



Ibsen Across Cultures

跨文化的易卜生

主编 孙建 [挪威] 弗洛德·赫兰德
Sun Jian Frode Helland

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Preface

On the morning of June 15, 2009, the conference hall in Guanghua Tower at Fudan University in Shanghai was filled to capacity. The XII International Ibsen Conference was being held there with the presence of more than 80 participants from 18 countries around the world. The conference, the first one held outside West, was a grand occasion for the Ibsen scholars when “All the virtuous intellectuals gathered, varying from old and young” as a Chinese expression goes.

I still cherish a pleasant and vivid memory of my experience in Oslo where I attended the XI International Ibsen Conference during which I was first approached one day by two renowned Ibsen scholars, Professor Errol Burbach (President of IIC) and Professor Helge Rønning (an IIC member), who asked me about the possibility of having the next conference at Fudan University in Shanghai. And then on a later occasion, Professor Joan Templeton met with me at a party in a beautiful garden owned by the Aschehoug Publishing Company at Hafersfjordgate in Oslo and formally invited me to be the organizer of the future conference. Finally the XI International Ibsen Committee designated Fudan University as the venue for the XII International Ibsen Conference. I felt very happy and excited after the announcement, regarding the endorsement as an honor not only for Fudan University but for China as well.

Ibsen has remained a popular dramatist in China and he has made a notable contribution to China in the process of its modernity. He was one of the Western writers first introduced into China during the stormy years at the beginning of the 20th century when China started to transform itself from a feudalistic nation into a modern one. His plays, especially his *A Doll House*, inspired not only the Chinese playwrights who endeavored to revolutionize the traditional theatre in China but also the young intellectuals seeking to set up a brand new society free from all the suffocating old doctrines during the New Culture Movement and the May 4th Movement. Ambassador Svein O. Sæther was precise to point out in his opening remarks at the XII International Ibsen

Conference: "The interest for Ibsen in China has long roots, going back to the May 4th Movement in 1919 and the famous Chinese author Lu Xun." His words were echoed by Professor Joan Templeton, President of the XII International Ibsen Committee, who spoke in her address on behalf of the committee that "Ibsen's influence has been primordial both in Chinese theatre and in Chinese social and cultural history since the early years of the 20th century."

Fudan University was one of the pioneering universities in China to embrace the reform both in the theatre and the society with gusto. The famous Chinese dramatist Hong Shen, who was determined to become "the Chinese Ibsen", contributed greatly to the development of the new theatre. He came to teach at Fudan in 1923 and helped establish the Fudan Drama Society which did much to popularize the ideas of modern Western drama represented by Ibsen. Since then, Ibsen's plays have been regularly taught and performed on Fudan campus.

Since China opened up to the outside world in the 1980s, Fudan University has become an important venue for many activities and academic exchanges related to Ibsen. In 1987, a course on the selected readings of Ibsen's plays was offered. From 2003 to 2006, a series of activities, such as the International Ibsen Symposium, the Seminar on the "Ibsen between Cultures" and the Ibsen Memorial Week, took place at the university with the participation of many scholars from home and abroad.

On April 11, 2007, a plenary meeting of the XII International Committee was held at Fudan University. The members reviewed the report for the preparation, inspected the venue and chose "Ibsen Across Cultures" as the theme for the conference after a serious discussion. The call for papers then specified the theme as the one "intended to prompt questions about what constitutes a cultural boundary, about the ways in which dramatic texts and performances are culturally 'marked,' and about the uses and appropriations of Ibsen's dramas in cultural contexts outside those of the author."

During the weeklong conference, the participants presented many thought-provoking papers by focusing on such topics under the general theme as translations and adaptations of Ibsen's plays, Ibsen in performance, the use and appropriations of Ibsen in a multicultural context, cultural specificity, and so on. A lot of new ideas and perspectives were raised, discussed and debated, adding a new dimension to Ibsen studies. The key-note speeches given by some noted Ibsen scholars demonstrated well the results of their research on Ibsen and drew positive response and comments from the participants. It goes without saying that the papers collected in this

proceedings will be a great asset to Ibsen studies in the future.

Apart from meetings in the conference halls and meeting rooms, we also took a tour to the ancient village of Zhou Zhuang where we had one session on a beautiful Chinese style boat in the lake. And we also saw a performance of Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea* at the Shanghai Theatre Academy organized by Professor Liu Minghou with a setting of Shanghai in the 1930s. Both events lent color to the conference with many local and cultural elements.

Though three years have passed since the convening of the XII International Ibsen Conference at Fudan University in Shanghai, the historical significance of the conference cannot be overemphasized. Ibsen first crossed the cultural boundaries one century ago and made a great impact in China, and in this age of globalization when different cultures interact more intensely, Ibsen has a greater role to play both culturally and artistically. In this respect, "Ibsen Across Cultures" will remain a topical theme for the days to come.

To conclude, I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to all the participants and institutions for their participation, enthusiasm and generous support without which this conference would not have been successful. I would like to specially thank Professor Frode Helland, Director of Centre for Ibsen Studies at Oslo University, who showed great concern for the conference by coming to Fudan twice to help with the preparations and who did a wonderful job by securing enough funding from Norway for the conference. Finally I must thank the Consulate General of Norway in Shanghai for providing financial support for the publication of the proceedings.

Shanghai, October 1, 2012

Sun Jian

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1. Ibsen: A Contemporary Bangladeshi Playwright

In this paper I discuss why Ibsen is a 21st century Bangladeshi playwright. The point I try to make is that Ibsen is one of us, transcending beyond European literature — expressing our thoughts, emotions, aspirations and frustrations. I argue that when we stage Ibsen, we firmly place him in our contemporary time and socio-political background. In other words, I would like to emphasize that we stage Ibsen with a view to unveiling ourselves, to understanding ourselves. I look at two Ibsen performances and a play inspired by Ibsen's oeuvre to see how they act as a commentary on the present-day Bangladesh.

I present here a brief sketch of the recent Ibsen-related activities in the country to ground my thought. Though the plays by Shakespeare, Molière, Brecht and even Beckett have been successfully staged here, Ibsen seems to be a favourite with our theatre directors and groups. That there is a living interest in Ibsen in the country is evident from the 11-day long highly successful Ibsen theatre festival held in November 2009 in the capital city, Dhaka. The festival featured adaptations of Ibsen and performances inspired by him by troupes from Bangladesh as well as the Egypt, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Iran. The local groups performed a number of Ibsen plays to the delight of the packed audiences in different halls of the national theatre complex. The hosts of the event, Centre for Asian Theatre (CAT) which must be credited for institutionalising Ibsen in the country, premièred *The Communicator* by Kamaluddin Nilu — a play that exploited Ibsen as a point of reference to comment upon today's globalized world. There were a three-day seminar at which scholar from home and abroad gave papers on Ibsen and screening of films based on Ibsen plays, exhibitions, interactive sessions with directors and actors to augment the theatre fiesta. Earlier in May 2006, a number of activities, including a theatre festival, an exhibition and a seminar had been arranged to commemorate the death centenary of Ibsen, where, alongside the local groups, professional groups from India, Nepal, Pakistan, China and Japan performed Ibsen plays. Since January that year, as a lead-up to the mega May event, the universities of Dhaka, Rajshahi, Khulna and

Jahangirnagar produced a variety of Ibsen plays, in addition to holding seminars on socio-political aspects of Ibsen. There had been seminars on Ibsen in 1997 and 2002 as well. Besides these efforts, not in too distant a past, *A Doll's House*, *Rosemersholm*, *The Wild Duck*, *Ghosts*, *Peer Gynt*, *An Enemy of the People*, *Brand* were all successfully produced on local stage. Workshops on Ibsen were organised, translations of Ibsen plays were published, and several seminar proceedings came out. Most significantly, liberal arts departments like English and Dramatics of the major public and private universities have included at least one Ibsen play in their syllabi.

Why and how Ibsen generates such an overwhelming interest in the public? What is it that he possesses to command such popularity, admiration and respect? Why Ibsen seems to be a contemporary to the people of the 21st century Bangladesh, speaking to us, about us, with genuine concern, although historically he is a world apart — a Norwegian, writing his plays in the 19th century Europe?

To answer these questions I argue that in depicting the Norway he lived in, Ibsen appears to have portrayed this South Asian country in the shape of her European counterpart. To put it in another way, in Bangladesh we have discovered Ibsen in a new light in our theatre; we have an Ibsen who is thoroughly ours. The Ibsen we encounter, the Ibsen we fashion and refashion tirelessly in our theatrical productions is our Ibsen. In performing Ibsen, we always make it our concern to locate him in our history as well as socio-political setting. And, this is precisely the reason that Ibsen does not speak to us as a *foreigner*; instead, through our practices, we have created him to delve into the hearts of millions of tormented Bangladeshi people. As Bangladesh's leading director and theatre personality Kamaluddin Nilu puts it:

We consider Ibsen's plays as a tool to depict and describe social inequalities and suppressive forces in our contemporary society. This is why "adapted Ibsen" is more important than "translated Ibsen". Through adaptation the message inherent in the drama comes closer to the audience. In adapted versions of Ibsen's plays people can understand the message within the frame of the social conditions they are a part of and their own thoughts, culture, rituals and traditions. That is why we are still going back to Ibsen's plays and why our modern playwrights are still being influenced by Ibsen. (1997: 3)

Nilu reasserts his strategic place for localizing Ibsen to make him more meaningful and rich in his Bergen Conference article, "Staging Ibsen in Bangladesh: Relevance and Adaptation" as follows:

1. Ibsen: A Contemporary Bangladeshi Playwright

The socio-political issues Henrik Ibsen deals with are still relevant. Ibsen has transcended geographical and socio-cultural barriers and has become a timeless voice against the restraints and cultural conceptions and social forces put on individuals. However, plays conveying a particular message have to suit the socio-political conditions and the cultural conceptions of the audience in order to be understood and hence considered to be relevant. (2001: 119)

It thus follows that when a dramatic text is put to intercultural exchange, it is the target audiences' history and culture that should play a decisive role in matters of its performance and reception. Expressing his "discomfort" at the "dominant tendency to dehistoricize Indian culture" by "Euro-American interculturalists", Rustom Bharucha categorically states:

Essentially — and there is no other way that I can state my position — the interpretation and use of cultures have to be confronted within the particularities of a specific historical condition. [...] A critique of interculturalism must necessarily focus on specific cultures and the diverse ways in which they are seen and used. (Bharucha 1993: 1 – 2)

Perhaps, here, it would not be out of place to cite Bharucha's experience of the "theatre journey" he undertook with German designer and director, Manuel Lutgenhorst in connection with their staging of "a one-woman, wordless play" entitled *Request Concert* by Franz Xaver Kroetz in five Asian cities:

Our purpose was to situate the German text *within the cultural contexts and actual living conditions* to be found in different parts of Asia. Since the play focuses on the everyday life of a working woman and her household routine on one particular evening, involving cooking, eating, watching television, listening to the radio and stitching, it lends itself to the most detailed examination of everyday actions and gestures, which vary considerably in different socio-cultural contexts. An additional complexity is provided in the final action of this non-eventful play, when the woman commits suicide with a matter-of-face calm. Unavoidably, we were compelled to *question the validity of this action within the social contexts* of Asian women and their connections to the larger movements of feminism in the world today. It was by focusing on the *specific worlds of individual Asian women* that we were able to explore the intercultural possibilities of Kroetz's text. (ibid 1993: 5; my italics)

The key idea emerging from the experience is that a dramatic performance should take into cognizance “the cultural contexts and actual living conditions” of the people in a given country where the performance takes place, as it should interrogate “the validity of [...] action within the social contexts” of the same country. That Bharucha is interested in testing the validity of an action within a particular social context is revealed through his experiment with *Peer Gynt* — *Gundegowdana Charitre* (The History of Gundegowda). Performed in Kannada by the Rangayana Theatre in Mysore, Karnataka in India in 1995, Bharucha’s *Peer* was intended to critique “India’s ‘unity in diversity’ — the *mantra* of the nation-state”. Bharucha engaged himself with the Ibsen play because “*Peer Gynt* was never a ‘foreign’ text for [him], even before it had been transformed into *Gundegowda*”. The European classic “became even more strangely and profoundly ‘Indian’, not just ‘universal’” (Bharucha 2003 [2001]: 90) in the aftermath of the demolition of Babri Masjid on December 6, 1992 by the Hindu fundamentalists.

Xiaomei Chen also emphasizes upon local situations for a performance to be understood and appreciated. She analyses the Chinese adaptations of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Brecht’s *Life of Galileo* and Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* to reveal that in these productions the Western dramatists were “appropriated as something ‘Chinese’ and came to play [their ...] dramatic role[s] in cross-cultural literary history in early post-Mao China” (Chen 2002: 47).

Hence, I argue that the social-political-cultural-historical issues of Bangladesh have always topped the agenda in our complex understanding and handling of Ibsen plays. My contention is that Bangladesh’s directors have exploited Ibsen as if he were a lens to reflect upon the country as well as their compatriots. As I have stated at the outset, I would have a look at two Ibsen plays — *Brand* and an adaptation of *An Enemy of the People* — and *Resurrection*, a play inspired by the works of Ibsen to justify my contention. *Brand* and *Resurrection* were directed by Nilu and were produced by CAT while I adapted and directed Khulna University, Bangladesh’s production of *An Enemy of the People*. The analysis are far from comprehensive; yet I hope that the brief discussions will show how the Ibsen plays and *Resurrection* act as critical commentaries upon today’s Bangladesh.

Brand

Translated by Monzur-i-Mowla, *Brand* was brought to stage at a time when Bangladesh caught the attention of the globe for the rise of militant

“Islamic” fundamentalists all over the country. The security of the state was at stake because of the declared onslaught by the fanatics. You could see their mighty presence everyday in the media. By misinterpreting the message of Islam, which does not permit shedding of the innocent blood, the so-called “Islamic” fundamentalists killed many in its name. They openly expressed their disregard and hatred towards the state’s institutions, including the judiciary, and declared that they would raze them to the ground as these, according to their allegations, did not conform to their interpretation of the Quranic strictures. Indeed, the court became the prime target of their bloody attacks and two judges were literally blown away on their way to the court. A section of journalists also suffered because they published *damaging* reports about their activities. August 17, 2005 will be remembered as a black day in the history of the country because, on this day, the extremists carried out a series of nearly simultaneous bomb attacks at sensitive places in all district headquarters, including the capital. Blessed by their politician bosses who, arguably, featured in the then government, the religious bigots were prepared to do everything for establishing “the rule of God”. They refused to allow any faith or creed other than theirs to be there in place.

This is where *Brand* becomes really important to us. The protagonist Brand is an extremist who too refuses to accept that there can be other beliefs equally important to their believers and followers. The play could serve as an eye-opener in that it highlights the disturbing fact that it does not matter whether you are a Christian bigot or a Muslim fundamentalist, or for that matter a Jewish fanatic, your vision has to be blurred by prejudices. The religious extremists like Brand, with their conceited and parochial views have retained, irrespective of time and place, their characteristic traits of not being accommodative or understanding. Nilu reveals;

The major back-drop for my interpretation of *Brand* is religious fundamentalism, as observed both in the Bangladeshi political-religious context and in certain aspects of the world political situation, notably ongoing conflicts which overtly or under the surface are about religious hegemony and in particular the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. (2007; 107)

Nilu perceives the play as “an attack on fanaticism of all sorts, including religious fundamentalism” (ibid; 109). He then offers a comparison between “*Brand’s basic ideas*” and “*The basic ideas of Islamic fundamentalists*” to conclude his piece with the following reflection:

A character analysis of *Brand* therefore provides insight into the understanding of frequently observed activities of Islamic fundamentalists whether in the form of agitation and attacks to overthrow a government, attacks on people with a different religious belief or enforcement of their values on their fellow citizens. (ibid: 120)

The ending of *Brand* is pregnant with meaning for the Bangladeshi director. He interprets “Brand’s death in the avalanche as a metaphor for the burial of extreme idealism or fanaticism” (ibid: 113). The Bangladesh production of *Brand* makes it explicit that the protagonist’s death in the avalanche is nature’s revenge on unnaturalism. In other words, the production propagates the message that fundamentalism or fanaticism does not and cannot succeed in the end.

An Enemy of the People

Khulna University’s production of *An Enemy of the People* (2006) made an attempt to adapt Ibsen to comment upon the existing social-political-religious setting of the country. The case of common “failings” and the individual’s single-handed battle to establish truth drove me to adapt and direct the play. The production shared its title with illustrious film maker Satyajit Ray’s *Ganashatru*, with a view to simultaneously paying homage to Ray’s classic interpretation of the play from an Indian perspective, as well as preparing the audiences for a play that is firmly rooted in their own time and place. Contrary to the contemporary interpretations of Stockmann in Norway and other Western countries that even reduce him to a clown, we have attempted a compassionate understanding of the doctor^① who, in our version, is a college principal who “with an indomitable life-force symbolises ... Shelley’s ‘West Wind’ that signals the death of the old and the birth of the new” (*Playbill* 2006). Indeed, I have aimed to create a hero in Principal Monwar because what we lack is a hero in our country. Thus, in our production, we have transformed Ibsen to suit the experience and expectations of the audiences.

We also accommodated a myth; the myth had it that the “pool is holy and

① A recent adaptation of the play, *Shatrughna* by Mamumun Rashid premiered during the last Ibsen festival in Dhaka by one of the leading groups of the country, Arannyak also attempted a sympathetic understanding of Doctor Stockmann. In this production the doctor is pitted against his highly powerful younger brother who is presented as an agent of the capitalist world. It lays bare how the younger brother makes life miserable for the poor masses to achieve his *cherished dream* of making poverty a museum-piece in Bangladesh. The Stockman character refuses to give in; he would fight till death.