

THE GEOGRAPHY OF CONSCIOUSNESS IN IBSEN'S THEATRICAL PRACTICE

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I have directed seven productions of Ibsen's plays: all five plays in the series from *The Wild Duck* to *The Master Builder*, as well as the early play, *Love's Comedy*. (I staged *Hedda Gabler* twice.) In preparing to direct these plays, and in my research about Ibsen generally, I read a lot of criticism, but I found that much of it was not very helpful for my purposes as a director. There is an obvious reason for this, but I did not realize what it was for a long time. Or rather, I had not thought about it; I had not articulated it. Recently I have attempted to identify the source of my discontent. I believe it is this: no matter how bookish a director may be, no matter how faithful he tries to be to the text of a play, when he stands in the cockpit of a rehearsal he sees a different object than a person reading the text of a play. Even before he gets to rehearsal, as he visualizes a production in his mind he is imagining something that has no physical existence at all. He is conceiving of an object that is not an object, or not yet an object. Making a potential object into an actual object is the director's process. The director is a kind of performer, and his activity is a process of elimination, or winnowing. It is a matter of reducing an infinite number of potential realizations into just one actual realization, which is never exactly the same from one performance to the next, because actors never reproduce a given performance exactly. A friend in graduate school once remarked to me that directing is translating. A better term might be transforming, since one is changing a text, which is an object made out of written language, into an event, in which the language is spoken by actors onstage in time.

In this essay I would like to introduce some of the principles of a criticism that might be useful to those approaching Ibsen's plays in performance. The first principle, to which I have already alluded, is that a play in rehearsal is perceived not merely as a text, but also as a sensory object involving actors speaking language; the second principle is that Ibsen's plays have a systematic pattern of imagery; the third principle is that Ibsen's early experience as a stage director and designer influenced his methods of composition; the fourth principle is that Ibsen's characters have a certain way of seeing the world, and that this way of seeing amounts to a psychology; and the fifth principle is that the plays have a double action, one action motivated in the mature plays by the conventions of the well-made-play, and the other action motivated by a mythic logic, in which the Ibsen character desires to see the world in a certain way.

Ibsen's imagery

In the title of this paper I have employed the phrase "The Geography of Consciousness" rather than, say, "The Landscape of Consciousness" because the scenes in Ibsen's plays are highly organized, integrated and symbolic. They are like maps to direct us to the meaning of the plays in performance. To use the term "map" is not just a manner of speaking. Caroline Spurgeon's famous book on Shakespeare's imagery demonstrated

that each of that dramatist's plays has a different array of verbal imagery, and that these images appear in clusters. *Macbeth*, for example, contains many images of blood and the supernatural; *Hamlet* is full of images of disease and corruption; *King Lear* has images of nature and the unnatural (Spurgeon, 1935).

Similarly, Ibsen's plays also have arrays of imagery, but in contrast to Shakespeare's practice, all of Ibsen's mature plays have the same system of imagery, and the images are arranged in consistent patterns of opposition. Some years ago the late Charles Lyons published a book in which he described the oppositional system of Ibsen's imagery:

Certain crucial antitheses are present in each of the plays from *Brand* to *When We Dead Awaken*: a desire for free movement within an unlimited space is opposed to a fear of restriction and enclosure; a desire for light and warmth is opposed to a fear of darkness and cold; a desire for the fixed and unchanging is opposed to a fear of movement and change; a desire for comprehension is opposed to a fear of obscurity and ignorance; a desire for a sense of the self as unique, integral and whole is opposed to a fear of being an unspecified part of some larger, undetermined whole. (Lyons, 1972,

In an early play like *Brand*, the scenery, with its mountain, fjord and glacier, mirrors the spiritual life of the characters. When Brand is tempted to take his family to a warmer climate to save his son's life, the half-mad gypsy girl Gerd appears, to announce that monstrous creatures are emerging from their graves and flooding the countryside. The suggestion is that only Brand's will has kept the forces of evil in check, and that chaos will reign as soon as he leaves. In the realistic period that began in 1875 with *Pillars of Society*, the symbolic landscape is compressed into the confines of the box set, appearing in interior spaces like the garret in *The Wild Duck*, or the inner room in *Hedda Gabler*.

The oppositional imagery in the plays is not merely decorative, however. It also has the function of stimulating the imagination of the viewer or reader. Religions court paradox in order to prompt their believers to entertain ideas that are not possible in the world of everyday life. All the paintings of the Madonna and Child, for example, are intended to provoke meditation on the mystery of the virgin birth, which is biologically impossible, but doctrinally affirmed. The paradoxical elements of Ibsen's plays are part of his arsenal of techniques to strengthen the effect of his unique type of theatre poetry. They are not action in the traditional sense, but rather visual stimuli, aspects of spectacle, an Aristotelian would say. Still, they not only enhance the visual effect of a play for an audience, they also often influence the behavior of the characters, a subject to which we shall return.

Influences from Ibsen's theatrical practice

Ibsen is known as the father of dramatic realism, a style of play that attempts to offer an impression of real life as it is being lived in time. However, Ibsen's realism is not like anybody else's. He built his plays in a way that nobody else has been able to imitate, despite the fact that realism is now the predominant style in theatre, films and television around the world. One of the reasons why Ibsen's plays are constructed in the way they

are has to do with his early experiences as a stage director in the theatre in Bergen. His title was *sceneinstruktør* (“stageinstructor”), which meant that he was responsible for the design of costumes and scenery, and for arranging the actors on the stage. Another person was responsible for coaching the actors in the delivery of their lines and dealing with motivations. This arrangement was evidently standard in Germanic theatres of the day. To be sure, there was not much room on the little stage where Ibsen worked, and stage movement in provincial theatres before the advent of realism was often limited to having the actors stand in a semicircle downstage, taking turns delivering their lines. A Swedish theatre historian, in discussing staging practices in the early 19th century, stated that “(h)alvcirkeln förekommer regelbundet i all salons-interiör och utan någon egentlig variation” (Bergman, 1946, p. 200). Ibsen preferred a realistic style of acting, but the director who was responsible for motivations was more traditional, and coached the actors in the presentational style of delivery. The other director did his work first, and Ibsen took over rehearsals after the actors had learned their lines and found their motivations.

The effect of this division of responsibilities meant that Ibsen learned to pay close attention to the visual elements of staging, that is, to the aspects of production which he could influence. One might say that he learned to think about characterization from the outside in, rather than the other way around. It may also be worth noting that before he left Norway in 1864 he spent a lot of time painting landscapes. This meant that he understood the conventions of visual composition, especially those commonly used in Romantic landscape painting (Moi, 2006, pp. 43 ff.).

Libido in Ibsen's plays

One clue to the dynamics of the performance space of an Ibsen play came to me during a production of *The Master Builder* that I directed at the Berkeley Repertory Theatre in California. The actress playing Aline remarked one day that entering onto the stage of that production was like stepping into a river of energy. At first, she said, one had to adjust to the flow, and then it carried one along through the movements of the scene. In this sense it was like skiing, which also has a flow, although the source of energy in skiing is gravity, while the source of energy to which the actress referred was in my opinion what we call libido, or sexual energy. Actually, to use the term libido may be too limiting, although sexual energy is one form in which this energy is expressed. One could also say “life force,” or even “spirit.” Or more technically, “stage energy.”

Actors are allowed to talk about a river of energy, because we expect them to be instinctive, almost like children in the immediacy of their responses. The phrase “river of energy” sounds like something a motivational speaker or a meditation guru might use. But this phrase did not come from a mystic or a charlatan; it came from an experienced actress, a professional in every sense of the word. Indeed, it could only have come from someone who had actually stood on Ibsen's stage and felt what it was like to inhabit one of his characters. So I propose to consider for a moment what this actress might have been trying to communicate by using the term “river of energy”.

A play is made out of language; that is its system of notation. Because we also use language in our everyday lives it is easy to mistake our ordinary language for that of a play, especially a play that is composed in a realistic style. I have always thought that dramatic realism should more aptly be called illusionism, since what it portrays is not “a slice of life,” but an illusion of life. Ibsen’s theatrical language, by which I mean language intended to be performed, is actually quite different from everyday language. In Ibsen’s mature plays there is a powerful compression at work, so that each sentence, each word has a particular job to do, and often more than one. Ibsen knew the workings of the theatre from his experiences with live theatre in Norway as a young man, but during his maturity as a dramatist he did not have direct access to the theatre. As a consequence he prepared his plays for performance with careful stage directions, and also fashioned a kind of code for producers to follow, if they were sensitive to his signs.

One summer when I was in Norway, I made a translation of *Rosmersholm*, and later on, when I was living in Seattle, I found an opportunity to stage it myself. This combination of experiences, as both translator and director, gave me an unusual perspective on Ibsen’s theatrical process. It was a remarkable experience to read Ibsen in the original language. As had been my experience with reading Shakespeare’s plays, the scenes lighted up in my mind. But these characters were not speaking English, so as I translated I tried to reproduce the flavor of the original, only in English. This could only be an approximation, of course, since each language is different. But the extent to which I succeeded is reflected in the fact that the actor playing Kroll in my production told me he cursed me while he was memorizing his lines, because their word order was so precise. Each word had its appropriate place and needed to come at the right time in order for the speech to achieve its proper effect. This word order was able to pass for everyday English, but it was in fact more intricate than normal word order. In his use of language, Ibsen’s realism is produced with non-realistic means.

The Master Builder is a play that increasingly concentrates on a spoken duet between Solness the architect and his young admirer, Hilde Wangel. They speak in a private code that at times is loaded with innuendo; in other words, they speak the unshielded language of libido. Hilde bursts onto the stage demanding that Solness keep a promise she claims he made many years ago, to build her a castle. He does not remember this promise, but when she continues to insist that he made it, he does at last concede that he might have wished to make such a promise, but without expressing it openly. She contradicts him; not only did he promise her a castle, but also, to seal the pact, he took her in his arms and kissed her many, many times. A passionate kiss between a man and a woman is so rare in Ibsen’s theatre that I am able to recall only one other occasion of it, in *The Vikings at Helgeland*, and in both these cases the kiss took place in the narrative past, not onstage. For that matter, there is some doubt as to whether it occurred at all in *The Master Builder*; Hilde says she remembers it, but Solness does not.

It could be argued that any play has a subtext of sexual energy, or libido; the Greeks believed that drama began in the celebration of the god Dionysus, and he was the god of sexual energy, or more precisely, of ecstasy. Ecstasy is a Greek word, and means,

literally, “standing outside oneself.” Acting is pretending to be someone else, momentarily escaping the confines of one’s own self. This feeling is exhilarating, even if the situation dramatized is solemn or even tragic. That is because psychic energy is released when the confines of one’s personal mask are removed.

The libido in the performance of other playwrights’ works cannot automatically be described as a river of energy. Anton Chekhov began his activity as a dramatist by writing farces, and even his greatest plays contain elements of farce, as well as some characters who behave in a manner more appropriate to farce than to serious drama. Farce can be a suggestive kind of drama, in which people often chase one another around in the attempt to get one another into bed. In such plays the characters have no inner life; libido is expressed overtly, scarcely repressed, if at all. Chekhov’s characters are looking for love, but their search is almost invariably met with disappointment; there is no way out of their private emotional prisons, although they often complain eloquently about their confinement. So we can say that the libido in Chekhov’s plays is repressed, and a Chekhovian character can get so frustrated that he explodes in violence, as Vanya does in *Uncle Vanya*, when Serebryakov, a retired professor who has married into the family, announces he is selling the house that most of the other characters live in, and which really belonged to his first wife’s family, to buy a cottage near St. Petersburg, where he intends to live in his declining years with his young and beautiful second wife, Helena. He is so selfish that he has not even considered the fact that this will throw the rest of the family out onto the street. They have been working hard and saving their money in order to send it to him to support his research, although it turns out that “not a page of his work will survive him.” They have devoted themselves to supporting a mediocrity. Vanya at last loses his temper, seizes a pistol and chases Serebryakov around the house with it, but when he fires the gun, it misses its target, only increasing his frustration. A farcical stage action, but a very serious situation.

Libido in Ibsen’s drama, by contrast, is generally not so much repressed as sublimated. Sublimation is a psychological mechanism in which socially unacceptable impulses are transformed into socially acceptable ones. In Ibsen such energies are directed to objects of a non-sexual nature: to a project, for example, which the character expects will be accomplished at some future date. The great day never arrives, however; the project is never actually accomplished, or if it is accomplished, it no longer has the meaning or offers the gratification that was expected. To offer just a few examples of this recurring motif: Brand disposes of his inheritance from his mother by building a new church, but by the time it is finished his wife Agnes has died, and he no longer cares about the church, and even throws the keys to the church door into a river that flows nearby. Helene Alving’s project, the orphanage in *Ghosts*, which was intended to redeem the family’s honor after the degenerate behavior of her dead husband, burns down as soon as it has been completed. Hjalmar Ekdal’s invention in photography, which he supposedly works on after lunch, and which he hopes will restore the family’s fortunes, is only a pipe dream. He is really napping, not working, and his invention will never be completed. The manuscript of Ejler Løvborg’s brilliant and prophetic history of the future is destroyed by fire, while he himself dies as a casualty of his dissolute

behavior. Alfred Allmers in *Little Eyolf* has spent years working on a book on human responsibility. But when he returns from a trek in the mountains, he announces that he has abandoned this project in favor of devoting himself to the military education of his son Eyolf, who is lame and physically incapable of satisfying his father's expectations for him.

The project focuses a character's energies, and gives meaning and purpose to his or her life. This is the way the Ibsenian character is built. When producing an Ibsen play it is necessary to establish what a character's ruling obsession is; otherwise the actor will not be in touch with his or her character's stage energy. The failure to connect Ibsen's characters with their source of energy is one reason why his plays can appear lifeless in performance.

Ibsen's Use of Myth.

What makes *The Master Builder* different from the rest of the canon is that Hilde demands that the project of the castle, which she claims Solness promised to build for her, come true, right now, "on the table," as she puts it. She is not content to wait for her dream to come true. This demand upsets the normal routine of daily life at the Solnesses' house, and increasingly separates the two central characters from the other characters, to such an extent that the others believe that Solness has lost his mind.

This play is an extreme example of a pattern of action that appears in all the plays. There is the world of ordinary life, and there is a special world, which some have described as mythic, and which functions according to different rules from the world of everyday life. The mythic world is the locus of a character's fantasy life, and he or she wants that world to coincide with the real world. So the technical problem for Ibsen became to integrate these two different worlds in a temporary illusory coincidence. That is what the characters want as well. They want their dreams to come true. But as we all know dreams rarely come true, and if they do come true the price may be too high. Ibsen's tragedies, as he said himself, are built on the disparity between aspiration and achievement.

Mythic material was a constant element in Ibsen's plays; he used myths in many different ways, and almost from the beginning of his career. In one of his earliest essays, written in 1851, when he was 23 years old, and while he was attending lectures at the university in Christiania (Oslo), Ibsen defended the use of myth in what he called "philosophical" poetry. (Fjelde, 1968, 44-46.) One of his professors was the famous poet J.S. Welhaven, who in his lectures had been criticizing the practice of some contemporary writers in using gods and goddesses from the classical period in their works. Ibsen did not come to employ that device, except to a limited extent in his two Roman plays, but he did use motifs and images from Norwegian folk tales, legends, ballads, sagas and other products of the popular mind throughout his career. He maintained that the "mythopoetic period," when the inventions of the pre-conscious popular mind were created, was past, and that originality in the fashioning of myth was no longer possible. This distinction between the kind of poetry produced by uneducated people and that produced by supposedly more conscious, educated people derives from

German aesthetic theory; typical in its use of this distinction was Schiller's essay "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry:" "naïve" meant unselfconscious; "sentimental" meant sophisticated. Ibsen agreed that educated poets could no longer assume a pose of naïveté and write new tales in the voice of the common people, as Hans Christian Andersen had done in his ersatz folk tales. But he maintained that using traditional story patterns, drawing them up from the "sea-depths" of the race consciousness, "lifting the veil of symbols within which the idea lies hidden," was still a legitimate activity. The "idea" to which he referred was that in the traditional forms created by anonymous artists there are elements that express universal qualities of human character.

Acting Ibsen's Plays.

In the late plays Ibsen was increasingly interested in the subjective life of his characters, and accordingly he allowed the plays' realistic surfaces to become more overtly symbolic in order to assist in the exteriorization of subjective modes of consciousness. I am by no means the first person to advance this notion (Holtan, 1968). Ibsen's mature plays are designed to disclose the inner life of the characters. The mechanism of disclosure is the gradual revelation of some important secret buried in the narrative past. In *A Doll's House* the secret is that Nora forged her father's signature on a note. In *The Wild Duck* the secret is that Werle may be the father of Hedvig. In some plays there is more than one important secret: in *Ghosts*, for example, one secret is the identity of Regina's real father, and another is that Osvald as a child caught syphilis from his father. *Rosmersholm* also has more than one secret buried in the narrative past: first, that Rebekka drove Rosmer's wife to suicide, and second, that she may have had a sexual relationship with her father without realizing it. And so on. The revelation of the secret is gradual but continuous, and each partial unveiling drives the action forward in the familiar technique of the well-made play. More recent dramatists have learned the techniques of the well-made play for constructing an action, but their plays resemble Ibsen's only so far, because they do not also contain the mythic dimension, or the psychology of Ibsen's plays. The mythic action is motivated not by disclosure, although it is disclosed in the course of the play, but by the desire of the major character or characters to perceive in reality a condition that corresponds to an image in their minds. Of course, this is only a manner of speaking. Characters do not have minds; they are merely constructs made of language which is put into the mouths of actors. But Ibsen was skilled at creating the illusion that his characters are living human beings. He gave them an "inner life" using the story patterns and associations of myths and legends to enrich the realistic situations, the surfaces of his plays.

In each of the late plays Ibsen employed a different theatrical style, a different solution to the problem of revealing the inner life of the characters. One important element remained constant, however, and that is the psychology of the Ibsen character. Ibsen's plays were written before the invention of the discipline of depth psychology, although there had been earlier attempts, for example associationism, to describe the sources of motivation. Ibsen was certainly aware of contemporary psychological practices, because *The Lady from the Sea* includes a detailed psychological analysis of

Ellida by her husband, Dr. Wangel. In the course of that analysis that play's secret is revealed: that Ellida is obsessed by the memory of an early love affair with a sailor. Unlike the other major plays, however, which usually end in catastrophe, her character is "cured" of her obsession, because Ibsen decided in that play to give his audience the "positive" message for which they had been asking. Based on my study of a number of his characters, from his first play to his last, I have concluded that Ibsen had his own idea of psychology, and it is what we would now describe as perceptual psychology. His version of this type of psychology was not exactly scientific, but it was systematic. Ibsen's major characters want to see things in a certain way. This drive governs their behavior, and when working with actors it is important for the director to elucidate this dimension of the characters' behavior. Many productions attempt to apply other psychological theories to the development of the characters, but they are mistaken unless the producers have the actors explore the way the characters see things, and what they want to see. As I mentioned, Ibsen's theatrical experience in Bergen taught him to think about character in visual terms, and this habit persisted throughout his career as a dramatist. He famously said that to be a poet means to see, and the same can be said for his characters.

In all the late plays, the desire of the main character or characters to see the world, or at least what they care about in the world, in a certain way is what controls their actions. In some scenes the character's fantasy may not even be referred to, but it governs what he or she desires to see, and that provides what is called the motivation of the character. If a producer of one of these plays attempts to apply another type of psychology, a psychology of repression, for example, such as Freud's theory, the effect is merely to muddy the waters, imposing an alien design on the one already there. It may be appropriate to mention in this context that the most popular method of actor training, the Stanislavsky system, is greatly influenced by Freud's theory of repression. Accordingly, many actors will prepare a role in an Ibsen play using the Stanislavsky technique of analysis, even if the director does not encourage it. This matters because in the Stanislavsky technique, which was developed in order to help actors perform naturalistic plays and avoid the clichés and stereotypes of contemporary popular theatre, like farce and melodrama, actors search for what is called the "subtext," motivations hidden within the dialogue but not articulated in the words themselves. In Ibsen's plays, I believe it is more useful to discover a character's ruling fantasy, and identify how it makes the character move. The stage directions show that he or she rises when a fantasy is hoped for or believed, and descends when disillusioned. Again, the character can be drawn towards or repelled from the object of his or her fantasy, depending on whether the object corresponds to the fantasy or not. It is not necessary to block a scene using Ibsen's stage directions, but they are an indicator of the flow of libido.

Mythic Action

The Ibsen character can live quietly if he or she is convinced that the life of which he or she is dreaming will one day come true, that reality will at some future time conform to the character's particular fantasy. Nora Helmer is convinced that one day her husband

will defend her honor against those who might condemn her for forging her father's name on a note she took out to pay for Torvald's therapeutic trip to the South. Helene Alving believes that by sending her son away she has protected him from his father's corrupting influence. Hjalmar Ekdal is sustained by the faith that one day he will make a photographic invention that will restore his family's fortunes. In *The Lady from the Sea*, Ellida is obsessed by the memory of a man with whom she entered into a spiritual marriage, and whom she expects to return one day to claim her. This obsession prevents her from expressing normal emotions to her family, since it has captured her libidinal energy.

Hedda Gabler is a bored housewife who decides to make her life more interesting by persuading a former boyfriend to kill himself "beautifully," as she puts it. She has an image in her mind of Løvborg dying beautifully to compensate for the empty bourgeois existence in which she feels trapped. She gives him one of her father's dueling pistols to shoot himself with, expecting him to put a bullet in his temple. When he dies under questionable circumstances in a house of prostitution, wounded not in the temple but in the groin, Hedda resolves to restore the image in her mind of a beautiful death by shooting herself in the temple, in her opinion a more aesthetically attractive place than the one where Løvborg is fatally injured.

The tragedy in *The Master Builder* is precipitated when Solness climbs the tower of his new house, and falls to his death. This gesture is his attempt to fulfill Hilde's demand that he be the hero in her fantasy, or rather, their shared fantasy of a "castle in the air." Once, long ago, he climbed the steeple of a church he had just built, but he was younger then, and

stronger. His effort to repeat his earlier achievement exceeds his ability. Significantly, his death does not matter to Hilde; what matters, as she says, is that "he got right to the top." In other words, his appearance corresponded to the image of the hero in her mind.

Viewed in their mythic dimension, both *Hedda Gabler* and *The Master Builder* are variations on the same story pattern interwoven with the modern realistic action. In the mythic action, a character attempts to stop time, or process, by fixing another character, or herself, in an image. The mythic action Hedda performs is based on the *Saga of the Volsungs*, a medieval epic where Brynhild has Sigurd killed and then kills herself rather than stay married to Gunnar, a man whom she discovers has not satisfied the condition she had established for the man who would win her hand: that he ride through her ring of fire. The ring of fire is a locale outside of time; that is its significance in the story. Sigurd had ridden through her fiery flames, but then he gave her to his friend Gunnar instead of marrying her himself. Therefore Gunnar won her without satisfying her condition. Satisfying a condition is a frequent motif in folk tales. In "Cinderella," for example, the prince will marry only the woman whose foot fits into one particular glass slipper. Brynhild was deceived in her marriage; her murder of Sigurd and her subsequent suicide are intended to destroy her false marriage, and assert the claim that she and Sigurd will be united in death, even though they could not be united in life. Hilde's demand that Solness build her a castle is analogous: in their castle-in-the-air they will

presumably be united in spirit, even if they cannot be joined in the flesh. In folk literature the fulfillment of the pattern was considered to be what satisfied the audience. In tragic romance one or both partners died, but the couple was still somehow united. *Romeo and Juliet* is probably the most famous example of this pattern, or formula. A significant difference between the ending of that play and these two plays by Ibsen is that Romeo and Juliet act out events influenced by the situation in which they are caught: a feud between two families. Ibsen's characters, by contrast, seem to be driven by some inner compulsion; to them even the illusion of order is preferable to disorder or a meaningless state, even if someone is killed in the act of creating the kind of order they desire. In Ibsen's plays characters seek to create what Lyons called "personal myths," but it is also the case that in these plays, the creation of a mythic illusion to give life meaning involves the sacrifice of life. The French critic René Girard maintains that behind myth there is always violence (Girard, 1979). Scholars have begun to explore the parallels between Girard's theory of sacred violence and Ibsen's plays (e.g., Johnsen, 2003). The ritual acts of a sacrificial religion show similarities to the mythic action of Ibsen's plays.

Even though Ibsen often used borrowed story patterns, he could put a different slant on them than what might be expected. A number of scholars have suggested that *The Master Builder* shows the influence of the philosophy of Nietzsche, who was attempting to fashion a modern myth with his ideas of the "superman" and the "will to power" (Van Laan, 2006). Solness has a "bad conscience," a phrase used by Nietzsche, and he also shows that he has the desire to have power over others in his exploitation of his employees. These and other features of the play may have been influenced by Ibsen's reading of Georg Brandes' lectures on Nietzsche. However, the play is not a straightforward dramatization of a Nietzschean "superman," but rather, as was his typical practice with the ideas of other philosophers, Ibsen tests several of Nietzsche's themes in his own dramatic crucible. Solness' ascent of the tower on his new home is a repetition of a similar climb he made many years earlier, on the steeple of a church he had built, and while he was up on that steeple he challenged God, claiming that he was a god in his sphere of building just as God was lord of the universe. So he was a rebel and a blasphemer, not a traditional hero; one might say he was an anti-hero. But after his ascent of the tower on his new home at the end of the play we are not exhilarated by the sight of a hero's triumph, or even cleansed by his fall. I believe we are meant to focus not on Solness' ascent and fall, which take place offstage, but rather on Hilde's reaction to them. She is onstage, in the foreground. Hilde is thrilled by his ascent, like a teen-aged girl by the lead singer at a rock concert. She virtually ignores the fact that her hero has fallen to his death. And as audience or reader, if we are paying close attention, I believe we can conclude that her enthusiastic reaction is meant to be disturbing. The other characters are horrified by what has happened; only Hilde is celebrating. This disparity between the two kinds of reaction to Solness' death requires a reader or audience to reconsider the events of the play. Until then we have had a certain degree of sympathy for Solness and Hilde, who are more interesting than the other characters in the play. We get involved in their quest for happiness, just as we do with the lovers in

any romance. But Hilde's indifference to Solness' death alienates us from her. We are left with nobody with whom to identify; the ending satisfies Hilde's expectations, but it is a cancellation of meaning for everyone else, both onstage and in the audience. And Solness' effort to reverse the flow of time, of the impending future he fears so much, is not so much a tragedy as a failure. It is as though he is punished for his attempt, like the builders of the Tower of Babel, who thought they could build high enough to reach the realm of the gods.

The purpose of the style of criticism outlined here is to offer insights into the way Ibsen's plays were designed to operate in the theatre. Such knowledge can be useful no matter what stylistic choices a director makes in developing a production. There is more that could be said about a criticism based on the nature of Ibsen's plays in performance. Another time the discussion could be extended to the effects in performance of the many varieties of historical and contemporary theatrical style Ibsen employed in his supposedly realistic plays. But those considerations must await another occasion.

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Biographical note

Philip Larson was educated at the University of California in Berkeley, California, where he received the PhD degree in dramatic art. He has taught theatre and drama at Berkeley, Stanford University, and St. Lawrence University. He has also taught English literature and history at five universities in China, including Zhejiang University and Nanjing University. He has directed Ibsen's plays in Berkeley, California; Canton, New York; Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and Seattle, Washington. He is the author of *Ibsen in Skien and Grimstad: his education, reading and early works*, published by the Ibsen museums in Grimstad and Skien, 1999. This book is available free online at ibsen.net, together with an extensive website of research materials on Ibsen's early cultural environment. Mr. Larson lives with his son and grandson in northern California, in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada.

Summary

When a director stands in the cockpit of a rehearsal he or she sees a different object than a person reading the text of a play. This article attempts to outline a style of criticism that may be useful to persons preparing to produce Ibsen's plays. Several critical principles are presented: first, that Ibsen's plays have a systematic pattern of imagery; second, that Ibsen's characters have a certain way of seeing the world, and that this way of seeing amounts to a psychology, what could now be termed a perceptual psychology; third, that the plays have a double action, one action motivated in the mature plays by the conventions of the well-made play, and the other action motivated by a mythic logic, in which the Ibsen character desires to see the world in a certain way. This desire can have potentially disastrous consequences if pursued too insistently, because of the disparity between a character's mythic vision and the facts of life as it is actually lived.

Keywords

Henrik Ibsen, *Rosmersholm*, *The Lady from the Sea*, *Hedda Gabler*, *The Master Builder*, perceptual psychology, mythic action, imagery, well-made play