

## Strolling players: theatre as an agency of cultural exchange

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Theatre has been used as a metaphor for human life in folk and popular culture and in Western literature and philosophy since Plato. By the sixteenth century the notion of *Theatrum Mundi* was commonplace: there are abundant references to the world as a stage, to humankind as 'poor players', each one with a 'part' to enact and to the Deity or Providence as dramatist, director and spectator. In contemporary secular society, sociologists, psychologists and even management consultants use notions of 'role', 'performance' and 'acting out' in the pursuit of their disciplines.

Whenever there is culture there are forms of theatre. (Fischer-Lichte 1988, 1)

The nature of the performance event renders it, albeit in divergent forms, common to many cultural systems. While each culture will evolve a theatrical code specific to itself and use signs of particular relevance to its constituents, the essentials of the act of performing, namely, the actor and the spectator, are universal. The performing arts, therefore, may be seen as ideal vehicles for cultural exchange. Western theatre since classical times can legitimately be regarded as an exemplar of transculturation. Carl Weber (Marranca and Dasgupta 1991, 31) cites the evolution of Molière's comedic technique from the Greek comedy of Aristophanes, through the Latin New Comedy of Plautus and the Italian Commedia dell'Arte. That line could be continued to include Holberg, a Dane, Ionesco, a Roumanian, and return to present day Italy in the work of Dario Fo. Shakespeare, Schiller and Brecht, together with many contemporary dramatists, have deconstructed and re-encoded sources emanating from other cultural contexts in creating new works. In contemporary theatre practice, a Russian, (Stanislavsky), a German, (Brecht), a Pole, (Grotowski), a Frenchman, (Artaud), and a Brazilian, (Boal) dominate the theories and techniques of acting and directing.

Despite the evidence of theatre culture's being a veritable *jeu sans frontières*, however, the institution of theatre is generally organised on a national basis financially and politically in terms of the creation and implementation of a cultural strategy. This is certainly true in Europe since the growth of the concept of individual nationhood in the nineteenth century. And nations first of all seek to represent themselves to themselves. Such representation may affirm the aesthetic taste of the dominant class or group, for example, in 'National' companies whose remit includes the conservation of the national canon and the preservation of a dramatic heritage, or it may critique such taste within alternative and *avant-garde* productions that both in choice of material presented and in methods of presentation challenge the hegemonic discourse of the classical. Indeed it is such alternative movements that import most freely from 'alien' cultures, if the dominant national culture is too lacking in energy to promote self-generated innovation.

Within any nation there are many sub-cultures. How and to what extent these are represented on stage is always a matter of debate, often of fierce argument. As many Scots would resent the national image that is projected abroad through the drug-dealing delinquents of Edinburgh in *Trainspotting* as would detest the blue-faced tartanry of *Braveheart*. Loren Kruger in *The National Stage* expresses the ambivalence thus:

The idea of representing the nation in the theatre, of summoning a representative audience which will in turn recognise itself as a nation on stage, offers a compelling if ambiguous image of national unity, less as an indisputable fact than as an object of speculation. (Kruger 1992, 3)

Thus theatre literally 'stages' a nation by providing a public locus in which that nation can perform itself and by so doing may either reify or problematize its perceived identities. Self-presentation is linked to self-reflection, and as much may be revealed through the imaginative or fictitious texts through which a culture (re)presents itself as through the study of 'truthful' or 'factual' texts such as histories, political treatises or statistical reports.

Although in many respects theatre can be seen as an artform that will 'travel well', there are many features specific to it that render transportation problematic. The transportation of a performance created initially for an audience, presumed broadly to share common cultural competences, to a new target audience that is likely, albeit in varying



degrees, to differ from the first in the cultural capital which it brings to the theatrical event creates a range of challenges for both the 'exporter' and the 'importer'. These challenges, I suggest, are unique to theatrical art, for while the interlingual translation of a script is common to all literary works, the non-verbal languages of theatre, for example, the paralinguistic and kinesic signs of the actor and the iconic signs of the setting and costume design, are deeply rooted in the source culture and could be conceived of as being even less amenable to translation than the literary text. Actors, for example, in their gestural language, in the pace and rhythm of their performances, as well as in the intonation, stress and colouring of their speech, have been trained to perform in a manner which is both inscribed by, and reflective of, their cultural roots. The director, Peter Brook, in his experiments using a range of actors from a variety of histrionic traditions has attempted to develop an intercultural playing style and to erode national peculiarities but, in the main, it is not difficult to detect significant differences in modes of acting even between close neighbours such as Scotland and England. Indeed the whole *mise en scène* (that is literally, the process and result of putting a dramatic text on a stage) is crucially bound by the selection and organisation of cultural sign systems that are shared by the production team and by the audience. The theatrical signs can only be understood by those with a knowledge of the cultural system from which these signs are drawn.

Further, the specificity of a theatrical event in terms of the time, location and context of its presentation implies that a change in any of the original conditions will mean that what is 'exported' is not the original production, not even a re-production of it, but a new product. Since the performance event is by its very nature transitory and ephemeral, a fact that is at once a frustration and a fascination to the theatre historian, it cannot have an independent afterlife. What frequently occurs in the exportation is that the 'alien' form, the new wine, is insensitively served up in the old bottles of the receiving culture's theatrical conventions. Thus, a piece of Japanese Noh theatre may be crabbed and confined within a Western proscenium arch stage or a twenty-four hour Indian epic may be compressed to suit the expectations and the short attention span of a Western audience.

In the light of these preliminary observations I propose now to examine the main components of a theatrical performance and consider the extent to which each may be rendered exportable. These components are the script (or scenario) which is generally referred to as the 'pre-

text': the *mise en scène* or the performance text, and, finally, the context, the socio-economic, historical, geographic and theatrical conditions in which the performance text takes place. I have chosen to use as my principal source of examples, Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, not only because this pre-text can be justifiably regarded as seminal in the European modernist movement and as the springboard for major changes in Western dramaturgy, but also because Ibsen's career brings together the theatrical cultures of our two countries and is therefore an appropriate exemplar for this occasion.

In a letter to William Archer, the Scottish critic, who was the prime mover in the campaign to present Ibsen's work on the British stage in that he translated and directed several of the major plays, Ibsen wrote:

I have been revolving many things in my mind lately, and one of the conclusions to which I have come is that there are very strong traces in me of my Scotch descent. But this is only a feeling – perhaps a wish that it were so. (Morison 1905, 443)

Ibsen's 'Scotch descent' dated back to the eighteenth century and there was more German and Danish blood in his ancestry than Scottish, but his flattering comment to Archer perhaps excuses the light-hearted appropriation by Scots of the Scandinavian playwright of whom it has been said that he was really a Scot called 'Henry Gibson'. A programme note for a production of *Hedda Gabler* at the tiny Curtain Theatre in Glasgow in 1938 refers to Ibsen as 'the only Scottish dramatist of outstanding quality.'

Ibsen learned his dramaturgical craft at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen where he worked under Fru Heiberg: his champion and philosophical partner was the Danish critic, Georg Brandes: William Bloch, Denmark's most perceptive director of the naturalistic drama exercised his skills on Ibsen's plays: Ibsen wrote in Dano-Norwegian, and although the period of his social prose dramas coincides with the movement to 'Norwegianize' the language, his voluntary exile overseas meant that he was very little influenced by the 'Maalstrife'.

Any cultural exporter must deal with the translation of the source pre-text into the language of the target culture. There are many problems surrounding linguistic translation and a distinguished and formidable canon of theoretical literature exists on the subject. As Patrice Pavis has noted:



The phenomenon of translation for the stage ... goes beyond the rather limited phenomenon of the interlingual translation of the dramatic text. (Pavis 1992, 36)

The theatre translation must be rendered 'playable' in the target culture, which means that the notion of literalness or 'faithfulness' to the original will have to be modified in order that it is, in the first instance, 'speakable' by the actors, and secondly that it makes possible, or allows for, a *mise en scène* that will be appropriate to the target audience. Translation for the stage, then, is as much of a dramaturgical exercise as it is a linguistic one.

A second challenge for the translator of a dramatic text is that s/he must resist the temptation to render the script into the dominant language of the target culture if the original does not use the dominant language of the source culture. Such a mistake will reduce the original to blandness and lose the linguistic texture. Translation into Standard English or into Parisian French, for example, 'can have a homogenizing effect as a translating medium'. Bill Findlay, a Scottish writer, who has become celebrated for his translations into Scots of the work of the Québécois playwright, Michel Tremblay who writes in the Montreal dialect or *joual*, rightly claims that:

the class-associated tones [of Standard English] have misrepresented both the non-standard and the bi-lingual nature of much of Western drama and its rootedness in a particular regional or national culture. (Findlay 1996, 193).

He cites as examples not only the work of Tremblay, but of Francis Xavier Kroetz, 'rooted' in the Bavarian underclass, of Dario Fo, writing in the regional accent of Northern Italy and of Edmond Rostand using his native Gascon in such works as *Cyrano de Bergerac*.

Two contemporary scholars, Egil Tornqvist and Kirsten Shepherd-Barr have written at length on the translating difficulties surrounding Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. I propose to discuss only one, the translation of the title of the play. Ibsen's title *Et Dukkehjem* means literally 'a small neat cosy home'. It does not have the connotations of a children's toy inherent in the English translation *A Doll's House*, the American, *A Doll House* or the French, *La Maison de Poupée*. Dano-Norwegian had two other words for the toy, 'dukkehus' and 'dukkestue'. The French and English translations clearly pick up on Nora's references to herself as

having been no more than 'a pretty doll' in both her father's house and in her husband's. Thus the focus of the piece is specifically on the woman, Nora. Indeed German translators habitually took the heroine's name as the title. Ibsen's *Et Dukkehjem*, however, has a wider social implication namely that the turbulent but secretive action of the play was probably being re-played behind the comfortable and respectable facades of many of the 'small neat cosy homes' of Northern Europe. The societal repression that promotes an ideology of 'separate spheres' for men and women is seen as damaging to all the inhabitants, husband, wife, children and guests, not simply to one woman character. Ibsen's original title is ironic, not symbolic, as it becomes in the English and French renderings. Thus, the meaning of the original has been subtly altered, even before the translators have begun to work on the dialogue itself. Nonetheless, the ambiguities regarding the title are trivial compared to the crimes perpetrated by some translators/adaptors in Germany, England and Belgium who substituted a 'happy' ending in which Nora remains with her children for Ibsen's original when she leaves alone, slamming the door – a sound said to have reverberated all over European theatre.

I shall now consider the problems of transposition that relate specifically to stage presentation. *A Doll's House* belongs to the Naturalistic movement prevalent in Europe in the later nineteenth century which, with its roots firmly in the works of Auguste Comte, Charles Bernard and, above all, Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, focused on the important role of heredity and environment in the evolution of an individual. The Naturalists sought to represent on stage as accurately as was possible the environment that shaped the *dramatis personae*. Settings were designed to give information on the period and place of the action and on the characters' social, financial and psychological state. The problem that arises in the transportation of such a *mise en scène* is that what is regarded as eminently naturalistic in one country may seem positively exotic in another. A director must choose either to reproduce as closely as possible the stage directions in the source thus underlining its 'foreign-ness' or to seek equivalences in the target culture, which may not be immediately obvious.

The first full production of *A Doll's House* in England in 1889 attempted to represent, indeed to emphasise, the Norwegian setting, with a tiled stove, prints by Thorvaldsen on the walls and a contemporary Norwegian newspaper lying on the couch. This type of setting was very different from the usual lavish designs realised on the West End stage,



which mirrored the town and country houses of the affluent audiences. It was partly for this reason that Ibsen's dramas were often dismissed as 'provincial' that is, non-metropolitan.

The French theatre, on the other hand, made no concessions to the play's country of origin in the first production in Paris in 1894. William Archer described the set as:

A gaunt and arras-hung baronial hall, decked with trophies of war and of the chase – as though the Helmers had taken a flat in the Castle of Otranto (Tornqvist 1955, 67).

In this instance, the equivalence was misplaced and the social status of a Norwegian bank manager and his wife totally misrepresented.

Finally I shall turn to 'context': I have already referred to the importance of the place in which the theatrical performance is situated, i.e. the geographical, social and architectural features of the venue. These will condition the nature of the audience and its reception of the performance and will also dictate the experience and the reputation of the participants. A comparative study of the first Danish, English and French productions of *A Doll's House* clearly demonstrates this.

*A Doll's House* received its first professional production at the Royal Danish Theatre in Copenhagen in 1879. This theatre had recently passed from being truly 'Royal' by becoming a governmental democratic national institution. The players belonged to the national company. This was, therefore, a highly prestigious venue, supported by the State, and therefore, not wholly reliant on commercial success or on popular taste. The Royal Theatre had a long and distinguished history and had an undisputed role in Danish national culture. About two weeks before the production, the pretext had been published, and it is therefore likely that many of the literary and sophisticated audience would have read or at least would have heard of the play they were about to witness. The production was a considerable success, playing for twenty-one performances in the first season.

In England the theatrical context was very different. Two competent but comparatively unknown actors, Janet Achurch and Charles Charrington, approached William Archer for the rights to his translation of the play. Archer who had formed the opinion that Ibsen's plays would never be performed on a London stage, was delighted and became involved as adviser and as director of the production which was performed at the Novelty Theatre in Holborn, well outside the fashionable

West End ambience, in 1889. Money for the production was raised by Achurch and Charrington themselves, through an advance they received on entering into a two-year contract to tour Australia and New Zealand. Elizabeth Robins, the American actress who was later to play the great Ibsen heroines in London, commented as follows on the venue and the audience for this epoch-making production:

I cannot think such an experience was ever ushered in with so little warning. There was not a hint in the pokey, dingy theatre, in the sparse, rather dingy audience, that we were on the threshold of an event that was to change lives and literatures. (Robins 1928, 9)

In contrast to the National Theatre of Denmark, the Novelty in London was a 'fringe' venue, occasionally hired out to *ad hoc* companies for *avant-garde* productions that had no prospect of being mounted in the commercial theatre but which catered largely for an audience seeking an alternative form of entertainment to that which the dominant culture promoted.

In Paris, *A Doll's House* was first professionally performed in 1894 at the Vaudeville, a boulevard theatre, managed by Paul Porel, whose wife, Réjane, starred as Nora. Réjane was already a celebrated performer in the commercial theatre, her reputation having been gained in light comedy of manners. This was a commercial venture, not a state event, or a 'fringe' experiment.

Interestingly both in London and in Paris, the first professional productions were preceded by contrasting private performances. In France, the play was read before a distinguished audience of two hundred literary radicals at the Salon of Mme Auberon de Nerville. It took ten months to prepare and was directed fairly simply by Le Comte de Tillet, possibly with some help from Dumas  *fils*. This had little impact on the general public and was really an aristocratic literary party but none the less it was reviewed in the *avant-garde* press. The amateur performance in England was organised by Eleanor Marx-Aveling, Karl Marx's daughter. The cast included critic, iconoclast, future dramatist and passionate Ibsenite, G. B. Shaw.

Productions of *A Doll's House* did not go unnoticed in any of the cultures to which the play was presented. In Copenhagen, the target culture or the closest one comes to Ibsen's 'intended' audience, the critical reception did not focus, as it did elsewhere, on the pre-text as a feminist tract, but rather took the side of the abandoned husband, Helmer, and



questioned the morality of a mother's abandonment of her children. The reason for the critics' (and the Danish audience's) identification with Helmer might well have been the portrayal of the character by the celebrated and much loved actor, Emil Poulsen, who far from rendering the character as a pompous, narrow-minded bank manager, created the impression of a man with:

the right touch of vacillation, half-educated, half likeable, a little arrogant and cleverly ordinary. (*Dagbladet*, 22 December 1879)

The *Dags-Telegraf* (22 December 1879) described him as 'a congenial, refined, professionally energetic and honest, domestically happy and likeable personality'.

In addition Betty Hennings' Nora established her reputation as a first-rate actress within Denmark. Her previous career as a dancer enabled her to give a rendering of the Tarantella that was regarded as the finest in the early productions. The excellence of the acting overall encouraged the view that the play was 'a dramatization of a moral and ethical dilemma', one which the audiences found so engaging and ultimately so detrimental to normal conversation that placards were hung on the walls of Danish drawing-rooms advising guests that there were to be 'No Doll's House discussions here'. There was, however, no suggestion that the play was designed to be, or was received as, a blow for the emergent women's rights movement.

In London, the initial reception of Ibsen's dramas was largely clouded by the identification of the dramatist with a socialist political philosophy. The anti-Ibsen critic, Clement Scott, coined the term 'Ibsenite' and 'Ibsenism' came to mean far more than a group of people who enjoyed Ibsen's plays. To Scott and to upholders of the sacred cows of Victorianism, Ibsenites were:

nasty minded people who find discussion of nasty subjects to their taste in exact proportions to their nastiness. (Archer 1893)

To Herbert Waring, the actor who first played Helmer in London, the characteristics of an 'Ibsenite' were, first, a reverence for the 'New Woman', secondly, an intense belief in an intellectual oligarchy as an ideal form of government, thirdly, the appreciation of the consequences of heredity, and finally, a yearning after truth and individual freedom. (Waring 1894) One reason for this close identification of Ibsen with

radical socialism was the fact that the plays were first presented by alternative *ad hoc* companies of actors whose desire to reform the theatre often went hand-in-hand with a desire to reform society as a whole. But a major influence was George Bernard Shaw whose *Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891), one of a series of lectures on *Socialism in Contemporary Literature*, delivered to the Fabian Society in the previous year, crystallized the view that Ibsen was a champion of political radicalism and particularly of women's rights.

The first serious translation of *Et Dukkehjem* into English by Henrietta Frances Lord was prefaced by an essay on the unhappy position of women in contemporary society. Appropriately, the piece was entitled, *Nora*. Many, however, believed that Ibsen had been butchered to make a Fabian holiday and William Archer, on the occasion of the Achurch/Charrington *Doll's House* in 1889, made it clear that to see the plays purely as social documents was to take an absurdly limited view and to ignore Ibsen's dramatic and theatrical poetry.

To treat Nora's arguments in the last scene of *A Doll's House* as though they were ordered propositions of an essay by John Stuart Mill is to give a striking example of the strange literalness of the English mind; its inability to distinguish between drama and dogma. (Archer 1889)

Despite the sense in Archer's comments, however, the production of *A Doll's House* and the critical response that accompanied it influenced the future reception of Ibsen's plays throughout the following decade. To quote Kirsten Shepherd-Barr:

*A Doll's House* [in Britain] set up expectations of [Ibsen's] work as 'closed' texts/performances *ie* those that aim in generating a precise response from a more or less precise group of empirical readers. (Shepherd-Barr 1997, 59)

The plays were deemed to be interesting only to an audience of left-wing intellectual radicals and were, with the exception of *An Enemy of the People*, emphatically refused production in the fashionable commercial theatres of the actor-managers.

Kirsten Shepherd-Barr also makes the pertinent point that most of the principal promoters of Ibsen's plays on the English stage were not Eng-



lish. There was William Archer, a Scot: George Moore, G. B. Shaw and Oscar Wilde, all Irish: Henry James, Elizabeth Robins and Marion Lea, all Americans, and J. T. Grein, a Dutchman. The Ibsen advocates, therefore, came from what could be seen at the time as cultures marginal to the dominant London one, against which they were mounting an aesthetic and even a political campaign.

In Paris, Réjane's light-hearted, childish, flirtatious Nora caused no such ripples on the political scene. The character was portrayed as charming, slightly naughty, an excellent vehicle for a well-known star, celebrated for winning audiences by her attractive and vivacious personality. French critics saw Nora, not as a portrayal of a real woman but as an idea, *un symbole révolutionnaire*, and, therefore, hardly a threat. Others took the view that as a Scandinavian woman culturally distanced from a French one, and emphatically not a Parisienne, Nora was no challenge to the stability of indigenous morality, however fascinating she might be as a *revoltée*, a type of foreign deviant.

Thus, in three cultures, there is evidence that there were three quite different *Doll's Houses*, one which inspired a moral controversy, one which fanned the flames of feminism and one which was no more than the presentation of an archetype of the eternal female mystique, charming, but unpredictably wayward because she had not the good fortune to be born a Frenchwoman.

In my choice of a historical example to demonstrate the challenges inherent in international trade in theatrical products, I have reluctantly avoided discussion of some major issues relevant to the contemporary commodification of culture, for example, the dilution of the source text to enhance its marketability, the cannibalisation of only partially understood peripheral cultures to revive a moribund core culture and/or, the contrary phenomenon, when a destabilised or impoverished peripheral culture is fed, forcibly or otherwise, by an imperialist culture's produce. All of these topics are matters for future debate which our learned societies may come to confront.

Nonetheless my personal conclusion coincides with that of the Canadian theatre director, Robert Lepage, whose innovative productions of drama and opera have travelled widely and well over the last decade:

A culture that does not export is doomed to disappear.

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