

*Peer Gynt* by Henrik Ibsen. Directed by Erik Ulfsby. Dress rehearsal  
October 8, 2018. Det Norske Teatret, Oslo.

As a participant of the XIVth International Ibsen Festival, I had the opportunity to watch a rehearsal of Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* at Det Norske Teatret in Oslo on October 8, 2018. This was a full dress rehearsal before the opening. The play was directed by Erik Ulfsby—the theatre's artistic director—in a nynorsk [New Norwegian] translation by Jon Fosse. It had been seventy years since the dramatist's grandson Tancred Ibsen had given the theatre permission to produce the play in nynorsk. As a reviewer, I admit that nynorsk, as opposed to bokmål [standard Norwegian] is very hard for me to follow as a spoken language. I have, however, seen the play a number of times and translated it for productions at the University of Western Ontario and the Shaw Festival. This meant that I knew to a great extent what was being done and said in any given scene. Some passages, especially towards the end of the play, were spoken according to Ibsen's text. Furthermore, the visual impact of this latest production, combined with the director's approach to telling the story, as we shall see, in the form of a memory play, made the performance clear, as well as compelling, for me in spite of the language barrier.

The first decision made by Ulfsby, his set designer Arne Nøst, lighting designer Torkel Skjærven, and costume designer Ingrid Nylander, was to use a minimal white set and costumes, with two halves of a bridge as the movable-dividable set. In Nøst's words: "Møtet mellom den gamle Peer og Knapperstøyparen resulterte i ei bru. Dei nærmar kvarander over livets elv. Sjølve elva blir prosjisert i rommet, og dei fleste scenskifta kjem til som eit resultat av endringar i lys og projiseringar" [The meeting between the old Peer and the Button Moulder resulted in a bridge. They approached each other above the river of life. The river itself is projected into the stage space, and most scene changes result from changes in lighting and projections].<sup>1</sup> The surface of the bridge, for example, was formed by brown square stones projected onto its downstage side; the desert sand was projected onto the stage, one half of the bridge facing downstage, and a cinematic screen upstage; and for the storm at sea, the two halves of the set were placed side by side to form the ship's wheelhouse, while a film of a wild sea played out on the upstage screen. For me, the most striking use of this set-projection combination came near the end of the play. The two halves of the bridge were now as if broken apart, to form a ruined clock with Roman numerals projected onto its off-white surface. The Button Moulder stood on one fragment of this clock and the Old Peer on the other, as they listened to Unn Vibeke Hol's Presten [the Pastor] give her sermon on the boy who had cut his trigger finger off to avoid conscription in a war. Ibsen's *Grønkledd Kvinne* [Woman in Green] became green from a special thrown onto her white costume

as she crawled up from a trapdoor; and, as Nylander describes her, Sara Khorami as “Solveig kan få bunad på seg a starten av ein scene, men han falmar og blir borte” [Solveig can be wearing national costume at the beginning of a scene, but it fades away, and is gone]. The Troll King and Trollbrats were more comic than threatening; the Great Bøyg, however, was truly menacing: a wall of loud discordant sounds that made it hard for Peer Gynt not to “gå utenom” [go round about] (Ibsen 51). The soundscape by Jostein Reistad was enigmatic, like the Bøyg itself, but could be taken to stand for the discordant thoughts in Peer Gynt’s mind that stand in the way of his individuation.

This use of lighting, projections, sound, and a minimal setting, allowed the play to flow in a way that cumbersome scene changes so often hinder. After the Pastor’s sermon, the stage was for the most part bare leaving Maurstad to face the end. Because the play was presented in nonlinear fragments, Peer had already peeled his onion-self before he is crowned “selvets keiser” [emperor of the self] (Ibsen 121) in the Cairo madhouse. Without any pause, the madmen, wearing grey vests over their white costumes, moved downstage towards the Old Peer, to become “nøstene” [the threadballs] that remind Peer of his wasted life: “Vi er tanker,/du skulle tenkt oss ... . Vi er sanger:/du skulle sunget oss!” [We are thoughts, you should have thought us ... . We are songs: you should have sung us!] (Ibsen 144–45). As they did so they discarded their vests in a heap centre stage, much like the layers of the onion.

And this leads us to a concept and a performance that made this *Peer Gynt* so haunting, so memorable. Just as the production jettisoned any trace of national-romanticism, so did it change the linearity of Ibsen’s text into what Ulfsby calls “ein ny og ikkje-linear versjon” [a new and non-linear version]. The piece became “ei slags mine-reise” [a kind of journey into memories], that Skjærven compares to leafing through “et bildebok” [a photograph album]. To realize this concept, the ninety-one year old Toralv Maurstad gave the performance perhaps of his lifetime, but certainly the lifetime of many audience members. As the Old Peer, Maurstad was on stage, accompanied—before the very end—by the button moulder—played with grave presence by Svein Tindberg—for the full three hours performance time during which we watched him, to borrow John Keats’ words, “burn through”<sup>2</sup> the evasions, betrayals, and crimes of his younger selves. The production drew no laughter from the audience, and this was to Ulfsby’s credit, as the work became a dark morality play about what the Strange Passenger calls “angstens alvor” [the seriousness of dread] (Ibsen 132).

The audience was spellbound throughout, especially by Maurstad. For the three hours playing time, you could have heard a pin drop. In Mona Levin’s review for *Aftenposten*:

Den snart 92 år er mesterlig her. Han er på scenen hele tiden, og hans totale tilstedeværelse suger alle blikk til seg. Hvert ord or hver tanke oppstår i ham der

og da, hver pause er fylt til randen, synbar i ansikt og kropp, mens han lytter og ser etter en eneste formildende omstendighet.

(Levin, Mona. 2018. "En Peer Gynt for Evigheten." *Aftenposten*, September 11.)

[The soon-to-be 92-year-old actor is masterful here. He is on stage the whole time and his unwavering presence draws all our eyes towards him. Every word and every thought comes to him there and then, every pause is full to the brim, visible in his face and his body, as he listens and searches for one single redemptive circumstance.]

Peer Gynt's younger selves were played by seven actors, from a child with a toy buttonmoulder's spoon to Ibsen's 80-year-old Peer returning to Norway. Maurstad sometimes interacted with the other performers, at other times simply watched or listened. When, for example, Peer Gynt is visited on board ship by the strange passenger, also played by Tindberg, Maurstad sits as it were in steerage to hear their exchange. When Peer Gynt pushes the ship's cook off the upturned boat, Maurstad watches in horror. It was only when I found a photograph of this moment in the programme that I realized Maurstad is walking on water, as is the strange passenger: both are in a different, otherworldly dimension from that of the other characters, including Peer Gynt's former selves. As these moments suggest, the Old Peer is for much of the time in a kind of purgatory, but one memorable gesture at least looks forward to possible redemption. In the famous scene, where the young Peer takes his dying mother for an imaginary sleighride to Soria-Maria-slottet [Soria-Maria-Castle] (Ibsen 65–71), Maurstad stood looking down at Ingrid Jørgensen Dragland's Mother Åse's face with sad pity. Here Ulsby chose to disregard Ibsen's stage directions: in the text, the young Peer "*lukker hennes oyne*" [closes her eyes] (Ibsen 70). In the production, Ulsby, rightly I think, has Peer flee from the face of his mother's death. It is left to Maurstad to close her eyes. It is as if there are two dimensions of time in the scene: the unforgiving linear time that will turn Peer Gynt into a human troll and a spiritual time in which the past can be undone.

In the closing scenes of the play, Maurstad was left alone with the Buttonmoulder, Solveig, and, except for the final few moments, with himself. He spoke the lines beginning "Så usigelig fattig kan en sjæl da gå/tilbage til intet i det tåkete grå" [So unspeakably poor, then, can a soul take its journey/back to nothing in the misty grey] (Ibsen 164) without self-pity or bitterness. The speech became more of a secular kenosis than an anagnorisis—an emptying of the self to give room for some form of grace. This was truly great acting. In her review for *Verdens Gang*, Borghild Maaland probably spoke for us all who were present that evening:

I en sluttscene der han ser ut som en liten, usikker mann som gjør et siste forsook på å IKKE gå utenom vanskelighetene, er han formidabel stor. Jeg har aldrig sett en avslutning på en Peer Gynt-forestilling som har berørt meg sterkere. Det er sett og slett teatermagi.

(Maaland, Borghild. 2018. "Mesterlig Maurstad." *Verdens Gang*, September 9. Accessed 29 October 2018. <https://www.vg.no/rampelys/i/9m4k4p/mesterlig-maurstad>.)

[In a final scene where he, as a small, uncertain man who makes one last attempt NOT to go round about his difficulties, he is formidably great. I have never seen an ending of a Peer Gynt production that has moved me so strongly. It is complete theatre magic.]

Yes, few audience members will forget the moment when Allo Winther's Peer as a child ran downstage to take Maurstad's hand before they seemed to walk upstage into the hereafter. Levin was not exaggerating when she chose for her review's headline the words: "En Peer Gynt for evigheten" [A Peer Gynt for Eternity].

John Lingard

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#### NOTES

1. Unless otherwise stated, quotations are from the unnumbered programme notes. All translations from the Norwegian are my own.
2. Keats, John. 1997. "On Sitting Down to Read King Lear Once Again." In *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*. Shorter 4th ed. Edited by Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy, 496. New York: W. W. Norton and Company.