

# IBSEN, BJØRNSEN AND THE ART OF ACTING

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## Introduction

The intention with this article is to describe how Henrik Ibsen and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson contributed to the development of a modern acting style in Norway. The study is a part of my on-going theatre historical project aiming at giving a general presentation of the Ibsen tradition in Norwegian theatre.

The preconditions and basis for development of Norwegian theatre lies in Danish theatre, as this was represented in Norway approx. 1830-50, through Danish touring companies and the Danish theatre in Christiania. In addition, the activities within the Norwegian dramatic societies can also be seen as an important precondition for the later theatre development in Norway. However, the amateur based theatre activities within the dramatic societies, which flourished in Norwegian cities from the 1780s, did in general come to a stop around 1830. The dramatic societies then started letting their theatre buildings to touring theatre companies, mainly Danish. The dramatic societies were important for the establishing of a public sphere around theatre. But when it comes to development of professional acting, it is difficult to see that there should have been any substantial line of connection from the amateur activities in the dramatic societies to the emergence of professional Norwegian acting in the 1850s (Ansteinsson, 1956; Anker, 1968; Broch, 1994).

Danish theatre in Norway before 1850, especially the activities at Christiania Theatre, is well documented (Blanc, 1899; Anker 1956, 1968; Schmiesing, 2006 et al.). The documentation, however, consists mainly in registrations of when things happened, what was performed and who performed. There are few substantial descriptions of performances by Danish actors from before 1850 in Norway. We know that the stage language was elaborated Danish. But we have very little specific knowledge about the actors' performances, their use of voice and behaviour on stage and the spectators' perception of this.

From around 1830, newspaper reviews of performances at Christiania Theatre appeared occasionally. But the reviewers seldom wrote particularly about the performance and the actors. Typically, the reviewer gave an account of the content of the play, its literary value and meaning according to him. If the performance and the actors are mentioned, this was often in a few sentences at the end of the review, where it was stated whether the actors performed good or bad.

The national opposition against Christiania Theatre grew stronger in the 1840s. And this seems to have led to something like a boycott of the theatre in the newspapers, where only few and brief reviews of the theatre's performances from this period can be found.

It may therefore be necessary to use Danish theatre historical sources for a description of Danish acting in the romantic period, and to transfer this to Danish acting in Norway in the same period.

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<sup>1</sup> Norwegian newspapers (published in Christiania) previous to 1850: *Norske Intelligenssedler* (1763-1891), *Morgenbladet* (1819-), *Den Constitutionelle* (1836-47), *Christiania-Posten* (1848-56).

### Danish romantic acting

Danish theatre had a “golden age” in the romantic period from around 1810 and until the 1850s. From this period a rich material in form of drawings, theatre protocols, theoretical and critical writings, memoirs etc. is handed down. And taken together with later studies, is it possible to get a fairly good picture of Danish romantic theatre. .

Within the field of professional acting in Danish theatre during the romantic era, different traditions and trends can be distinguished:

- 1) A local tradition of comic acting had developed during the 18<sup>th</sup> century related to Ludvig Holberg’s comedies (and inspired by classical French comedy). In the romantic era Holberg was treated with respect and the comic acting tradition taken care of (Borg, 1984; Kvam 1992-93).
- 2) A new and specific romantic trend in acting can be related to the development of a Nordic and national romantic tragedy, with Adam Oehlenschläger as the most important dramatist. Here, a renewal of the traditional pathos oriented declamatory acting style took place.
- 3) As a third trend, a new contemporary way of acting developed through the then very popular contemporary French and Danish comedies and vaudevilles; with Scribe, Heiberg and Hertz as central dramatists.

During the romanticism a process of transformation from a classical declamatory acting style towards a modern, individualised and psychological way of acting began. An epoch making contributor to the development of the romantic acting style was Johan Christian Ryge (1780-1842), generally named Dr. Ryge because of his background as a medical doctor before turning to the theatre. He had his debut in 1812, at the age of 32, at The Royal Theatre in Copenhagen in the main role of Oehlenschläger’s *Palnatøke*. This performance is often considered the breakthrough of a Nordic romantic acting style (Overskou, 1854-76, 280ff.; Kvam, 1992-93, 200ff.).

Several contemporary critics and colleagues have given substantial accounts of Ryge’s Nordic romantic acting style. For example the writer and critic Jens Baggesen who describes Dr Ryge thus: “Power – a special devastating power – is the characteristic of this actor, his unique style is the grandiose” (Agerholm, 1913, 36). Also the choreographer August Bournonville, who in his youth performed with Dr. Ryge has described the Nordic power of his acting: “His words sounded like sword blows on copper shields, pushing themselves forward into the soul like runes on boulders. His voice toned like a shrilling lure through the breaking waves of the North Sea” (Ibid.). With his pathos-filled declamatory power, Dr. Ryge appeared to his contemporaries as the very incarnation of the Nordic romantic hero – and generally of the Nordic spirit (Agerholm, 1913; Mantzius, 1922, 53-56). And as such, he came to be the model and ideal for several younger and succeeding actors. In accordance with romantic ideals, Ryge’s acting had a strong, but not a sole, element of identification with the role. He started out as an intuitive and inspirational

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<sup>2</sup> This and all following quotations from Danish and Norwegian are translated by me (Hyldig).

actor. Later he developed to be a more technical actor, in accordance with the general development of romantic and realistic character acting during the romanticism period.

Inspired by Dr. Ryge a new Nordic style of declamatory acting developed. In the 1840s Michael Wiehe (1820-1864) can be considered a successor of Dr. Ryge's romantic heroism at the Royal Theatre. And the Danish actor Christian Jørgensen (1812-69) at Christiania Theatre was also a pupil and successor of Dr. Ryge. During his long-lasting engagement at Christiania Theatre from 1831 to 1863, Jørgensen was a prominent executant of a Danish romantic acting style in Norway, and he came to function as example, teacher and director for several younger Danish *and* Norwegian actors. Jørgensen was an important transitional figure between Danish and Norwegian acting and also between a classical-romantic declamatory style and a modern acting style, emphasising realistic and psychological characterisation.<sup>3</sup> However there are few substantial descriptions of his performances.

A new and gradually more important element in the Danish romantic theatre was the French or French inspired contemporary comedy and vaudeville,<sup>4</sup> with Eugene Scribe as one of the most performed and popular dramatists. These new contemporary bourgeois genres offered opportunities for a new way of acting, by many contemporaries considered more "natural" and closer to human reality than what was seen and expected in the stereotypical acting in the classical comedy and the idealised, larger than life characters of the (Nordic and classical) tragedy.

The leading exponent of this new acting style was the legendary actress Johanne Luise Heiberg (1812-1890). She developed a vivid acting style with a quick and elegant diction resembling the contemporary bourgeois conversational tone. This new kind of acting was an expression of the intensified interest in human individuality during romanticism. The actress's performance was focussed on expression of shifting moods and feelings by means of bodily expression, gestures and modulation of the voice. This new way of acting, was in 1842, denominated by her husband, the theatre aesthician Johan Ludvig Heiberg (1791-1860) as "the interesting character" (Heiberg, 1861, 384-85). In her comprehensive autobiography from 1891, Mrs. Heiberg underlines the importance of the French contemporary comedy for the development of a new conversational tone in the theatre:

The quickness by which one in the French conversational drama has to let the smile play in the tears and then again the tears in the smile, therein exists the ability to perform this kind of comedies, if not the performance shall become dry. Have one only the smile, then the performance becomes flat, have one only the tears, then it becomes heavy and monotone. It is the unification of both, that brings forth a living image... [...] Our actors were not used to perform in this light genre. They had difficulties letting the words run so quick over the lips, and all the same in this quickness to characterise sharp, clear and distinct. They were not trained in this tossing of piquant remarks, their tone of

<sup>3</sup> General presentations of Christian Jørgensen as actor can be found in Bricka vol. IX, 1887-1905, 29-30; Rudler, 1961, 664ff. and Jensson, 1981, 89.

<sup>4</sup> For a presentation and discussion of Eugene Scribes plays and their importance for the development of Danish theatre, see Aschengreen, 1969.

conversation still had train and wigs from the time of the old German comedies, and as I have said, I believe that during the years I have helped them on the track by means of my own performance. (Heiberg, 1973, vol. 1, 186-87)<sup>5</sup>

Mrs. Heiberg's acting was neither based on stereotypes nor exterior imitation, as it often was in traditional comic acting. She developed her roles out of an inner (ideal) image of the character to be performed.<sup>6</sup> This kind of interior foundation in the performance of roles can be considered a forerunner of psychological realism, as it later was developed on the basis of Ibsen's contemporary plays, and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was codified as an acting method by Konstantin Stanislavskij. His central idea of "subtext" or inner line in the actor's performance can thus be led back to an acting trend within the romantic theatre.

It is not possible here to go into further detail of a description of Danish romantic acting. What is important for me is to have sketched up some main features of Danish romantic acting and to maintain the parallel between the acting styles at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen to the one among professional Danish actors in Norway before 1863. Many of the Danish actors in Norway – as for example the aforementioned Christian Jørgensen, had been pupils at and had their debuts at the Royal Theatre; several were familiar and in other ways related to actors in Denmark. During the 1830s there were several guest performances from the Royal Theatre at Christiania Theatre, among others by Dr. Ryge, Mrs Heiberg, C.N. Rosenkilde and other prominent actors. Thus, there was a large surface of contact between Christiania Theatre and the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen.

I will now move on to a description of Ibsen's and Bjørnson's views on acting, as this can be extracted from their critical writing on theatre.

### **Ibsen's view on acting**

In the beginning of the 1850s Henrik Ibsen and, four years later, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson established themselves as dramatists, theatre critics and directors.

In 1852 Ibsen was engaged as "theatre poet" and a year later as stage director at the first national theatre enterprise in Norway: The Norwegian Theatre (Det norske Theater) in Bergen. Here he stayed until 1857 when he returned to Christiania to become artistic director at Kristiania Norwegian Theatre (Kristiania norske

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<sup>5</sup> "Den hurtighed, hvormed man i de franske konversationsstykker må lade smilet spille i tårerne og tårerne atter i smilet, i den består egentlig evnen til at udføre denne art af komedier, ifald spillet ikke skal blive tørt. Har man blot smilet, da bliver fremstillingen flad, har man blot tårerne, da bliver den tung og monoton. Det er foreningen af begge, der frembringer et levende billede... [...]Vore skuespillere var ikke vant til at spille i denne lette genre. De havde ondt ved ved at lade ordene løbe, så hurtigt over læberne og dog i denne hurtighed nuancere skarpt, klart og bestemt. De var ikke øvede i denne henkasten af pikante replikker; deres konversationsstone havde endnu slæb og paryk på fra de gamle tyske komediers tid, og jeg bilder mig som sagt ind, at jeg mer og mere i årenes løb her hjalp dem på gled ved mine fremstillinger."

<sup>6</sup> There exists several biographies and other scholarly publications about Johanne Luise Heiberg, see for example Mantzius, 1922, 76; Aschengreen, 1961; Krogh & Christiansen, 1967; Kvam 1992-93, 222-227.

Theater).<sup>7</sup> In 1857 Bjørnson succeeded Ibsen as theatre director at the theatre in Bergen, where he stayed until 1859.

Through their theatrical activities and co-work with the expanding group of Norwegian actors in Bergen and Christiania, Ibsen and Bjørnson can be considered founders of a Norwegian theatrical art. Both Ibsen and Bjørnson urged for a national dramatic art and were simultaneously occupied that Norwegian theatre should be developed in continuation with Danish and European traditions.

Bjørnson was obviously much more comfortable with the cultural atmosphere of the 1850s dominated by nationalism, than was the case for Ibsen. Early in the 1850s, when Bjørnson had moved to Christiania with the intention of studying at the university, he identified with the national movement. Soon, he appeared as a spokesman for nationalism and for cultural nation building projects. He considered the theatre an important arena for educating and developing a national identity. Repeatedly in his writing on theatre, he focused on its important role in the development of a national identity (Koht, 1912; Schmiesing, 2006).

Ibsen did not in the same enthusiastic way, as Bjørnson, identify with the national movement. For certain he was influenced by the national romanticism and engaged in development of Norwegian theatre. This is obvious from the plays he wrote, his theatre reviews and articles and his practice as theatre director in the 1850s. But it is also a fact that he became disappointed with the liberal and national movement in Norway, and as a result, turned away from a national viewpoint (Figueiredo, 2006, 212-221, 338-339).

An important example of Ibsen's writing on acting is an article from 1857 about the Danish actor Anton Wilhelm Wiehe (1826-1884), who was engaged at Christiania Theatre 1851-61. Here Ibsen is very explicit in his standpoint that Norwegian theatre should and could be developed in continuation of Danish acting traditions. Ibsen writes that Wiehe had come to Christiania

as an awakening example – and he has exercised an indisputable influence on the progress of our national theatre. He brought something new into the theatre and into awareness of our spectatorship. A youthful poetry laid strong and warm over his acting – a spiritual purity was revealed in his performance, a deep sense of holiness and meaning of art, an effort toward, not the harsh reality, but truth and a higher symbolic representation of life, as the only thing worth fighting for in the realm of art, as it is recognised only of the few. (HIS vol. 16, 163-64)

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<sup>7</sup> The Norwegian Theatre in Bergen and Ibsen's engagement here 1852-57 is described by several theatre historians; see for example Blanc, 1884; Kroepelien, 2006; Gjervan, 1998, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> "Anton Wilhelm Wiehe", *Illustreret Nyhedsblad*, 13. December 1857, no. 50. Here quoted and translated from *Henrik Ibsens skrifter* (HIS): "Han kom som et vækkende Exempel – og derfor har Wiehe øvet en ubestridelig Indflydelse paa vor nationale Scenes Fremgang, Han bragte noget Nyt med sig ind i Theatret og ind i Publikum's Bevidsthed, al Ungdommens Poesi laa stærk og varm over hans Spil, - der aabenbarede sig i hans Præstationer en sjælelig reenhed, en dyb Følelse af Kunstens Hellighed og Betydning, en beandtet Stæben, ikke efter den krasse Virkelighed, en efter Sandhed, efter hiin høiere symbolske Gjengivelse af Livet, hiin Eneste, der i Kunstens Verden virkelig fortjener at kjæmpes for og som dog kun erkjendes af saa Faa."

Ibsen considers Wiehe's artistic example of "incalculable value during a period of fumbling development, a period where germinating art seeks its examples and gladly turns to the representative of tradition if men of progress not were to be found" (Ibid.).

Through his appraisal of Wiehe's acting, Ibsen formulated an aesthetic of acting with romantic-idealistic features, when he writes that art and acting should be "a higher symbolic representation of life", and simultaneously regarded Wiehe's art as future oriented. Thus he also points towards a new (and modern) way of acting based on an individualised and interior comprehension of the character to be performed. Even if Ibsen expresses himself in terms of idealistic aesthetics when emphasising the importance of the poetic and symbolic, was realism, in the sense of likeness with life, also a fundamental element in his perception of the art of acting.

In the 1850s, Ibsen was a spokesman of realism in the art of acting. This can be read from his extensive review (in two parts) in the historical tragedy *Lord William Russell* by Andreas Munch at Christiania Theatre in 1857. These articles were published in the following weeks after the quoted article about Wiehe. Here Ibsen sets out a discussion of the modern historical tragedy along with a criticism of the classical tradition of performing tragedies, where it

has become usual to demand highness... [...] a feeling of being beyond the world of the everyday; but that is exactly what usually causes a failure of the effect; the world conjured by the poetry appears unfamiliar to the spectator, there is nothing that links us to the fighting and falling hero, and when he falls, he will also be without our sympathy. (Ibid., 166)<sup>9</sup>

Ibsen points to the importance of familiarity and sympathetic identification in the perception of acting, which is an essential element in the aesthetics of realism (in literature as in acting). Both in terms of dramaturgy and acting, Ibsen operates in this article with a distinction between surface (exterior) and depth (interiority). This dualistic principle can also be found as an important structural principle in Ibsen's later plays, in the story lines and the sceneries and formulations of the characters. Ibsen's viewpoint in the article, is that the symbolic (deeper) meaning of a plot or a character should appear as something additional to the exterior realistic representation – as something subtle or secret beyond the realistic representation, "like the silver vein in the mountain", as he explains it in his article with a poetic metaphor. Thus the symbolic is something for the spectator to experience, if he is capable of experiencing it and not only takes the realistic surface into account (Ibid., 167).

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<sup>9</sup> "«Lord William Russel» og dets Udførelse på Christiania Theater", *Illustreret Nyhedsblad*, 20. and 27. December 1857, no. 51 and 52. Here quoted and translated from HIS vol. 16, 166: "Det er blevet sædvanligt at fordre af denne en Høihed, en Lutrelse hos de handlende Personer, en Storhed i Tanke og Udtryk, i Villie og Handling, som skal erstatte, hvad Grækernes Kothurner tilsigtede, en Følelse af, at vi befinde os udenfor Dagligverdenens Omraade; men netop herved forfeiles Virkningen somoftest, den gennem Digtningen fremmanede Verden staar fremmed for Tilskueren, der er intet Baand, som knytter os til den kjæmpende og faldende Helt, og derfor falder han ogsaa uden Deeltagelse fra vor Side."

In the article, Ibsen also analyses several actor examples (mainly Danish actors) from the performance at Christiania Theatre of *Lord William Russell*. In this, Ibsen clarifies his view on how the symbolic and the realistic should be dealt with by the actors. Previously in the article, he has written about the possible symbolic meaning of historical or fictional characters. In his assessment of the acting, he does not use the concept of symbol directly. Instead he writes that the character should not be performed “in its abstract generality”, but with an “infinity of nuances depending on situation and surroundings” (Ibid., 173), which means as realistic as possible.<sup>10</sup> In this context, Ibsen’s use of the concepts of “the symbolic” and “abstract generality” seems to be two sides of the same thing, as the symbolic is an expression of generality or universality, and as such an additional meaning to the realistic and individual phenomenon. The abstract and general meaning of a character is according to Ibsen, not a task for the actor to expose consciously in his performance. The abstract and/or symbolic meaning is something up to the spectator to experience.

Later, in the 1870s and 80s, in some few letters to directors and actors, Ibsen did give advice concerning the staging and acting of his plays. His general viewpoint then was that the performance should appear as a life-like representation, and that the characters should appear as real human beings in the present time. But this does not exclude the simultaneous importance of the symbolic, which according to Ibsen the performing actors not should care about.

In my opinion, the romantic-idealistic viewpoints on art and acting by Ibsen underwent a transformation and reappeared in psychological and symbolic motives in the contemporary plays. The strange intermingling of psychology and symbolism in Ibsen’s contemporary plays was experienced as hard challenges by the actors of the first performances.<sup>11</sup> Ibsen’s directions, given in letters and talks, were always that the symbolic meaning never should be consciously expressed by the actors. This should be something for the spectators to comprehend. Thus, Ibsen’s true contribution to the development of modern acting is his contemporary plays and the continued challenge the characters in these plays have been for actors.

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted and translated from HIS vol. 16, 173: ”Charakteren i dens abstrakte Almindelighed lykkes som oftest for den dygtige Skuespiller, men hvad der ligesaa ofte skorter paa er Karakterens Uendelighed af Afskygninger alt efter de Situationer og Omgivelser, hvorunder den momentant befinder sig.”

<sup>11</sup> For an elaboration on the question of Ibsen’s viewpoint on realism in the theatre, see for example Berg, 2001 or Hov, 2007. See also Ibsen’s letters to August Lindberg 2. August 1883, HIS vol. 14, 193-94, letter to Hans Schrøder 14. November 1884, HIS vol. 14, 280 and letter to Sophie Reimers 25. March 1887, HIS vol 14, 395.

This was for example described by the actress Octavia Sperati from the Bergen National Stage, who in 1885 played Gina Ekdal under the direction of Gunnar Heiberg. Sperati writes that Heiberg solved the mysterious enchantment that the play aroused, by demonstration that the characters should be performed unaware about their double life, i.e. unaware about their symbolic meaning. The characters should be captured and performed through natural and everyday activities. (Sperati, 1916, 106) Heiberg himself wrote in a letter, that he got ”an intoxicating understanding of, that the more realistic and the more natural we performed, the better would the symbolic and universal burst out and arch over the play as in life” (Nygaard, 1974, 145-46).

### **Bjørnson's view on acting**

Bjørnson wrote his first theatre reviews in January 1854 at the age of 22. All in all he has written more reviews and theatre articles than Ibsen. The main body of articles is from the years 1855-1859. In the 1860s, he wrote some articles with point of departure in his own productions at Christiania Theatre and some political-polemical theatre articles. Also in his extensive correspondence several passages about theatre and acting can be found. Compared to Ibsen, Bjørnson was more direct, maybe more spontaneous, in his critical writing on actors and acting. And through his reviews, articles and letters, he can be said to have functioned as an artistic advisor to the actors.

Bjørnson's earliest reviews and articles on theatre were polemic and critical to the Danish artistic leadership and actors at Christiania Theatre. He criticised the theatre for putting the young Norwegian actors in the shadow of the Danes and for not giving them adequate opportunities to develop as actors.<sup>12</sup>

Bjørnson's early theatre criticism reveals limited knowledge of theories of aesthetics and acting. But he was strongly engaged in the development of a distinctive national style of acting, and he took it for granted that the Danish leadership and the Danish actors, as soon as possible, had to give way to Norwegians. Bjørnson developed quickly into a theatre critic who was able to give precise descriptions and advices to the actors. Through assessments and discussions of the actors' "role perceptions" he appeared as guide for them. Especially of Laura Svendsen (later Gundersen, 1832-98) of whom he had great expectations, but who often disappointed him, Bjørnson wrote several extensive and instructive reviews. One example is about her performance as Agnete in Hostrup's comedy *Drøm og Daad* (*Dream and Deed*), which premiered 14. May 1854. Here Bjørnson wrote:

Miss Svendsen's Agnete was, according to her role perception, clear and gracefully performed. In our mind however, her perception does seem a bit mistaken. As we recollect it, it is the passion and intense mental alterations of the Mediterranean, not the melancholic sickness and modest fearfulness for revealing her emotional life, typical for the Nordic woman, which here is called upon. The whole inner fight must therefore be more apparent. The transitions must be more un-reflected and violent and this must also be expressed in the<sub>13</sub> voice, which then becomes more cheeky and frisky. (Bjørnson, 1854)

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<sup>12</sup>"Et Brev", *Krydseren*, 1. March 1854, "Til Theaterdirektionen", *Christiania-Posten*, 5. Marts 1854", and "De norske Skuespillerinder", *Morgenbladet*, 25. March 1854. All referred from Bjørnson 1912, 51, 58-60, 63-68.

<sup>13</sup>"Jomfru Svendsens Agnete var, saadan som den engang var opfattet, klart og yndig gengivet. Men ogsaa hendes Opfattelse forekommer os en Smule fejlagtig, da vi erindre, at det er Sydlandets glødende Sværmeri og heftige Sindsovergange, ikke den nordiske Kvindes melankolske Sygelighed og blufærdige Banghed forat blotte sit Følelsesliv som her paakaldes. Hele den indre Kamp maa derfor foregaa mere synlig. Overgangene være mer ubetænkte og voldsomme og dette skal ogsaa meddele sig i Stemmen, som da bliver kjækkere og friskere..."

One sees that Bjørnson in his criticism advocates a realistic characterisation, which at that time already was and continued to be a basic norm in his view on acting. An important aspect of Bjørnson's idea of realistic acting is the way he explicitly relates it to cultural context and national identity. In the quoted example this concerns the difference between the passionate Mediterranean and the melancholic Nordic woman. Bjørnson established an early understanding of national characters as a basis for his understanding of realistic acting.

A search for expression of the typical Norwegian (or the typical national in general) was a main concern in Bjørnson's comprehension of realistic characterisation. Clear examples of this can be found in his reviews of new Norwegian plays in the 1850's at The Norwegian Theatre in Christiania. An example was his review of Nicolai Ramm Østgaard's *Fiskerhjemmet* (*The Fisherman's Home*) which premiered in March 1855.<sup>14</sup> Bjørnson was critical to what he in this performance along with other "Norwegian" performances perceived as stereotypical national characterisation. He describes how Norwegian men were performed as bragging and impudence, while the women often appeared emotional and weepy:

Being Norwegian is according to [this] formula synonymous with being a braggart or scoundrel. We haven't yet seen a Norwegian play pretending to offer national characters, without at least one burglary in it, and preferably an attempted or fulfilled murder... [...] One still has to imagine beside these, the peace-loving farmer, his average, calm and healthy way of thinking and<sup>15</sup> behaving, so deeply rooted in our national character. (Bjørnson, 1912, 70-71)

In his criticism, in his peasant tales and his general Norwegian-Scandinavian ideology expressed in articles and speeches, Bjørnson developed an imagination of the natural, average and healthy Norwegian farmer's identity, which he considered the basis for a modern Norwegian identity. This idea of national identity can also be said to be a basis of his understanding of acting and his contributions as theatre instructor to the development of acting within Norwegian theatre.

After having demonstrated himself as an unafraid and consequent national minded critic and writer of national historical plays like *Mellem Slagene* (*Between the Battles*) and *Halte Hulda* (*Lame Hulda*) and especially his peasant tale *Synnøve Solbakken*, Bjørnson got engaged as theatre director at the Norwegian Theatre in Bergen, as a successor to Ibsen (Blanc, 1884, 240). Through this engagement, which lasted from Dec. 1857 until the summer of 1859, he got opportunities to test his ideas in the practical direction of actors and Bjørnson was a very enthusiastic and engaged director (Wolf, 1898, 194ff.; Hoem, 2009, 154-56.164).

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<sup>14</sup>*Fiskerhjemmet*, reviewed in *Aftenbladet* 17. March 1855 and *Ervingen* reviewed in *Aftenbladet* 3. May 1855.

<sup>15</sup> "Det at være norsk er efter [denne] Opskrift snart ensbetydende med at være en Storskryder eller en Kjeltring. Vi har endnu ikke seet et norsk Stykke, som har givet sig ud for at fare med norske Folketegninger, uden at der idemindste er forekommet et Tyveri deri, og allerhelst et Mordattentat eller et virkeligt Drab...[...] Fremdeles maa man ved Siden af disse tænke sig den fredsæle Bonde, hans jevne rolige sunde Tænkesæt og Færd, som ligger dybt grundet paa vor Nationalkarakter..."

After having staged *Dronning Margaretha* and *Hakon Jarl* at the theatre in Bergen, Bjørnson wrote a suite of articles about the tragedies of Adam Oehlenschläger.<sup>16</sup> He writes about how he and the actors discovered how "Nordic" and close to a Norwegian feeling of language and identity the plays of the Danish dramatist are. Therefore he considered these plays of great advantage for the development of a Norwegian style of acting. However, according to Bjørnson the importance of national identity in performing "the higher drama"<sup>17</sup> has been overlooked:

In the comedy we can so to say by ourselves break with the Danish delivery, because the topics are found in life around us, which in itself will direct us. Different in the higher drama; here we stand without rules for national declamation and pathos. One has uncritically taken over the Danish rules, which in Norwegian mouths leads straight into affectation. (Bjørnson, 1912, 179)<sup>18</sup>

Thus he describes how the comic characterisation by itself will find its national form, because it is based on imitation of human types and characteristics known from everyday life around the actors (and spectators). In the higher drama however, a special artistic effort and education is required. And it was here Bjørnson saw his main task as director and coach for Norwegian actors. It was through a development of distinct national characteristics, in declamation, pathos and characterisation, that Norwegian theatre should mark its identity.

### **Ibsen, Bjørnson and the development of Norwegian acting**

Ibsen and Bjørnson were the two most outstanding theatre directors (and also important theatre critics) in Norway in the period 1852-1872.

As stage director (sceneinstruktør) 1852-57 at the theatre in Bergen Ibsen had to share the directorial tasks with Herman Laading, who simultaneously was engaged as director with responsibility for the implementation of reading rehearsals and individual instruction of the actors. According to Ibsen's contract of engagement, his responsibility was the staging, i.e. blockings, decor, lightening etc. (Gjervan, 2010, 56)

Later as artistic director from 1857-62, at Kristiania Norwegian Theatre, Ibsen again had to share the directorial tasks with another, the linguist Knud Knudsen who was engaged to guide the actors in Norwegian language and responsible for the reading rehearsal and to a certain extent individual instruction of the actors. Only when working with his own plays in Bergen and Christiania did Ibsen have

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<sup>16</sup> "Om Opførelsen af Oehlenschläger Tragødiier" I-IV, *Bergensposten*, 21. Jan.-15. Feb. 1859, here quoted from Bjørnson, 1912, 168-182.

<sup>17</sup> The influential aesthetician Johan Ludvig Heiberg also used "Det høiere drama" as a genre category, for example in "Dramaturgiske Skrifter II (1828)", *Prosaiske Skrifter* VII, 1861, p. 191 f.

<sup>18</sup> "I Lystspillet kan vi som af os selv bryde med de danske Overleveringer, fordi Emnerne maa hentes rundt omkring i Livet, der altsaa give Anvisning nok, men i de høiere Skuespill staar vi uden Regler for national Deklamation og Pathosbygning. Man optager da kritikløst de danske Regler, som i norsk Mund fører lige ind i Affektationen."

responsibility of both “role-instruction” and staging (Rudler, 1978, 246; Hov, 2007, 57).

Through his extensive work as stage director Ibsen must have gained much experience in visual stage arrangements. Occasionally he was recognised for his efforts, as for example the staging of *Hærmændene på Helgeland* (*The Vikings at Helgeland*) at Kristiania Norwegian Theatre in 1858, which was very positively received by the critics, especially the stage decor and arrangements (Gjervan, 1998, 43-44; Hov, 2007, 63-64). Ibsen can be seen as the one who introduced a modern form of staging and also established the basic standards for staging and visual arrangements within Norwegian theatre. This is a main viewpoint of Roderick Rudler in several of his articles about Ibsen’s practical theatre work (Rudler, 1967, 1973, 1978). However, when it comes to the development of acting, Rudler concludes that he probably had very little influence on it (Rudler, 1967, 87). Ibsen is known for having had a reserved attitude toward the actors when he was directing. However, he had a profound respect for them and regarded them as decisive creative contributors to the art of theatre (Rudler, 1978, 76; Hov, 2007, 48, 69).

Among these two, Bjørnson was the one that had the strongest immediate influence on Norwegian actors. He was engaged as artistic director at the theatre in Bergen 1857-59, at Christiania Theatre 1865-67 and at the “protest theatre” in the premises of the abandoned Kristiania Norwegian Theatre in Møllergaden 1870-72. Bjørnson’s contribution to Norwegian theatre and the development of acting is mentioned by several, but mostly in short and in panegyric terms (Wolf, 1898, 194ff.; Koht, 1912, XXXIII-XXV and LXIII-LXIV; Hoem, 2009, 357-58). However, to a large extent, Bjørnson’s practical theatre engagement has been overlooked within Norwegian theatre historiography, maybe because he has been over-shadowed by his many other important sides: the writer, the speaker, the politician and status as “pater patriae”. In the monography on the history of Christiania Theatre, Tharald Blanc does not write so much about Bjørnson, but is very explicit in the appraisal of his contribution as a director, especially from 1865 to 67, which according to him was

one of the most interesting periods in the history of our theatre, not only with regard to what was achieved in the excellent acting and choice of repertoire, but first of all in respect to the fundamental importance Bjørnson’s management had, at all times, for the Norwegian theatre. (Blanc, 1884, 194-95)

Within the later historical research of Norwegian theatre there has been much more attention to Ibsen than to Bjørnson. I find it probable that the increasing appreciation of Ibsen’s plays in theatre and literary scholarship in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has affected the attention of the theatre historical research in disfavour of Bjørnson’s contributions. The theatre and Ibsen scholar Roderick Rudler does however very clearly state that “after 1865 Bjørnson’s approach did win a complete victory over the stage, and he was the one to imprint the development of Norwegian acting” (Rudler, 1978, 88). The same is underlined by the theatre historian and Ibsen scholar Ellen K. Gjervan in her master thesis about Ibsen’s work as theatre director, when she concludes:

Bjørnson's acting directions came to be a foundation stone for Norwegian acting, which had serious consequences for Ibsen's plays. The Ibsen tradition in Norway, meaning the way his plays have been performed, has been carried out according to Bjørnson's acting directions. Consequently, the Ibsen tradition in Norway has actually been a Bjørnson tradition. (Gjervan, 1998, 99)

I think it is high time to uncover Bjørnson's fundamental impact on Norwegian acting during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and maybe also much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Both Ibsen and Bjørnson were preoccupied with developing modern realistic character acting in place of the traditional stereotypical acting style. But, as I have tried to argue, they differed in their approach to acting. Bjørnson's program was to develop a specific Norwegian acting style, representing typically Norwegian characteristics (and thus in danger of becoming stereotypical). Ibsen on the other hand, was a spokesman for a psychological and individualising way of acting. And an Ibsen-inspired acting style started to emerge in performances of Ibsen's contemporary plays during the 1880s and onwards. To begin with this appeared sporadic by individual actors. But then during the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century an Ibsen-inspired psychological realistic way of acting developed to be the general acting style among Norwegian actors.<sup>19</sup> But before this, in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the dominating acting style among Norwegian actors was a kind of national Realism, more inspired by Bjørnson than Ibsen. Here the actors through what was considered "natural" and realistic performances sought to represent common recognised national features and characteristics.

With this, I have reached the point where I actually wanted to start this article, namely to demonstrate through analysis of performances, that the acting style among Norwegian actors, to begin with, were influenced and regulated by principles implemented by Bjørnson rather than Ibsen. However, to find and define the beginning of Norwegian theatre tradition, it was necessary to go beyond, and examine what was behind or before the beginning. In this article, I have outlined what I, as theatre historian, consider an important contextual background for conducting closer analysis of Ibsen performances in the 1850s, 60s and after. That will be presented at another time and in another article.

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<sup>19</sup> See Hyldig 2000.

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#### **Summary**

In this article Henrik Ibsen's and Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson's contribution to the development of acting in Norwegian theatre are discussed within the background of Danish romantic acting. In the 1850s and -60s both were active as theatre critics, directors and dramatists. Both had a view on theatre and acting marked by a mixture of romantic and realistic ideas, and both urged for the development of Norwegian acting in continuation of Danish and European traditions. It was, however, Bjørnson, who to begin with, came to be most influential with regard to what direction the acting style, among the Norwegian actors, developed. Through his inspiration and efforts a specific national coloured way of acting developed and came to dominate Norwegian theatre at least until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The influence from Ibsen – and the development of a Norwegian Ibsen tradition – has first of all come from his contemporary plays. A specific Ibsenian (i.e. psychological realistic) acting style developed gradually from the 1880s and onwards, through the actors' work with the characters in Ibsen's contemporary plays.

**Keywords**

Romantic theatre, Danish theatre, Norwegian theatre, Johanne Luise Heiberg, Dr. Ryge, Henrik Ibsen, Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson