed as a cycle in the Oxford Dictionary sense, but in essence they do not constitute a cycle.

Why did Brahm, then, mount Ibsen's plays as a performance cycle? Three factors seem to have been decisive. 1) The tautological explanation: He really did perceive Ibsen's works as a continuous whole. 2) Ibsen was a lodestar for Brahm in all theatrical endeavors, in which he was involved. 3) Ibsen's plays engaged audiences. Let me elaborate on these three points.

Brahm's holistic interpretation of Ibsen's works

Brahm was a great admirer of Ibsen during his whole professional career and, in a German context, there was no one who promoted Ibsen's authorship as strongly and persistently as him. In the 1880s, Brahm worked as a literary critic in Berlin. Already in 1886, in Brahm's first major essay on Ibsen, it is obvious that Brahm applied a holistic approach to Ibsen's works. He pointed out that Ibsen's plays were characterized by an "abundance of interlocking issues". Ibsen strives for a "complete description of reality". Parallel to the basic theme of his works run other themes, which set "new motifs". And whenever a motif is "unable to find its complete expression in a work, it is taken up again in the next: connecting threads are thus running from *The League of Youth* to *A Doll's House*, and from *A Doll's House* to *Ghosts*" (Brahm, 1886, 212).*

At this point, in 1886, no new Ibsen play had been staged at any German theatre for five years. Brahm saw in Ibsen a great potential to stimulate and revitalize German theatre, and in the 1886 essay he complains that no one has redeemed the duty of "introducing a full audience coherently to the train of [Ibsen's] thoughts and making German theatregoers ready for Ibsen through a presentation of his modern plays, from *The League of Youth* onwards" (Brahm, 1886, 219-220). Brahm, here in fact, submits a claim which he himself complies with twenty-two years later. If Ibsen's life and works are so coherent and consistent as many claim, Brahm's life and works seem even more coherent.

But note that Brahm here mentions the plays from *The League of Youth* onwards. Altogether, Ibsen wrote 26 plays. His thirteen contemporary plays from *The League of Youth* to *When We Dead Awaken* make up only half of them. Thus, Brahm's Ibsen cycle in fact didn't present Ibsen from A to Z, but Ibsen from M to Z. Brahm's spotting of the "connecting threads" among Ibsen's works, in his essay from 1886, is made valid with the same reservation. The holistic approach to Ibsen's collected works seems to presuppose exclusion of what doesn't fit in: the first half of his authorship.

Ibsen as Brahm's lodestar

In 1889 Brahm became the head of the theatre society Freie Bühne in Berlin. Up until his death in 1912 he was a key figure in German theatre and he was pivotal in the modern breakthrough on the German stage. In a retrospective glance in 1909, Brahm characterized the founding of the Freie Bühne as a "German theatre revolution" evolving out of Ibsen's "revolution of the human spirit". Ibsen was the

“progenitor” of the Freie Bühne movement, claims Brahm (Brahm, 1915, 462), and the decisive revolutionary moment was Freie Bühne’s inaugural performance of *Ghosts* in 1889.

The Freie Bühne was the set-out, but Brahm didn’t have a company at his disposal during his five years as head of the Freie Bühne. It wasn’t until 1894, when Brahm was appointed the theatre director of the Deutsches Theater in Berlin, that he could carry out his modern reform of German theatre in a systematic manner. And it eventually became clear that this very reform revolved around the works of Ibsen. During Brahm’s ten years at the Deutsches Theater he had four playwright lodestars: Ibsen, Gerhart Hauptmann, Arthur Schnitzler and Georg Hirschfeld, all four firmly rooted in naturalism. During his subsequent eight years as the theatre director of the Lessing-Theater in Berlin, three of them still prevailed as Brahm’s lodestars: Ibsen, Hauptmann and Schnitzler. The following figures are telling. From 1904 to 1912 Brahm presented 704 Hauptmann performances (nineteen plays), 635 Ibsen performances (thirteen plays) and 144 Schnitzler performances (eight plays) at the Lessing-Theater (Buth, 1965, 19).

Ibsen as a box office playwright

A survey of Brahm’s repertoire during his directorship at the Deutsches Theater and the Lessing-Theater tells us one thing. He was very one-sided. Compared to Duke Georg II and his Meininger company before him and Max Reinhardt after him, he was conspicuously negative towards the classics. In eight years at the Lessing-Theater, he presented only one single classic play: Schiller’s *Demetrius*.

This, however, despite what we would expect from a contemporary perspective, did not imply low box office incomes. Today, a theatre presenting a repertoire of exclusively contemporary plays, at least in Norway, would be in need of a full subsidy. But the Lessing-Theater in Berlin was a private theatre without subsidies. Brahm was wholly dependent on box office income. Ibsen was by no means a playwright Brahm put on only to get intellectual credibility. Many of his Ibsen productions were box office successes. Among the twelve most frequently performed plays at the Lessing-Theater during Brahm’s management, three Ibsen plays are featured: *Pillars of Society* with 94 performances, *Hedda Gabler* with 83 performances and *Rosmersholm* with 81 performances (Claus, 1981, 120).

The tradition of Ibsen cycles in German-speaking theatres

By who, when and where was the first Ibsen cycle presented? What sort of tradition was it? But first of all, what is at the core of the phenomenon? When Ibsen’s plays are strung together in a cycle, a connection is established which transcends the perspective of the individual play. In itself, this represents a break of the normal seasonal planning procedure in the theatre industry. A company selects a series of dramatic texts, divides them evenly across the season and runs the season accordingly. If theatre cycles break this pattern, the single-work focus is transgressed.

It’s not every playwright’s privilege to get their plays put together in theatre cycles. Ibsen is part of a distinguished, exclusive group. In my research of German-speaking theatre I’ve only come across Shakespeare, Schiller, Wagner and Mozart

cycles. There is obviously a strong element of recognition and acknowledgement in this. If your plays are put together in a cycle, you are a top-ranking playwright. If you're not in the lead, you won't come into question. This is condition no. 1. But secondly, your works need to be "cycl-able". I haven't come across any Bjørnson cycles. His authorship was, seemingly, too incoherent and disjointed. He wasn't cycl-able.

As far as I have been able to track, the very first Ibsen cycle was presented at the Schänzli-Theater in Bern in Switzerland in 1889. Six "Ibsen Evenings" were given of three Ibsen plays: *A Doll's House*, *Rosmersholm*, and *The Lady from the Sea*. I've found a total of 21 similar Ibsen cycles.

- 1) Schänzli-Theater (six Ibsen Evenings), Bern, 3 plays, June-August 1889
- 2) Königliches Hoftheater in Stuttgart, 6 plays, May 1897
- 3) Leipziger Stadttheater (Ibsen Evenings), Leipzig, 5 plays, June and July 1905
- 4) Neues Deutsches Theater, Prague, 7 plays, March-April 1908
- 5) Lessing-Theater, Berlin, 13 plays, January-March 1909
- 6) Lessing-Theater, Berlin, 13 plays, March-May 1909
- 7) Johann Strauß-Theater, Vienna (guest performances by the Lessing-Theater), 13 plays, May-June 1909
- 8) Lessing-Theater, Berlin, 13 plays, April-May 1910
- 9) Königliches Hoftheater in Stuttgart, 10 plays, season 1910/11
- 10) Bremer Schauspielhaus, Bremen, 10 plays, September 1910-April 1912
- 11) Lessing-Theater, Berlin, 13 plays, November 1911
- 12) Königliches Hoftheater in Stuttgart, 12 plays, season 1911/12
- 13) Lessing-Theater, Berlin, 13 plays, February 1912
- 14) Großherzogliches Hoftheater Darmstadt, 4 plays, March-April 1913
- 15) Großherzogliches Hoftheater Darmstadt, 4 plays, February-March 1914
- 16) Altonaer Stadttheater, Hamburg, 8 plays, January-April 1915
- 17) Großherzogliches Hoftheater Darmstadt, 8 plays, January-March 1916
- 18) Altonaer Stadttheater, Hamburg, 8 plays, April-May 1918
- 19) Altonaer Stadttheater, Hamburg, 8 plays, April-May 1918
- 20) Altonaer Stadttheater, Hamburg, 8 plays, September-November 1918
- 21) Altonaer Stadttheater, Hamburg, 8 plays, November-December 1918

More Ibsen cycles are in the process of being uncovered. The above list is presumably just the tip of the iceberg.

Otto Brahm's Ibsen cycle

Now let's look into the details of Brahm's Ibsen cycle. The thirteen plays were given in the following order:

- 1) *The League of Youth*, 22 January
- 2) *The Pillars of Society*, 25 January
- 3) *A Doll's House*, 29 January
- 4) *Ghosts*, 1 February
- 5) *An Enemy of the People*, 5 February
- 6) *The Wild Duck*, 8 February

- 7) *Rosmersholm*, 12 February
- 8) *The Lady from the Sea*, 15 February
- 9) *The Master Builder*, 17 February
- 10) *Hedda Gabler*, 19 February
- 11) *Little Eyolf*, 24 February
- 12) *John Gabriel Borkman*, 26 February
- 13) *When We Dead Awaken*, 1 March

All plays had been performed at the Lessing-Theater prior to the cycle. Two of the productions, *The League of Youth* and *A Doll's House*, were called “Neueinstudierungen” (new productions), but in fact a couple of changes in the cast was what it all boiled down to. The plays were by no means given a directorial make-over. The complete Ibsen cycle was in fact a large-scale recycling of well-known material. The compilation of the thirteen plays and the cumulative effect of presenting them consecutively in chronological sequence was the whole point. Werner Buth, in his monography about the Lessing-Theater, confirms this:

The mise-en-scène of the individual performances was not fundamentally reworked for the cycle. They appeared in the well-known concept of the previous repertory performances. However, the cycle conveyed an impression of the coherence of Ibsen's individual works in a previously unknown manner. The re-emergence and merging of motifs and themes in Ibsen's dramas was evident and promoted the understanding of the poet's work. But the exegetical tendency of the cycle could only do its work persuasively through the chronological sequence of the plays (Buth, 1965, 65-66).

The chronological sequence was, however, not absolutely correct. In Brahm's cycle, *Hedda Gabler* and *The Master Builder* switched places. Why? Brahm wanted to let *The Master Builder* follow *The Lady from the Sea* because the character Hilde Wangel connects the two plays (Buth, 1965, 65). In a sense this was a logical move. It illustrates that Brahm's basic focus really was the “connecting threads”. The theatre audience was introduced to Hilde Wangel in *The Lady from the Sea*. She re-emerges in *The Master Builder*. Brahm wanted to let the audiences know what became of the character. *The Master Builder* is the answer to that question. But Hilde Wangel is not the only character to appear in more than one play. What about Aslaksen in *The League of Youth* who re-emerges in *An Enemy of the People*? Why didn't Brahm let the latter play follow the former? Brahm was inconsistent. There was an element of arbitrariness in Brahm's set-up. He is neither re-producing the real chronology of Ibsen's plays, nor presenting the plays consistently in accordance with his own focus on the “connecting threads”.

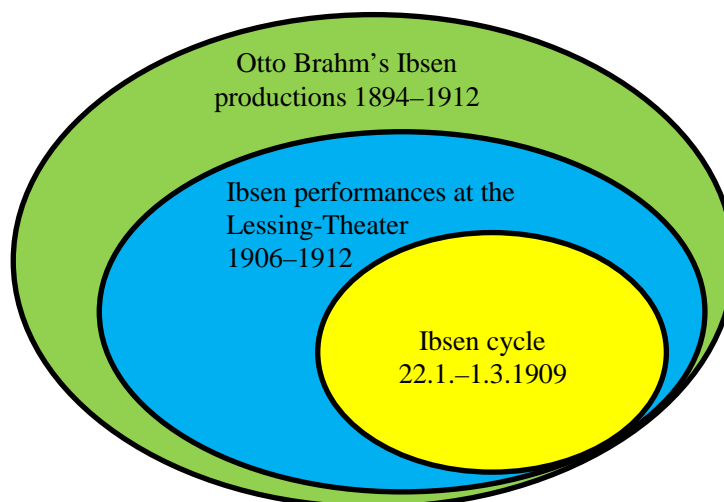
The critical reception of Otto Brahm's Ibsen cycle

To survey the critical reception of Brahm's Ibsen cycle in its entirety is, in fact, not easy. As a media event the cycle was of a somewhat elusive nature. If you look at the playbills from the theatre, the matter is clear and simple. The cycle opens on 29

January and ends on 1 March 1909. But the cycle had been planned for many years. When Ibsen died in May 1906, Brahm picked up his own, twenty year old idea of presenting Ibsen's contemporary plays in a row. However, a typical sign of Brahm's thoroughness was that he didn't launch an Ibsen cycle the following season. Instead he planned the cycle carefully. At the same time, he wanted to prepare the public. Hence, the Ibsen cycle was announced in the theatre columns of the *Vossische Zeitung* in Berlin on 22 August 1906 (Buth, 1965, 39), t.i. two and a half years before it actually took place. What did Brahm and his theatre do in the meantime? They performed Ibsen's plays! Brahm systematically revived all the thirteen plays. Out of the thirteen plays constituting the cycle, eleven were presented as new productions in the planning phase.

Because of this media strategy, theatre critics started identifying productions as part of the cycle before the cycle had actually materialized. The production of *Hedda Gabler* on 14 September 1906 marks the beginning (cf. Buth, 1965, 39). A review of *John Gabriel Borkman* in the *Berliner Börsen-Zeitung* on 2 February 1908 opens thus: "In the sequence of his Ibsen cycle, the director Otto Brahm has now arrived at *John Gabriel Borkman* which was performed in his Lessing-Theater yesterday with great success."

On 16 January 1909, six days before the inaugural performance of the Ibsen cycle, the Lessing-Theater provided the press with a set-up of previously given Ibsen performances. In fact, this announcement was misleading. It pretends to give an account of how many Ibsen performances had been given at the Lessing-Theater, but in fact includes Ibsen performances given by Brahm at both the Deutsches Theater and at the Lessing-Theater. This proves beyond doubt that the Ibsen cycle was Brahm's "baby" more than it was a Lessing-Theater project, a fact, however, which has already been established. But this had consequences for the critical reception of the cycle. The reception documents I have looked into, around forty theatre reviews and a fair amount of book references, differ in regard to what constitutes the object of criticism. Some documents are theatre critics of one or more of the thirteen performances constituting the cycle (yellow ellipse in figure below), some are theatre critics of Ibsen performances prior to the cycle, but which explicitly relate to the coming cycle and some confuse the matter entirely by implying that the cycle was already up and running before it had been started (blue ellipse). A third group of documents relates to the Ibsen cycle within the context of all the Ibsen productions Brahm was responsible for during his whole career as a theatre director (green ellipse).



I haven't found any Berlin theatre critic who reviewed all the thirteen performances constituting the cycle. Standard procedure in newspapers was – and still is – to engage critics to attend the opening night of a production. Since eleven of the productions in the Ibsen cycle had their opening nights prior to the cycle, they had already been reviewed. In fact the reviews of the Viennese critic Alfred Polgar is the only example of a collection of criticisms of all thirteen performances, not of the original Berlin performances, but of the guest performances in Vienna during May and June 1909 (Polgar, 1910).

Bearing these reservations and qualifications in mind, how could the critical reception of Brahm's Ibsen cycle be summarized? I've made two general observations. Firstly, the majority of the critics are favourable, some were even loaded with praise. If we judge this fact in the light of posterity, this may come as a bit of a surprise. In 1909, Brahm was considered a yesterday's man. In the arena of public opinion Max Reinhardt had outmanoeuvred Brahm long ago as the new leading director in German theatre. Brahm was closely linked to Naturalism which represented a thing of the past. Twenty years after the Freie Bühne revolution, Brahm had turned into a "conservator of a passed era" (Buth, 1965, 178). However, in light of the critical acclaim and public interest in which Brahm's Ibsen cycle was received, we may need to reconsider these viewpoints.

My second observation – and let this be my conclusion – is that as good as none of the critics judge Brahm's cycle concept critically. They "buy" the concept as a way of structuring a series of performances. The cycle concept as such is not refuted by anyone. Many of the critics recognize the cycle as a summing-up, a monument or even a "coronation" (Kerr, 1908, 3) of Brahm's Ibsen achievements. But the cyclic take on Ibsen's works remains an assertion which is neither confirmed nor rejected. As a media event, the cycle was a highly successful catwalk showcasing the emperor's new clothes. In essence, nothing new was presented, but the wrapping was impressive and irresistible.

* All translations of German quotations are mine [JMH].

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Biographical note

Jens-Morten Hanssen is a Ph.D. candidate at the Centre for Ibsen Studies, Department of Linguistics and Scandinavian Studies at the University of Oslo.

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E-mail address: j.m.hanssen@ibsen.uio.no

Summary

In 1909, an Ibsen cycle comprising all of Ibsen's thirteen contemporary dramas, from *The League of Youth* to *When We Dead Awaken*, was presented at the Lessing-Theater in Berlin. The plays were performed consecutively, in chronological order, in the course of six weeks. The cycle was theatre director Otto Brahm's grand summing-up of his enduring efforts of promoting Ibsen and his works in Germany. The paper examines this performance cycle from different angles. Why did Brahm present the plays as a cycle? What happens when a cyclic pattern is applied on Ibsen's works?

Research has revealed a great number of Ibsen cycles in German-speaking theatres in the period before World War II. Brahm's Ibsen cycle was the most prominent, but not by far the only of its kind. The paper points out how thoroughly Brahm planned the cycle, his clever media strategies and how he in the end designed the cycle as a monument of Ibsen and – not least – of his own achievements as the foremost German champion of Ibsen. How was the critical reception of the cycle? Measured both by audience response and critical reception, the cycle was a success. The cycle concept as such, however, was not judged critically. The cyclic take on Ibsen's works was neither confirmed nor rejected.

Keywords

Henrik Ibsen, Otto Brahm, German theatre, performance cycle.