ROBERT WILSON’S STAGING OF *PEER GYNT* AND THE NORWEGIAN TRADITION

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**The Norwegian Ibsen Tradition**

The notion of an “Ibsen tradition” in Norwegian theatre basically designates the continuous presentation of new productions of Ibsen’s plays, and, as an essential part of that, the development and maintaining of a psychological realist way of acting. The tradition, however, not only consists in a certain Ibsenian performing style, it also comprises reception of performances. Thus the tradition encompasses practitioners and spectators in a continuous historical process of ‘negotiations’ between conventional and non-conventional modes of expression and reception.

The psychological realistic acting evolved step by step from the 1880s among Norwegian actors and actresses through their work with Ibsen roles. In the first decades of the twentieth century this was established as a general ensemble style, to begin with at The National Theatre (Nationaltheatret) in Kristiania/Oslo. This psychological realistic acting style – which can be denoted “the Ibsen Tradition” – constitutes a dominating feature of Norwegian theatre throughout the twentieth century. Of course there have been breaches from this realistic tradition, for example in the 1920s and 1930s with productions inspired by modernist trends in European theatre. And again from the 1970s and onwards till today’s theatre increasing tendencies towards new modes of theatrical expressions can be observed in Norwegian theatre.

The Ibsen tradition in Norwegian theatre is so comprehensive that the performance histories of some of the most famous plays can be seen as
individual lines of tradition. This counts especially for the performance history of *Peer Gynt* following an own line of development characterized by national romantic motives. Yet, this performance tradition has also to some extend been marked by psychological realism, which not necessarily implies opposition to (national) romanticism!

It was Ibsen himself who took the initiative to the first production of *Peer Gynt* when he in 1874 asked Edvard Grieg to compose music for a shortened and ‘melodramatic’ stage version of the play, as Ibsen wrote to Grieg. The first performance took place in 1876 at Christiania Theatre. The Swedish director Ludvig Josephson, who at this time was artistic director at Christiania Theatre, staged the play with spectacular ‘Norwegian’ decorations. Along with Grieg’s lyrical music this gave the production a popular appeal. The unity of the spectacular sceneries and Grieg’s music was the basis of the national-romantic Peer Gynt tradition. Another important element was the ‘Norwegian’ characterisation of the persons, especially Peer, performed by Henrik Klaussen as a frisky and ‘typical Norwegian’ country lad. The production was a huge box-office success, and it was performed 40 times the first year, until a fire in 1877 destroyed the set and the costumes.¹

The production attracted attention outside Norway and was among others copied at The Dagmar Theatre in Copenhagen. *Peer Gynt* soon became a symbol, in Norway and abroad, of Norwegianness and Norwegian theatre. The production marked the beginning of a lasting comprehension in Norway of *Peer Gynt* as a play about Norwegian identity.

After the first production in 1876, was the national romantic approach to *Peer Gynt* further developed by the director Bjørn Bjørnson (1859-1942), to begin with at Christiania Theatre, where he was engaged 1884-1993, and then later at The National Theatre (Nationaltheatret) established 1899 as a replacement of Christiania Theatre. Bjørn Bjørnson was son of the influential nationalist writer Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson (1832-
1910), who also played an important role in the development of Norwegian theatre. Bjørn Bjørnson was educated actor from the conservatory in Vienna, after which he worked as an actor in the famous Saxe-Meiningen ensemble, which at that time was at the height of its artistic carer. Bjørn Bjørnson introduced the detailed exterior realistic style from Saxe-Meiningen’s theatre to Norwegian theatre, but he aimed at giving it a specific Norwegian tone and colour. This he did by means of picturesque Norwegian settings and especially through the development of a ‘natural’ contemporary Norwegian stage language.²

In 1892 Bjørn Bjørnson re-staged Peer Gynt at Christiania Theatre, but only the three first acts. An important contributor to this production was the theatre’s new scene painter Jens Wang. The critics were enthusiastic, especially about the outdoor decorations. The play’s rhymed language was adapted to contemporary every day language, and Bjørnson himself played Peer as an ordinary Norwegian country lad speaking a contemporary Norwegian dialect. In this way was a realistic acting style integrated into the overall national romantic approach.

In Bjørnson’s new staging of the play in 1902, now at The National Theatre in Kristiania, the number of scenes was extended. Also this production became a huge box office success. Meanwhile, some reviewers were critical, as they meant that Ibsen’s text tended to disappear in the spectacular and voluminous sceneries. Bjørn Bjørnson’s staging, with Jens Wang’s settings as an important contribution, was continuously reproduced and developed further with new sceneries in the first three decades of the twentieth century at The National Theatre. Hence the first period of the national romantic Peer Gynt tradition lasted from 1876 and until the 1940s.
Fig. 1: From the scene painter Jens Wang’s publication *Peer Gynt i 24 billeder fra den sceniske fremstilling* (Kristiania 1924) based on photos from Bjørn Bjørnson’s staging 1902 at The National Theatre (Nationaltheatret) in Kristiania (later Oslo).
The main aesthetic characteristics of this tradition can be summarized as:

a) An extensive use of spectacular Norwegian sceneries.

b) Lyrical mood-creating music.

c) Recognisable and thus ‘natural’ representations of Norwegian characters.

The first breach with the national romantic tradition came with a new staging of the play in 1948 at The Norwegian Theatre (Det Norske Teater) in Oslo, which was the first performance of an Ibsen play in New Norwegian language. The director Hans Jacob Nielsen consciously aimed at an ‘anti-romantic’ staging, focussing on the critical and satirical potential of the play. The Norwegian composer Harald Sæverud composed new music for the performance. The decorations were stylized.

In his staging Hans Jacob Nielsen made a differentiation between unrealistic scenes (in the Dovre Hall, the confrontation with the Boyg and the Button Moulder etc.) and realistic scenes (especially the Norwegian). The unrealistic scenes functioned allegorical, as satiric and ideological comments to the realistic scenes.

The production attracted great attention and released an extensive discussion in the press about the play and how to perform it. Hans Jacob Nielsen contributed self to the debate. In a newspaper article he wrote that he did not consider Ibsen’s text at all romantic and that it was the theatre and the tradition that had made Peer Gynt a folkloristic romantic play. Again in the 1970s was the satirical and critical potential of the play emphasized in several productions. Peer Gynt adapted very well to the social critical tendencies of the time and a Brecht-inspired non-psychological mode of presentation. An important example of a new political and Brecht-inspired Norwegian staging was the production at Hålogaland Theatre in Tromsø, directed by Stein Winge. “The play about Peer Gynt” as the performance was named, was presented within a historical-dialectical frame, presenting the reality of the working class of the
eighteenth century through lectures and slides. Thus the performance was intended to function as a historical teaching for the contemporary audience. It is, however, an existential approach to Peer Gynt that has been prevalent in the second half of the twentieth century. Ingmar Bergman’s staging in 1957 at Malmö City Theatre (Malmö Stadsteater) in Sweden was groundbreaking for this approach. In Bergman’s version, the play takes place in Peer’s fantasy or consciousness. Bergman used a high degree of stylization with projections and fragments of realistic stage props. A production at The Norwegian Theatre (Det Norske Teater) in Oslo in 1962, staged by Tormod Skagestad was inspired by Bergman’s production along with the medieval play Everyman. This made Peer Gynt into a ‘mystery play’ about the human life. The unrealistic scenes and Peer’s monologues were interpreted as dreams or visions occurring out of the more realistic scenes. Meanwhile, Peer and the Norwegian characters were performed realistic.

The existential approach was continued by the director Kjetil Bang Hansen in a production from 1978 at Rogaland Theatre in Stavanger. In this production were also the Norwegian scenes stylized and the satire in the folkloristic scenes emphasized. The setting was to a great extent based on lighting. The acting style was physical; movements and visual tableaux replaced much of text. Peer Gynt (performed by Jan Grønli) appeared as a kind of satyr, half man and half animal. The production was pronounced aesthetic and existential, letting the play be a representation of an inner drama about the human search of his humanity.

In 1993 Bang Hansen made a new staging of the play at The National Theatre (Den Nationale Scene) in Bergen. This was partly a repetition of his staging from 1978, but now with use of Grieg’s music and with the national feted singer Sidsel Kyrkjebø as Solveig. This strengthened the national romantic features, but the production was still marked by satire and a general focus on the existentialistic motive. Typically most of the Peer Gynt productions of the 1980s and the 1990s have been existential in their approach to the play. Meanwhile, along with this there has also been a strong tendency towards spectacular and tourist friendly productions of the play, particularly on special outdoor locations. One example of this is in an old stone quarry at Kristiansand, transformed into a magnificent outdoor scene. Here the director Bentein Baardson, made a spectacular staging of the play in 1998. Another important example of the tendency toward national – and tourist friendly – idolization of Peer Gynt is the annual performance (since 1989) of the play in a mountain area in Gudbrandsdalen, where the historical Peer Gynt is supposed to have been living. The scenery for the performance is spectacular with the mountains around and the lake behind the main performance area. The natural surroundings, including the lake, are extensively used in the performance. The performance is now one of the most popular theatrical events in Norway. The combination of the play with the spectacular nature scenery,
live performances of Grieg’s music has made this event a typical example of the increasing national idolization of Peer Gynt – and Henrik Ibsen – in the last decade.

This national idolization seemed to reach a high point with the national Ibsen celebration in 2006, with among others several popularized productions of Peer Gynt aiming at the tourist market and national marketing and branding of Norway abroad. The major example of that was the spectacular production in front of the pyramids of Giza outside of Cairo in November 2006, again in a staging by Bentein Baardson and with Norwegian actors. This production was among others criticised for being marked by a traditional western orientalism.

There is an apparent tendency in the Norwegian Ibsen tradition towards interculturalism. This seems to have been stimulated by the international oriented Ibsen festival held bi-annual in Oslo since 1990. Here Ibsen productions from many different countries and different cultures are being performed along with Norwegian productions. This has contributed to an intercultural opening and globalization of the Norwegian Ibsen tradition, with an expanding variety of approaches towards Ibsen’s plays.

I will however conclude that in the Norwegian Peer Gynt tradition, as it has been developed till now, three main lines of development or approaches can be distinguished:

a) A national romantic approach
b) A satirical-political approach
c) An individualistic-existential approach.
Robert Wilson's staging of Peer Gynt 2005

On the occasion of the 100 years anniversary in 2005 of the dissolution of the union between Sweden and Norway, the American director Robert Wilson was engaged to stage Peer Gynt as a co-production between The Norwegian Theatre (Det Norske Teater) in Oslo and The National Theatre (Den Nationale Scene) in Bergen.5

Robert Wilson is generally, and especially among theatre scholars recognised as a groundbreaking and highly influential theatre makers over the last three decades.6 He started his career in the artistic avant-garde milieu in New York in the 1960s. Early in the 1970s he gained international attention with his large-scale visual performances. From around the mid eighties he began to direct opera and dramatic text, in which he adapted his performance aesthetics to classical theatre texts.

Meanwhile, at this occasion I do not want to discuss the production of Peer Gynt in the light of Wilson’s previous works or in the light of an established comprehension of his style. My intention is to outline an analysis of the production, and discuss this in the context of the Norwegian Ibsen tradition.

Dramaturgical structure

More than a year previous to the rehearsals, Robert Wilson held a workshop at his Watermill Centre in New York, were he together with collaborators worked out a “Project Book” for the production of Peer Gynt. Along with a synopsis of the play is the main content of the “Project Book” the visual drafts of all the planned scenes in the production. Through this was the production preconceived as a course of images, and as such it was staged. The text of the play was authentically translated from Ibsen’s Danish-like Norwegian into New Norwegian language by the well-known dramatist Jon
Fosse. The final production, which lasted about four and a half hour, followed the course of scenes as prescribed in the text.

The most distinctive dramaturgical feature of the production was the separation or estrangement between the visual stagings of ‘living images’ made up by space, light, bodies, movements etc. and on the other side the oral presentation of the text.

Wilson consciously aimed at an estrangement between the visual and the textual by splitting the rehearsals into two separate periods. In the first rehearsal period ten months before the opening, the scenes were worked out visually combining decorations, lightening and choreographed movements without words, but followed by musical improvisations by the composer Michael Galasso, which conveyed the images with a basically musicality. Only in the last rehearsal period, in the month before the opening, did the actors start to speak the lines, whereby the text was mounted together with the images and the music. The intention seems to have been that the staged images should not appear as representation or interpretation of the text, but rather as visual juxtapositions of the text, inviting the spectators to interpret the performance – and the text – from a visual point of view.

The dramaturgical separation of the visual and the textual in two juxtaposed sign systems created an anti-realistic effect. Still, the production did appear as aesthetic unified because of the way the visual and the textual were combined.

All movements of bodies, objects light etc. were marked musically or rhythmically. Along with the visual staging and the text delivery, the musicality was a decisive dramaturgical mean of expression in the production. The music (and the musicality) contributed both to the estrangement between the visual and the text as well as to the combination of these two expressive systems into an aesthetic unity.
Much of the text was delivered sung or rhythmically and with different and strange voice qualities. Music or other acoustic effects often accompanied those parts of the text that were delivered closer to daily speech. Almost all linguistic deliverance was musically marked. The general musicalisation and rhythmification of all kinds of movements and vocal deliverance in the production contributed to the estrangement effect as well as the aesthetic synthesis of separated elements in the production.

Interpretation

Build on my experience as a spectator, I shall propose an interpretation of the production as being about spiritual self-recognition. This motive was especially apparent in the scenes between Peer and Solveig. Other scenes, however, also supported this. As for example the scene in the Dovre Hall where Peer was confronted with the question of the difference between being thyself and being thyself enough, and the scene with the voice in the dark (the Boyg) repeating the words “Who are you?”, “Myself” and “Go roundabout” and the confrontation with the Button-moulder in the scenes just before the aged Peer is united with the love of his heart Solveig.

To set out my interpretation I will only elaborate on the scenes between Peer and Solveig. The relation as exposed in the production was not a love relation between two realistic human individuals. First of all, Solveig did not appear as a real person. Peer could seem more real, but mainly in the sense that he represented a universal human, a kind of Everyman. In relation to Peer, Solveig appeared more as representative of an inner spiritual force. Speaking in terms of C. G. Jung’s psychology of archetypes, Peer appeared as a representation of the limited and earth-bound Ego-consciousness, while Solveig as an archetypical anima figure represented the spiritual core of the individual, the self. The interaction
between them can be understood as a representation of an individuations process, as described by Jung.  

After having been expelled from the sub terrestrial world of the Dovre Hall and haunted by the mysterious voice of the Boyg, Peer awakes in the wood, which in the production was represented by a painted backdrop, showing a wild and romantic forest. He awakes in a confused condition. Soft music is heard, which created a soft loveable atmosphere – in contrast to the mood in the preceding chaotic scenes.

Solveig comes to him dressed in white. Previously she had been dressed in a red dress in a ‘Norwegian’ cut. This place, whereto Peer by mysterious forces has been saved from the underworld of Dovre is not to be perceived as the world of physical reality. It is a spiritual place where Solveig comes to meet him. Peer is lying confused on the left side of the stage; Solveig enters the stage from the right. She moves backwards with a smile on her face turned towards the audience while she gently but urgingly sings “Skam deg” (Shame on you) over and over again. Peer asks her what has happened and she answers, “It was rung with church bells.”

Solveig leaves him, but returns again in the next scene. Peer has started building a hut, represented by simple geometric lines in contrast to the highly complex painting of the wood on the backdrop. Peer asks Solveig: “Why do you come? I am an outlaw.” And she answers: “I have been asked to come.” She brings reindeer antlers on a pillow to him, carrying them like ceremonial objects. After having made a couple of goat-jumps with the antlers to Solveig’s pleasure, Peer carries her over the door step, and she confidently falls asleep on the pillow in the hut.

Meanwhile, outside the hut, Peer is visited by the Woman in Green along with the ugly son, who is the result of her seduction of him into the Mountain Hall of her father, the Dovre King. This confrontation overwhelms Peer with shame and he cannot go back to Solveig. She calls on
him, but he asks her to wait: “It is dark and I have something burdening to
obtain.” Solveig promises to wait.

In the scenes between Peer and Solveig in the wood I see strong indications of ideas
steaming from Gnosticism: the mystery of the feminine divine soul, the Sophia.
Solveig, as she appeared in the production, and in my mind in Ibsen’s text, has
many similarities with the Sophia figure. Sophia is a very central spiritual figure
in the Gnostic mythology and an example of the advanced position of the feminine in
Gnosticism.

Sophia represents wisdom about the spiritual world and about the status of
the human in his/her relation between the physical and the spiritual. She is a
cosmic divine being and at the same time she is the divine spark at the core
of the human individuality. Thus she can mediate between the human and
the divine.8

The mood of the scenes between Peer and Solveig in the wood was loveable. Forces beyond his control had saved Peer from the demonic
turmoil of the hall of Dovre to this paradise-like place, where the love of his
hart, Solveig, comes to meet him. She seems perfectly at home here, nothing but wisdom, love and joy comes from her. She acts and speaks like an initiate or divinity. Peer, on the other hand, is spiritually undeveloped (in his ego-consciousness). He has a great fantasy, but his moral standard is low. This spiritual atmosphere, where Peer finds himself with Solveig, is not only imaginative but also strongly moral, as is expressed in Solveig’s urging at him “Skam deg.” Peer does not posses a spiritual maturity in accordance with this atmosphere. He hasn’t yet learned the spiritual meaning of the feeling of “shame.” Meanwhile he feels himself at home here, and starts to build a hut, which symbolically can be understood as establishing oneself (a humble) a home in the spiritual world.

The feeling of shame is related to being seen by another and seeing oneself from another’s viewpoints. Shame is a very important feeling in Christian mysticism, like Gnosticism. Much of the teaching of Christ is related to the spiritual quality of shame. When confronted with so-called “sinners” he never addressed them as guilty, instead he confronted them in ways that aroused feelings of shame. To be seen by Christ is to be seen by God, and that arouses a strong feeling of shame in the soul. Face to face with God one must feel ashamed of oneself. According to both western and eastern spiritual practices, it is an essential part of self-recognition to see oneself from the viewpoint of another, and realise one’s own moral standard and shortcomings. Peer does not yet know the spiritual meaning of shame, but he is overwhelmed by shame when the Woman in Green visits him with their ugly son. After this he cannot face Solveig and feels himself forced to leave her. He has to learn the lesson of the feeling of shame, learn to see himself through the eyes of others, through the eyes of God. Learn to distinguish between “be thyself enough” and “be thyself.”

In the last part of the production Peer is back in Norway on his way home. Here we experience Peer’s final confrontation with himself and especially his own mortality through the meeting with the Button-moulder
as a guardian at the threshold of death, the black angel (the Lean One) representing the devil and finally Solveig as his saving angel.

With regard to the spiritual individuation motive much could be said about this last part of the performance, especially Peer’s meeting with the Button-moulder. The most important scene, however, was the last one: Peer’s homecoming to Solveig. Humble and shamefully Peer leans on her breast and asks her to name all his sins. But to her he is no sinner. He has made her whole life a song, she says, and points to God as the one to judge him. He then asks her: “Can you tell where Peer Gynt has been since we parted?” Laughing she answers: “The answer to that riddle is easy: In my faith, in my hope, and in my love,” thus referring to St Paul’s hymn of love in the Bible. She then sings her final lullaby for him: “Sleep thou dearest boy of mine! I will cradle you, I will watch you.” Simultaneously she slowly ascends from the ground like a supernatural being. The performance ends with the image of Peer adoring Solveig like a divine Sophia above him.

All characters in the production appeared as figures integrated in living images loaded with references to cultural history, religion and art. They were like living “hieroglyphs” (in the sense Artaud spoke of in The Theatre and its Double) or “archetypes” in the Jungian sense.

Interpreted as an archetype, Peer represented the Ego-consciousness oriented towards the exterior material world: wealth, sex and social status. Simultaneously he is a kind of Everyman struggling to find his true identity. Solveig appeared as a representation of the spiritual self, and such she resembled the Gnostic figure Sophia. I do not mean to say that Solveig can be completely identified as Sophia as represented in Gnostic mythology. Sophia is, however, both a cosmic divine being and at the same time an essential part of the human individuality. Therefore, she can take shape according to the individual human. Solveig is thus only one individual representation of the divine Sophia. Solveig-Sophia is infinitely patient with Peer and gives him one main teaching, as presented in the production: learn
to understand the true meaning of shame. Shame shall not lead you like the Boyg demands Peer to “go roundabout.”

**Wilson’s *Peer Gynt* in light of the Norwegian Ibsen tradition**

**Dramaturgy and reception**

The Ibsen tradition, as it has evolved over the years, is basically a literary theatre tradition. Among theatre critics and educated spectators the demand of conformity between text and performance has been strong with regard to Ibsen productions. It has of course been many breaches from the textual normativity in Ibsen productions, especially from the 1970s and onwards. And today’s Norwegian theatre critics, and along with them the literary educated spectators, are more familiar with unconventional approaches to text in the theatre. However, with a still present literary normativity in the Norwegian Ibsen tradition, one could expect that Wilson, notorious for his visual and anti-literary approach to theatre, with his staging of *Peer Gynt*, would give rise to a discussion of how this national canonized text was treated in the production. The critics perceived the production as surprisingly traditional in its approach to the text. Andreas Wiese wrote in the leading Norwegian newspaper *Dagbladet*: “The text is taken care of, not more edited than what is usual, in a New Norwegian language by Jon Fosse close to Ibsen’s text.”

Another theatre critic Anne-Britt Gran, who is also a theatre scholar and well familiar with Wilson’s form, wrote: “A certain relief was traceable among the audience: we can live with this – Ibsen’s text is well preserved by Wilson as well as Fosse.”

Here Gran points at the still prevalent textual normativity among Norwegian theatregoers, especially in relation to Ibsen. A symptom of this could be observed during the beginning of the performance. It opens with a
several minute long sequence where the large backdrop gradually was lightened up by a stylized sunrise followed by soft music. As Annette Andersen observed and concluded in her master thesis about the production, this opening of the show was an attempt to invite the audience into a visual-contemplative perception of the performance prior to a textual-semantic perception. Meanwhile, both Andersen and I observed during several shows of the production a great deal of chattering among the spectators during this silent opening scene. This continued until the actors started to speak. This seems to illustrate a basically textual approach among ordinary spectators. They do not consider the performance to have started until the first line is spoken!

The dramaturgy of the production was basically scenic, with point of departure in the expressive means of the theatre: space, light, actors’ bodies, movements, voice, rhythm etc. Even if the text was strongly present in the production was the dramaturgy primarily of a visual kind, inviting the spectators to interpret the text through the visual.

Although Norwegian theatre public has become familiar with different kinds of non-literary and visual theatre forms, was Wilson’s consequent visual approach in staging a canonized play still convention-breaking in several ways. This counts for the visual dramaturgy in contrast to the traditional textual dramaturgy as well as Wilson’s approach to actors and acting.

**Acting**

The usual way of directing an Ibsen play and other literary plays is with point of departure in the text. The director and the actors start with reading rehearsals. In the next step the actors move out on the floor, often still with the text in the hand and thus keeping the primary focus on understanding and speaking the lines. Step by step the lines and directions of the text are
transformed into characters and actions in time and space of the performance.

Wilson’s direction does not start with the text. It begins in the space and with the actors’ bodily presence and movements in the space.

The rehearsal process was separated into two phases: “Stage A – silent staging,” almost a year before the opening and “Stage B” in the month before the opening.

In the first phase were the actors’ positions and movements in the scenic space worked out in detail and rhythmically. Movements were rehearsed choreographic. Instead of speaking the lines, the actors counted along with their movements. Often the actors developed the movements through improvisations in dialogue with Robert Wilson, but when a movement or a movement pattern was satisfactory to Wilson, it got noted down and the actors were expected to maintain the movements exactly. This was important, because the movement later should be integrated into the total visual composition, involving a highly complex lightening.

At the end of the first rehearsal period the actors were told to learn the text by heart before the final rehearsal period. The actors did not know how much of the text that was going to be part of the production. The only thing Wilson said to them about the text was that he did not want them to rehearse pronunciation.

In the last rehearsal period in the month before the opening, the actors started speaking. The circumstance that the actors first started to speak the lines at this late stage of the rehearsals and independent of the fixed movement patterns, made it difficult for them to develop psychological-realistic interpretations of their roles. When asked, Wilson never would give directions of interpretation of the text. His directions on how to deliver the text only considered pitch, speed and tone of voice. Most of the Norwegian actors, especial those with much experience from comedy, seemed to have adapted well to Wilson’s direction. In interviews some of
The actors described their experience of the work. Generally they were positive, like for example Wenche Medbøe who played Mother Aase, who said: “He has made a choreography that I experience is very much in accordance with us. It is exactly as if he knew my way of moving.”

The well known comedian Harald Heide-Steen who played the Dovre King said: “It is very funny - because he starts in the wrong end with light and movements - and then puts on the text in the end.” When saying this he implicitly referred to the established and common way of rehearsing a role, namely by starting with the text. The general Norwegian acting style as it is developed through the Ibsen tradition is first of all a linguistic mode of expression. Facial mimic and movements follows as reflections of the psychological interpretation of the words spoken. However, some of the actors had troubles with Wilson’s direction, for example the younger Endre Hellestvedt who played Peer in the middle part (the African scenes). In an interview in the journal of the actors union he described his frustrations in the work with Wilson:

The directions I got on text were mainly about whether it should be loud or low. But concerning the idea of the text, I was told to find that out myself. Wilson had made a choreography for me, marking the point where I should stand, that was basically the help I got.

The acting style that Wilson was striving at in the productions reminds of the ideas of acting that Edward Gordon Craig developed, and among others tried to define by means of his concept of the “Übermarionette.” With their white painted faces the actors looked like porcelain dolls. Very often the lines were delivered with the face turned towards the audience with big open eyes and a static smile. The movements were dance-like and unnatural. A typical performance by a Norwegian actor of an Ibsen role is psychological determinated. Psychology is the root of the role interpretation and of the play as a whole. Robert Wilson’s choreographic and non-
interpretational approach to acting was therefore a marked breach with the established and still prevalent psychological realistic way of acting in Norway. On the other side, this approach seemed to adapt quite well to an established comic acting style. This is more stereotypical and exterior, using physical and often surprising modes of expressions without inner psychological coherence, and thus in line with Wilson’s approach.

**Interpretation**

Several times during the rehearsals, at press conferences and in interviews given in relation to the production, Wilson explicitly expressed his unwillingness to interpret a text when staging it. This makes it meaningless to search for an intended interpretation in the production. Anyhow, this doesn’t make it meaningless to establish and interpretation of the production as it appeared spectator-wise, as for example to me as theatre scholar.

And in my mind was - knowing or unknowing - a certain understanding of *Peer Gynt* exposed or pointed out in the production: *Peer Gynt* as a play about spiritual self-recognition.

Compared with the established ways of interpreting the play: the national romantic, the political-satirical and the existential, this situates the production in the existential tradition. The existential approach was in Wilson’s staging reinforced towards the mystical, but not without ambiguity. This existential mysticism of the production, I have tried to elaborate by mean of C. G. Jung’s concept of individuation and the Gnostic dualism between the everyday ego-consciousness and spiritual self-consciousness.

An existential approach to *Peer Gynt* has been the most prevalent in Norwegian productions for a long period, but, as I have pointed out, has also a new national romanticism, often in combination with an existential
approach, in the last decade become more apparent, maybe especially in connection with the Ibsen celebration 2006.

Wilson’s staging confirms and deepens the existential approach spiritually. The combination of an overall aestheticism with spiritual individualism makes the production distinctly romantic, but not national romantic! The idea of spiritual individualism is essential romantic. Along with this, there were many references and aesthetic elements in the production, which contributed to the establishing of a universal romanticism. For example were the Norwegian references mixed up with references to non-Norwegian culture and art history, which created a kind of universal or global expression. Thus the production was a contribution to a global reception of *Peer Gynt*. The performance was produced in Norway, but its frame of references was universal or global oriented. The production is anyhow not alone standing in this. Globalization is becoming a more and more apparent feature in the Norwegian Ibsen tradition, among others stimulated through the bi-annual International Ibsen festival held in Oslo since 1990.

So in this respect was Wilson’s staging of Peer Gynt not ground breaking new, it confirmed already established tendencies in the Norwegian Ibsen tradition towards visual and spiritual interpretations of Ibsen’s plays and towards a globalisation of the Ibsen reception.
3 New Norwegian is a constructed national language based on dialects especially from the western part of Norway, different from “bokmål”, which has its point of departure in written Danish, but developed in a specific Norwegian way.
4 Referred from Hans Midbøe, op. cit. Midbøe gives an extensive documentation of the most important productions of Peer Gynt in Norway until the beginning of the 1970s.
5 The opening was on 19 February 2005 in Oslo. In May, the same year, the production was shown in Bergen as part of Bergen International Festival and during autumn 2005 it ran at The National Theatre in Bergen. During Easter 2006 the production visited Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York.
7 Anima is Jung’s concept of the feminine aspect of a man’s soul that he has to come to terms with in the process of selfrecognition or individuation. The female anima in men corresponds with the male animus in woman. According to Jung’s psychology are “anima” and “animus” two of the most central psychological archetypes. Another central archetype is “The shadow,” but Jung has pointed out many other archetypical figures and transpersonal symbols. The archetypes belong to a “collective unconscious” common for all human beings and all cultures. The archetypes are represented in a huge variety of mythological, religious, artistic and psychological figures and symbols. The mental process of individuation described from many viewpoints by Carl G. Jung and his pupils. See for example C.G. Jung, The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious, Collected Works, vol. IX, part I, and Aion: researches into the phenomenology of the self, Collected Works, vol. IX, part II, New York: Pantheon Books, 1968, M.-L. Franz, “The individuation process” in C.G. Jung (ed.) Man and his symbols, Garden City/New York: Doubleday, 1964, and Edward Edinger, Ego and Archetype, New York: Putnam, 1992.
8 The Gnostic mythology of Sophia can be read out of old scriptures like the “Pistis Sophia” (known from 1795), “On the origin of the World” and “The Sophia of Jesus Christ,” both from the Nag Hammadi Scriptures found in 1945 in Egypt and published in different translations. Since the finding of the hitherto unknown Gnostic scriptures in Nag Hammadi, the scholarly as well as the general interest in Gnosticism has grown considerably. Gnostic ideas have, however, been apparent throughout European history in religious groupings, among mystics, alchemists and artists. The ideas are still present and exercise a strong attraction on many. C. G. Jung was very interested in Gnosticism in which he found many resemblances to his archetypical and transpersonal psychology. Gnosticism also inspires parts of the feminist movement. For example, the modern idea of God as a woman is directly inspired from Gnostic thinking. The literature on Gnosticism is comprehensive.
9 Dagbladet, 20 February 2005.
12 Interview in Aftenposten, 19 January 2005.
13 Ibid.
14 Stikkordet 1, 2005.
Bibliography

Andersen, A. S., “The Mind is a Muscle”. “The Body is an Ear”.


