BOOK REVIEWS

Global Ibsen. Performing multiple modernities, edited by Erika Fischer-Lichte, Barbara Gronau and Christine Weiler, New York, Routledge, 2011, xii + 279 pp., £80 (hardback) ISBN 978-0-415-87713-8

The centenary of Ibsen’s death was widely commemorated in 2006. The GLOBAL IBSEN conference held at the Academy of Arts in Berlin in September 2006 was one such commemorative event. An outcome of the conference was this consistently interesting book, which focuses very precisely on ‘performing multiple modernities.’ The basic premise of the book is that the production and reception of Ibsen’s plays coincided (and still coincide) with the processes of modernisation in a range of cultures – and that the plays were generated within, and contributed towards, these cultures. But the contributors not only provide brief histories of the reception of the particular plays they are dealing with (each participant was required to discuss at least three performances of one play); they also address two issues summed up as follows by Erika Fischer-Lichte: ‘(1) that of the relationship between text and performance and (2) that of interweaving a text from the European tradition, in this case Norway, with traditional theatre forms from other cultures’ (p. 5). The historical contextualisation of the works confirms one’s broad impression of just how central Ibsen’s position has been in modern ‘Western’ theatre, but by far the most outstanding and illuminating feature of the book is the focus on ‘performance’ in its broadest sense – not only acting styles embodied in performance, set design and stage craft, but also what one might call ‘cultural performativity’ as Ibsen’s works have been appropriated by a range of ‘other cultures.’ The key point of the book is made crisply and clearly in the Introduction: ‘a production and its impact in performance can never be appropriately judged by taking recourse to the text alone’ (p. 6).

Given the close relationship – from Ibsen’s own time – between ‘modernity’ and the rise of the feminist movement, it is no surprise that almost half the chapters deal with A Doll’s House (and to a lesser extent Hedda Gabler). The very first chapter (by Temple Hauptfleisch and Hilda van Lill) has the most direct bearing on the remit of this journal, dealing as it does with the reception of the first professional production of an Ibsen play in South Africa – a performance of A Doll’s House in 1929 by an Afrikaans touring group entitled Geleende Geld (Borrowed Money). The chapter addresses many of the key concerns of the book – a growing sense of national (cultural) identity, the social position of women (though the Afrikaans title may be a sop to Calvinist sensibilities, especially in the rural areas, not yet ready to address issues of patriarchy head on), translation as appropriation and adaptation, the dynamics of the interplay between cultural politics and personal temperaments, in particular in the light of the growing popularity of the cinema.
One might think that limiting authors to a single play would lead to some repetitiveness, but it is precisely the focus on performance, more often than not as an ‘intervention into the existing social order’ (p. 2), that keeps the commentaries very specifically rooted in distinct cultural and historical contexts, while addressing the concrete realities of stagecraft, themselves driven by a multitude of ideological and aesthetic choices. Marvin Carlson traces Ibsen’s varying fortunes in America, noting in particular the decline in productions during the 1930s and 1940s. The turbulent 1960s saw a revival of interest in Ibsen as a social reformer – women’s rights (A Doll’s House receiving very wide exposure through Joseph Losey’s 1973 television film with Jane Fonda), industrial pollution and corporate cover-ups (An Enemy of the People) and sexually transmitted diseases (Ghosts). The version of A Doll’s House that Carlson devotes most attention to is the Off-Off Broadway production Dollhouse directed by Lee Breuer in 2003. Its most striking feature was the cast of six-foot women being dominated by dwarf or midget men in a set that was literally a small dollhouse – making a political point in a startling way without undermining Ibsen’s fundamentally humanist concern with women’s rights. Jacqueline Martin also describes Breuer’s production, among others, in tracing the reception of Ibsen’s play in Australia from 1889 onwards as providing an index of the status of women’s rights and of cultural expectations of the theatre. Errol Durbach takes into account Canadian mores, customs and laws related to marriage in addressing the multifaceted responses to the play in a multicultural (‘hyphenated’) society, and interestingly broadens the ‘feminist’ responses to the play to include Torvald’s predicament in a production that ‘asks us to feel compassion even for the emotional illiteracy of Ibsen’s male of the species’ (p. 73). Mitsuya Mori writes about the reception of A Doll’s House in Japan, where the play probably underwent its most radical generic transformations not only as a social ‘intervention’, but as a vehicle for the aesthetic subversion of traditional expectations about the theatre and indeed of the role of women in Japanese society. Tiina Rosenberg and Maria Shevtsova both incorporate Hedda Gabler into their account of the discourses on women’s right, with Rosenberg offering the most interesting explicitly ‘gendered’ readings of the two productions she describes that ‘challenge the hegemonic position of normative heterosexuality’ (p. 93) – in a 2006 production in Copenhagen Hedda marries a woman instead of a man, ‘but remains unhappy, regardless of whether she is a lesbian or a heterosexual’ (p. 97) – the production therefore opened up fascinating possibilities for considering issues of intimacy (rather sexuality) and homophobia (rather than nineteenth-century patriarchy). Maria Shevtsova devotes her chapter exclusively to productions of Hedda Gabler, and in particular to Deborah Warner’s 1991 production, which appeared in the wake of Thatcher’s regime; one production of one play perhaps establishes the link with Thatcherism a bit tenuously, but Bourdieu’s notion of ‘habitus’ is introduced briefly and helpfully to account for the production’s impact in the immediate post-Thatcher years.

If the first section of the book (‘What Happened to the Women’s Liberation Movement?’) deals with performing modernity in productions of A Doll’s House in the light of the ‘waves’ of the feminist movement, the second section does so in terms of ‘Negotiating Cultural Identity’ in productions of Peer Gynt, describing performances in Egypt, Israel, Brazil and France, as well as a contentious operatic version written in Berlin in 1938. In giving wonderfully detailed descriptions of Egyptian productions of A Doll’s House (inescapable even in the section devoted to
Nehad Selaiha also makes the point that ‘What really needs altering is not so much the status of women in society, but, rather, the ideas that men have about women and how they should be treated’ (p. 122). His account of the Peer Gynt production in Giza deals with the textual adaptations (contentious and otherwise) and touches on the impact of Grieg’s music – a point addressed in other chapters as well. Freddie Rokem compares two productions (1952 and 1971) of the play in the light of Peer’s homecoming as ‘a crucial issue for the reception of Peer Gynt in Israel, reflecting the ideology of the state of Israel and it concern for returning the Jews to their ancient homeland’ (p. 135). The 1952 production used the original Grieg score while the 1971 version ‘used music by an Israeli composer who created what several critics called an “anti-pastiche” of Grieg’s well-known, sentimental tunes’ (p. 138), not so much, it seems, a sign of a confident new national identity, but a pointer to more troubled cultural politics and a critique of a ‘romantic’ Zionist dream (p. 144). Tereza Menezes describes a highly acclaimed and influential 1971 Brazilian production critical of an increasingly oppressive military regime, while Catherine Naugrette (drawing on Hans Jauß’s theories) describes a 1981 French production which similarly produced an ‘aesthetic shock’ that demolished the audience’s ‘horizons of expectations,’ setting up an ‘aesthetic gap’ that needed to be closed – in this case, according to the author, initiating ‘a new era of Ibsenian theatre and its reception’ (p. 169) in France. The approaches of these two chapters usefully demonstrate the range of the book – the former focuses on detailed preparations for the production, whereas the latter concentrates on the significance of textual adaptations.

I found Clemens Risi’s account of Werner Egk’s opera, Peer Gynt, which premiered at the Berlin Staatsoper in September 1938, particularly fascinating, not only for the historical contextualisation, but because it highlights particularly vividly the difficulties of ‘reading’ a cultural event some 60 years after the event. The issue here is the nature of Egk’s relationship with the Nazis and specifically whether it is possible to determine this from the music. Not surprisingly, Risi finds that the music can be ‘read’/‘heard’ in two entirely contradictory and mutually exclusive ways – which can then be transferred to reflect Egk’s own ideological stance. One is irresistibly reminded of Leni Riefenstahl here. As with Riefenstahl, the bulk of the evidence seems to point to some kind of sympathy (identification?) with the Nazi cause – mostly in the implicit anti-Semitism of the troll scenes, but what exactly does the use of ‘degenerate’ music (Entartete Musik) at this point signify? To his credit, Risi refuses a final answer, noting quite correctly that music is a highly arbitrary sign system open to interpretation.

The third section of the book is headed ‘Modernization of Society and the Emergence of a New Theatre’ and deals with a more diverse selection of plays. Platon Mavromoustakos looks at productions of Ghosts in the light of notions of Greek tragedy, and he describes an intriguing production Ibsenland by Iakovos Kambanellis – which seems to be not quite a sequel to Ghosts, but a meditation on, or a teasing out of the implications of, a dramatic rewriting of the play in which the dramatist ‘fuses Ibsen with Chekhov and Pirandello in a quest for a new theatricality’ (p. 198). Wang Ning points out that A Doll’s House ‘is undoubtedly the most frequently performed Ibsen play in China,’ but a 1996 performance of An Enemy of the People was particularly noteworthy and successful because it referred to ‘at least two urgent and controversial social issues: environmental pollution and the crisis of the

Peer Gynt!).
humanistic spirit’ (p. 203). Barbara Gronau’s account of an East German production of *An Enemy of the People* in 1988 (i.e. at the very end of the existence of the GDR) is possibly one of the most absorbing descriptions of a performance in the book (but perhaps the one most in need of a language editor’s ‘intervention’). It describes Frank Castorf’s provocative, transgressive staging of the play that opens up a whole host of new perspectives on virtually every single dimension of the play, as performed in a repressive environment. The final two chapters offer more exclusively historical material. The chapter by Laura Caretti describes the difficult professional relationship between Eleonora Duse and Gordon Craig (who successfully staged *Rosmersholm* in Florence in 1906), with some illuminating comments on Craig’s stage designs for (unrealised) Ibsen productions. The final chapter by Dmitry Trubotchkin describes two productions of *Rosmersholm* in Moscow: one in 1908 directed by Nemirovich-Danchen (Stanislawski’s collaborator at the Moscow Arts Theatre) and the other in 1918 directed by Evgenji Vakhtangov, tracing the relationship of these two productions to one another as the directors negotiated their way through different understandings of the aesthetics of the theatre – with, not surprisingly, a strong focus on the acting (although, interestingly, Vakhtangov expressed a desire to emulate Gordon Craig’s stage designs for his production).

My editing hand kept twitching in places, but on the whole this is a sturdy hardcover in the *Routledge Advances in Theatre and Performance Studies* series, well-presented, and helpfully includes separate indexes of works, names and subjects.

Edwin Hees

*University of Stellenbosch*

*eph@sun.ac.za*

© 2011, Edwin Hees

---

**Trends in twenty-first century African theatre and performance**, edited by Kene Igweonu, Amsterdam and New York, Rodolphi, 2011, 474 pp., R2000 (hardback), ISBN 978-90-420-3386-3

What exactly constitutes ‘African’ theatre? This is a question that has been hotly debated by scholars and practitioners, both from the African continent and elsewhere in the world. It is a question which, in the light of the title of this book, is dealt with incisively by Temple Hauptfleisch in his Foreword. After discussing a number of viewpoints, he finally observes:

In this book the context is Africa and the topic is theatre and performance on the African continent at a particular phase in the history of the region and a particular phase in the evolution of the field of theatre and performance studies. In this case the problems outlined above [pertaining to the ‘Africanness’ of theatre, as well as research into ‘African’ theatre] are dealt with as a montage of ideas, presented through a mosaic of individual and specific articles based on first-hand experiences by authors primarily living in and working on the African continent. It is, at this point, perhaps the only way it can be done (p. 15).