

Staging Henrik Ibsen's and Jon Fosse's Mental Landscapes: Myth, Allegory, and Mise-en-Scène in *The Lady from the Sea* and *Someone is Going to Come*

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ABSTRACT

Norway's best-known contemporary playwright Jon Fosse has often been compared to Henrik Ibsen, no less because of the two dramatists' common emphasis on their native physical landscape as a mirror of the protagonists' emotional and existential conflict. In Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea* (1888) and in Fosse's *Someone is Going to Come* (1996) in particular, characters and actions – although generated within specific geographical and cultural co-ordinates – rise to the level of archetypes and acquire timeless significance.

This comparative study traces a continuum from the modernist Ibsen to Fosse's humanistic postmodernism in so far as the authors' treatment of psychology, structure, and landscape exposes ideas and endorses themes and images, which in turn account for similar patterns of staging. In a context whereby myth and allegory are projected against a background defined by the ocean and unfamiliar horizons, the markedly schematic representation of existential dread in both plays reveals strong visual conceits that are uncannily similar to the effect that one cannot really read or direct Fosse without making a mental note of Ibsen's drama. The "haunted" nature of the spectator's experience notwithstanding, both texts seem to be a director's ideal material, hosting the natural environment so intensely so that it becomes an extension of the characters, punctuating the important stations in their lives and adding emotional and sensory texture to their words and their actions. From the point-of-view of a theatre director, decoding the plays' imagistic identity becomes primarily an immersive experience in the Nordic landscape – of both nature and the mind.

KEYWORDS

Norwegian theatre, Henrik Ibsen, Jon Fosse, contemporary directing, symbolist theatre, allegory

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Staging Henrik Ibsen's and Jon Fosse's Mental Landscapes: Myth, Allegory, and Mise-en-Scène in *The Lady from the Sea* and *Someone is Going to Come*

INTRODUCTION

The similarities between Jon Fosse's *Someone is Going to Come* (1996) and Henrik Ibsen's *The Lady from the Sea* (1888) – written more than a hundred years before Fosse's play—are numerous and striking. The figurative representation of existential dread is prevalent in both texts, and one cannot really read or stage Fosse without making a mental note of Ibsen's drama. My own experience of directing Fosse's play¹ was one where sensory, psychological, and structural echoes from Ibsen reverberated in the work profusely, referencing common motifs in the treatment of setting and subject matter. Trying to serve Fosse's demanding poetry, I used *The Lady from the Sea* as a parallel narrative for many rehearsal explorations. For one thing, while working on the characters of She and Man, I could not help turning to Ellida and Stranger, respectively, as if looking for an archetype to base my analysis on. Moreover, before settling on the concept of the weather-beaten house, which became the set design's central metaphor, I revisited Ibsen for visual clues and inspiration. In a way, the remarkable kinship between the two plays felt almost too good to pass by.

My scholarly interest in the two writers notwithstanding, having staged Fosse and mentally directed Ibsen, I based part of the present study, which concerns the function of myth, allegory, and symbolism in the two writers, on my rehearsal observations for *Someone is Going to Come* and my extensive director's notes during a close reading of *The Lady from the Sea*. In many ways, the process proved quite demanding, especially in so far as

1 Produced by Teatro Versus. At Teatro Ena, Nicosia and Limassol, Cyprus (2013). Performed by Fani Petsa, Konstandinos Gavriel and Andreas Nicolaides. Set and Costume design by Elena Katsouri. Original music by Nikos Vittis. Lighting Design by Joseph Christodoulides.

marrying academic and theoretical analysis with actual directorial practice was concerned. However, it also produced rich insights for both plays. Applying on my analysis staging principles that had either been tested in actual practice (in Fosse's case) or carefully considered in virtual preparation for a future performance (in the case of Ibsen), I came to view the plays as culture-bound, yet remarkably allegorical: they are tales of an individual's quest for fulfillment and self-definition, containing in their imagery universal meaning about the human existence.

Marvin Carlson lucidly argued that one of the universals of performance, both East and West, was its "ghostliness, its sense of return."² Quoting Herbert Blau's "we are seeing what we saw before,"³ he commented on theatre's "uncanny but inescapable impression upon the spectators" that "the present experience is always ghosted by previous experiences and associations while these ghosts are simultaneously shifted and modified by the process of recycling and recollection."⁴ Elin Diamond had theorized the "re" phenomenon, pointing out that "while a performance embeds traces of other performances" – as do in fact texts and playwrights – it also produces "an experience whose interpretation only partially depends on previous experience."⁵ For the purposes of this article, it must be stressed that from a director's perspective, the affinity between Ibsen and Fosse feels important for one additional reason: given the writers' shared geographical and cultural context, a contemporary audience will inevitably come to Fosse's productions carrying memories of Ibsen's plays. In this respect, Fosse's productions may indeed appear "haunted" by Ibsen, despite the fact that Fosse denies any such connection. While it is certainly worth considering whether international audiences who attend Ibsen and Fosse have certain expectations of what Norwegian drama looks like on stage, it is, I believe, of more interest to identify the mental event in which directors, actors, and spectators are involved. This may have a lot to do with the audience's empirical experiences but also with their exposure to imaginary constructions of the Nordic element, which, more often than not, carry associations of spectacular fjords and lakes, subliminal midsummer skies, breath-taking vistas, and very dark winters.

Fosse, Norway's greatest living playwright and one of the most acclaimed and prolific playwrights worldwide, is celebrated for his elliptical style and the idiosyncratic poetry of his dialogue. He has often been characterized the "new Ibsen" (as well as the "new Beckett"), and his plays have been translated into over sixty languages and performed all over the world. Whether or not Fosse is writing from within the Ibsen tradition is a matter that has already been granted scholarly attention.⁶ What my own contribution aims

2 Carlson 2003, 1.

3 Blau 1987, 173.

4 Carlson 2003, 2.

5 Diamond 1995, 2.

6 See, for example, Korynta 2012, where it is argued that Fosse can in fact be

to provide is an investigation of the aspects of the symbolic and the mystical (mysterious and cryptic) in the two writers' textual imagery, an examination of the ways in which characters and actions rise to the level of archetypes, becoming imbued with timeless import. The metaphoric function of the Nordic landscape in both plays – notably, the wilderness of the open sea becoming an expression of Ellida's and She's state of mind – establishes a common base on which most of the external and inner action unfurls in a series of consistent patterns. Pondering on how Ibsen's and Fosse's symbols function on stage, I will try to locate elements in the text that are particularly conducive to a director's staging of allegory, and illustrate, by means of example, how set, lighting, music, and the actor's delivery can bring these elements to the foreground in performance. In doing so, I will pore over dramaturgical and stage-informed parameters, hoping not just to trace a continuum from the modernist Ibsen to Fosse's postmodern écriture, but also to look at this "ghosting" process and how it affects the modern spectator.

In effect, not only does the treatment of psychology, structure, character, and landscape expose symbolic motifs that will invariably generate corresponding patterns in staging, but, perhaps more importantly, one notices how the Norwegian landscape, which clearly defines action, becomes a shared emotional property for Ibsen's and Fosse's audiences. The question that Una Chaudhuri raised in the seminal study *Land/Scape/Theatre*⁷ of "whether every landscape is not always in fact a 'culturescape'"⁸ seems particularly resonant here. As Fuchs argues in the same work, the end of the nineteenth century saw a shift in the viewing of landscape as an "independent figure: not simply a support to human action, but entering it in a variety of different roles, for instance, as mentor, obstacle, or ironist."⁹

DRAMA AND DRAMATURGY

Although Fosse emphatically denies any strong intertextual connection to Ibsen, claiming, when receiving the prestigious Ibsen award in 2010, that being called "the new Ibsen" shows "a lack of respect for Ibsen," besides showing a lack of respect for him,¹⁰ an affinity between the two Norwegian writers in terms of theme and emotive context cannot be overlooked. There is good reason why Fosse's dramatic oeuvre has been paralleled to "Ibsen stripped

called "post-Ibsen," as he is writing after, and with aspects of Ibsen's style, but goes beyond it (208).

7 In Fuchs and Chaudhuri 2002, 10. Fuchs and Chaudhuri examine landscape theatre in terms of its ability to "retrace the trajectory followed by the concept of landscape itself, from two-dimensional representation to three-dimensional environments, from a tract of land capable of being seen at a glance to an environment one can explore and inhabit" (21). In doing so, they further develop the notion of theatre spatiality as a mental concept that envelops and adds to the plays' physical action.

8 Fuchs and Chaudhuri 2002, 11.

9 Fuchs and Chaudhuri 2002, 30.

10 Qtd in Korynta 2012, 14.

down to its emotional essentials,” to borrow the apt phrasing of the *New York Times*, after the U.S. premiere of *Death Variations* in 2006.¹¹ With respect to our two texts of study, a careful reading will inevitably reveal marked similarities: notably, the neo-biblical associations of the myth of Creation, with the “uncanny” significance of the Stranger/Man in the heart of it, together with the metaphysics of landscape – embodied in the allegorical dimension of the Sea and the notion of Home turned exile. In a sense, both texts are a directors’ ideal material, encouraging extensive experimentation with symbols, beyond the confines of a four-wall Realistic representation. In these plays, Ibsen and Fosse engage with the natural environment so deeply that it becomes an extension of the characters, punctuating important stations in their lives and adding emotional and sensory texture to anything they say or do.

The Lady from the Sea is nowhere near as famous as Ibsen’s revered masterpieces *The Wild Duck*, *A Doll’s House* or *Hedda Gabler*. Yet, it has always held a peculiar fascination for directors, no less because of its potent scenographic scope. The play tells the story of Ellida, the daughter of a lighthouse keeper from a region where the fjord meets the sea, who marries the widower Dr Wangel and moves to a small town in the mountains of West Norway to become mother to his two daughters. The crisis begins once Ellida’s old lover, a sailor called “Freeman,” to whom she had been previously engaged, comes back to claim her, after several years of separation. The bond between Ellida and the character that Ibsen named “Stranger” is strongly based on their love for the sea and the unknown, so when Ellida finally decides to remain in her marriage, one can argue that she is ultimately opting for an earthly existence, away from the chaotic implications of an uncharted, precarious relationship.

Someone is Going to Come – Fosse’s earliest and most produced play ever – seems variously indebted to *The Lady from the Sea*, one of Ibsen’s admittedly least successful plays. The love triangle theme is articulated in its most unnerving ramifications, which well supersede the choice of erotic companion. Fosse’s play feels like an inverted modern-day version of Ibsen’s drama: a couple arrives at a remote seaside location, full of expectation to move into a new house and get away from the pressures of living in society. Soon, a fleeting impression that “someone is going to come” (16) becomes a disturbing obsession, growing into an open threat when a man who claims to be the previous owner of the house and a neighbor actively intrudes into He’s and She’s life. While in Ibsen the looming presence of the Stranger originates in Ellida’s past, in *Someone is Going to Come*, the mysterious Man appears to have sprung out of nowhere, yet is altogether anchored to an ominous future, undermining the couple’s hopes for tranquility away from the demands of social interaction.

In a potential staging, building a *mise-en-scène* around the plays’ enigmatic mood could be a way of integrating the different textures of threat that so

11 Gates 2006.

obviously pervade them both – spreading from mere unease to utter despair in Fosse’s case, and a mock-resolution in Ibsen’s text. The conflict between the imagined and the actual presence of the Stranger (in Ibsen) / Man (in Fosse) is in fact a most powerful conceptual trope on which a production can be grounded. It is the female characters that first experience anxiety over the impending arrival, until it gradually creeps into the consciousness of Wangel and He (as Fosse calls the character of the husband). Specifically, in her confession to Wangel, Ellida speaks of the horror, “the thing...that draws me to it and strikes terror in to my heart” (4:84). She also makes reference to “dread” (2:48), while Wangel mentions the “unspeakable” (2:49), and Arnholm (the tutor character in the play, who used to be in love with Ellida) also uses the words “fear” and “dread” when describing her state of mind (4:76). In that sense, a rhythmical acceleration in the actors’ delivery of the text, as we progress from one act and scene to the next, would viscerally reflect Ellida’s and She’s disquiet, a feeling that rises steadily from a nebulous sensation of unease to a consummate experience of terror.

The somber mood accompanies most references to the “third party” (the “other” man in both plays); dramaturgically, the conceptualization of fear is conspicuous in the interplay between lighting and shadow, during those scenes where the Stranger and Man are either physically present or merely conjured up in dialogue. My own experience of directing Fosse’s play told me that emotional tension could be generated by having the female protagonists move in and out of the lit areas of the stage, as they oscillate between comfort and distress. In addition, I realized that the space could be manipulated by means of a set design that would allow the intruder to materialize and then disappear unnoticed. This cross from light to darkness indeed seemed to intensify the spectral atmosphere of the play. In my production of *Someone is Going to Come*, having Man emphatically circle around He’s and She’s house in scenes 3 and 4 really favored the building up of suspense.¹²

Conversely, in *The Lady from the Sea*, choreographing the Stranger’s sudden emergence in Wangel’s garden in as much subtlety as possible could further spotlight his nebulous nature, while keeping the level of Ellida’s alarm high. After all, through sensory stimulation, spectators are usually exposed to the characters’ emotional distress more viscerally.

An equally strong directorial choice might be to physically reference the writers’ preoccupation with the symbolic overtones of the “eyes” and the power of the gaze, which are so central in the plays. Ellida’s obsession with her

12 In my production, Man moved along the periphery of the carefully defined borders of the property in markedly choreographed step, which began in loose stroll and built up to a fast, military-like pace, reiterated to maximum effect. Similarly, his diagonal entrance into the household, in and out of light, was intended as a violent act of trespassing. By and large, rhythm and tempo helped define aurally the essential dichotomies of the play: society/nature, intellect/instinct, placid indifference/desire, etc. Communicated through amplified sound, Man’s increasing knocking on the couple’s door also proved to be effective, generating nervous gasps from the audience.



FIGURE 1. Threat

From the production of Jon Fosse's Someone is Going to Come (Nicosia, Versus Theatre, 2013. Director Avra Sidiropoulou. Photo Credits: Socrates Socratous).

dead child's eyes resembling "the blackest sea" adds to the overall aura of mystery: "Oh, if the sun was shining his eyes were blue. But when the storm broke they were – oh I could see them, you couldn't, I could –" (2:49). In fact, she goes further to insist that the child actually had the Stranger's eyes, an insinuation that reinforces the mood of the uncanny. That the eyes are a window to the soul is a known cliché, yet the metaphor remains powerful if we consider how the eyes, here, further bolster the connection between Ellida and the Stranger – to each other, as well as to the Sea, whose colour the child's and the Stranger's eyes borrow.

Evidently, an inscrutable fixation with seeing and being looked at is manifest in both plays. In Ibsen's crisis scene, in which she encounters the Stranger after several years, one of the first things Ellida does upon recognizing him is to cover her eyes with her hands in an attempt to protect herself from his gaze: "The eyes. Don't look at me like that, I will scream" (3:58), a plea that she keeps repeating throughout the scene. In the meantime, in *Someone is Going to Come*, He (the husband) is consumed by the thought that She has been looking at Man (the neighbor):

HE:

You didn't even look once into his eyes

(Brutally)

Were you looking into his eyes all the time. (31)

Such instances of angst, bordering on neurosis, are ingrained into the plays' structure. While Fosse's depiction of She's predicament can often be subterranean, Ibsen builds the atmosphere of apprehension with astonishing precision and high drama – each act revealing clues that immerse us further into Ellida's dilemma over the future she should choose for herself. Surely, Fosse's texts are nowhere near as dramatic as Ibsen's crisis-driven narratives, being more about the invocation of mood through stasis and internal tension.¹³ Rather than linear, they are liminal, the very stories existing at the threshold of writing, between abstract action and concrete emotion. Consequently, one major challenge for the mise-en-scène is how to frame, without smothering, Fosse's emphasis on the open-ended pattern and the lack of a definitive ending that could bring closure to the characters.

Most directors would probably agree that it is impossible to stage these texts without ultimately confronting their ambiguous endings. For example, even if Ibsen's "problem scene" – which highlights Ellida's final decision not to give up on her marriage – provides an unexpected anti-climax to the play, the protagonist's daunting compromise calls for directorial caution; the ending has been often addressed as ironic – almost anticipating a play-sequel to take on from here. Structure, that is, is entwined in characterization. Elinor Fuchs' postmodern reading of Ibsen rightly perceives the drama's conflicting elements as ingrained into the textual fabric, rather than being proof of "the playwright's 'failure' to totalize his dramatic scheme by recognizing its contradictions."¹⁴ Perhaps less inexorably so than in *Someone is Going to Come* – where the couple's sought-after idyll is shattered forever – "while things may be temporarily sanguine in the Wangel household [...] the cosmic drama that has just unfolded predicts the eventuality of chaos."¹⁵ No matter how a director views the problem of the ending in both plays, the ambiguity that Ibsen and Fosse problematize can never really be left unexplored.

Through and through, the suspenseful structure is replete with nuances of impending doom. In Ibsen, the horror that Ellida keeps referring to, identifying it with both desire and repulsion (4:84), assumes supernatural dimensions, voiced in terms of lighting and darkness:

Ellida: Oh no, no, it isn't like that at all. Yes, there is contentment and happiness. But where there is happiness on a light summer's day underneath is the knowledge darkness is coming, it's coming. And it cast its shadow

13 Fosse insisted that, for him, theatre was "a way to understand through and by emotions. It's a reflection that comes besides the nationality and language. Besides the languages, there are a lot of stimuli" (Fosse 2010).

14 Fuchs 1990, 442.

15 Rosengarten 1977, 472.

*over all of men's joy. Does a drifting cloud cast its shadow over the fjord?
The sky is bright and it is blue. And then – (3:57)*

In *Someone is Going to Come*, Fosse's keen mastery of language, his repetitions and silences, compound a poetry of violence that foreshadows as well as precipitates the unraveling of the action, further to capturing the couple's torment. Featuring a unique stanza and line division, it commands an almost breathless delivery and bombards the audience with an array of statements and questions that are impossible to process at normal speed:

*SHE:
I just know
that someone is going to come
You also want for someone
to come
You would rather be together
with others than with me
You would rather be together with others
Someone is going to come
If we go in then someone will come
and knock on the door
knock and knock on the door
Someone is going to knock on the door
going to knock and knock on the door
and not give up
Just knock. (21)*

The manipulation of rhythm creates a musical score of alternating gasps, monosyllables and silences, to the extent that it introduces “a condition of non-verbal feeling that reaches towards something from outside human discourse and lies in silences or the unspeakable.”¹⁶ Fosse's postmodern lyricism distinguishes him from Ibsen, who had quite early on moved towards prose, leaving behind the romantic verse dramas of the 1860s. While such linguistic opacity may be a challenge for actors, directors, and spectators, as personal experience has certainly shown, it is also the perfect vehicle for conveying the playwright's visionary scope.

MYTH AND ALLEGORY

In one of his interviews, Fosse claimed that he was not a realistic writer, but “kind of a mythical one,”¹⁷ and that the love for his characters was also “mythical”. Beyond the breadth and complexity of the very notion of “mythical,” stretching back beyond recorded history, Fosse is probably talking about how his writing is fundamentally a study in archetypes, transcending an immediate national context to embrace universal constructs and ciphers of meaning.

¹⁶ Korynta 2012, 179.

¹⁷ Fosse 2010.

A concern for the infinite aligns him with Ibsen's investment in symbolism, which, notwithstanding the writer's acute social criticism, was in tune with his age's fascination with the occult and the spiritual.¹⁸ Moreover, the iconography of *The Lady from the Sea* is so pervasive and powerful, that it actually becomes structural: instead of merely illustrating the text, it blueprints each scene with dynamic metaphors that ultimately deliver and define dramaturgy.

The parabolic texture of the two plays – a simple story conveying some enlightened truth about human beings – is certainly worth exploring, perhaps in tandem with considering some semiotic aspects of an “allegorical mise-en-scène.” Textually, the figurative context is strongly supported by recurrent references to elements such as the Sea, the Eyes and Home – haunting connectors of Ibsen and Fosse, which function as mirrors of entrapment and escapism. The salient sea and landscape motifs are part of a thematic and aesthetic involvement with the notion of belonging, a return to or a departure from a base, a surrendering or resistance to an inscrutable force, well beyond one's control. Arguably, each play's symbolic activity provides the ideal background for a stylized and suggestive production to untangle the knots that underlie dramatic action and characterization. Working on Fosse, I was well aware that a symbolist text ultimately called for more abstract forms of staging, which were more likely to open up its inner space to the parabolic.

THE ADAM AND EVE NARRATIVE

Fosse makes the anguished story of the “He-She-Man triangle” a modern version of the Adam and Eve tale. The emblematic opening sequence features an older man and his young female companion arriving at their new homestead in order to get away from the rest of the world and be with each other. They approach the place holding hands, cherishing the prospect of entering their own private paradise. In performance, soft lighting and an exaggeratedly slow movement can easily establish a pseudo-romantic, trusting mood for Fosse's beginning. In my production, that very combination produced a sharp contrast to the gloomy atmosphere of scenes that followed, which focused on the devastating effects of Man's – initially apprehended and gradually actualized – presence. In a similar vein, arresting through lighting and sound the summery, quietly celebratory mood of the opening act of *The Lady from the Sea*, might also set up expectations that would be brutally crushed as the action progressed towards the inevitable end-of-summer bleakness.

A great number of directors are drawn to heavily allegorical texts, no less because they provide fascinating challenges vis-à-vis the treatment of space and of visual context. Striking the right metaphor that can carry the action along a solid point-of-view is vital, particularly in productions of symbolist plays, which tend to focus more on the characters' inner life and the associative powers of the human mind. As has already been suggested, elevating

¹⁸ See, for example, the spiritual pilgrimage in the verse plays *Brand* (1865) and *Peer Gynt* (1867).

the action above and beyond the boundaries of the specific, geography-defined elements is often a matter of imprinting the essential features of character and situation within predominantly heightened (non realistic) forms of staging. The fact that many productions choose to ignore Fosse's naturalistic stage directions in the early plays might be telling of how, in some respects, a design that surpasses details of time and place, frees up interpretation, encouraging the audience to perceive things without the confines of a specific cultural lens.¹⁹

As I personally discovered in my rehearsals for Fosse's play, the play teems with text-tied visual clues, which almost "scream" to be translated to specific staging options. The original paradise conceit, applied on the set, lighting, and sound design, is likely to produce a series of visual and aural reversals charged with irony and suspense. These reversals are consonant with the tension between the established premise of an idyll and its gradual repeal. Note, for instance, how the characters' growing discomfort, born out of the conviction that indeed "someone is going to come," is accounted for by continual references to the dark and ominous allusions to the on-coming winter. Significantly, the sense of paralyzing calamity that surrounds Man's ambivalent presence – together with the heightened eroticism in the She-Man encounters – coincides with a mental perception of a change in the landscape. The fantasy of willful isolation is now interrupted by Man's permanent intrusion into the couple's lives.

Whether or not the iconography of the Ellida-Wangel story in *The Lady from the Sea* consciously alludes to a modern-day version of the Adam and Eve parable, the notions of temptation and free will are ubiquitous. In a perfectly conventional and potentially prosperous household, Ellida and Wangel are confronted with the catalytic force of the Stranger, who comes to disrupt their fragile marital complacency. Although Ellida by no means enjoys a fulfilled existence, her life conditions, at least on a social level, are congenial. The surface equanimity of the Wangel home, however, is soon undermined by a persistent alarm over the imagined, as well as the actual arrival of the Stranger. On stage, working through a gradual acceleration in rhythm makes the ensuing journey through darker psychological realms even more pronounced. The Stranger's unexpected appearance in Wangel's garden in the third act is a chilling incident, but besides the pernicious force he brings along, the sailor is also the carrier of a mysterious and ultimately unassuaged passion for Ellida. In fact, the word "temptation" is quite central in Ellida's heart-rending plea to be spared the agony of choice:

19 See Thomas Ostermeier's production of Fosse's *The Name* (2000) and *Girl on the Sofa* (2002). Also, Claude Régy's *Someone is Going to Come* (2006) and Patrice Chéreau's *I am the Wind* (2011). All these works feature visually stunning abstract sets, which, in tandem with the playwright's elliptical poetry of language, seem to universalize Fosse's action through and through.



FIGURE 2. Temptation
 From the production of Jon Fosse's *Someone is Going to Come*
 (Nicosia, Versus Theatre, 2013. Director Avra Sidiropoulou.
 Photo Credits: Socrates Socratous).

Ellida: Save me from myself, Wangel.

Doctor Wangel: Ellida, is there something else?

Ellida: This hunger I feel

Doctor Wangel: Hunger?

Ellida: He is like the sea to me. (3:65–66)

Ibsen's *Stranger* stimulates subconscious associations about everything primitive, in all the implications of the word: repeatedly characterized as "demonic," he is also the very symbol of freedom, as his assumed last name "Freeman" suggests. Personifying the allure but also the dangers of the anarchic, the out-of-the norm, the pre-societal, he acts both as a harbinger of death and the embodiment of temptation – fiery, unpredictable, uncompromising.²⁰ The fact that Ellida chooses to remain with Wangel in the end, shutting off any chance for reunification with her sea-bound self, may be read as an ironically "happy" (if equivocal) reversal of Adam and Eve's fall from grace. Stretching the Christian analogy a little further, one could view Ellida's

²⁰ Ibsen's deliberately ambiguous portrayal of the *Stranger* is outlined by the playwright himself: "No one is supposed to know what he is just as no one is supposed to know who he is or what his real name is. This uncertainty about him is the essential element in the method I have deliberately chosen" (in Holtan 1970, 71).

decision to stay with Wangel as a “blessed” self-realization²¹ and an ultimate surrender (or compromise) to virtue, after she has considered and duly rejected the Stranger’s (Satan’s) propositions.

SEA(E)SCAPE

In truth, the natural landscape in Ibsen and Fosse functions as a reflection of the protagonists’ state of mind. Ellen Rees points out that Ibsen’s stage directions are steeped in visual spectacle, while his “conceptualization of dramatic space bursts the boundaries of the stage itself, [confronting] the audience with sweeping coastal and/or mountain vistas.”²² As a symbol, the Sea defines the structure and temperature of both plays, organizing set and story around the main metaphor of the landscape. In *The Lady from the Sea*, the element of water, in all its different forms, is treated extensively, displaying a complexity that reveals existential issues at the core of the play.²³ In *Someone is Going to Come*, the Sea envelops the mental space of characters, actors, and spectators, but its presence is more than anything suggested rather than experienced. It is also embodied, adopting the loneliness of the long, dark, silent Norwegian winter months. The mood and atmosphere of the forlorn seascape is fully conveyed through words alone:

SHE:

Imagine when it gets dark

Imagine when there is a storm

When the wind goes

Right through the walls

When you hear the sea roaring

And the waves crashing

When the sea is white and black

And imagine how cold it will be in the house

When the wind goes right through the walls

21 Richard Schechner brings up the analogy of Ellida as a “modern man,” who recognizes that the Stranger is “within her own mind:”

She fights against him and finally triumphs over him. With this triumph she is, for the first time, able to feel loved and at home with Wangel. She recognizes that the Stranger typifies her own wishes. When Ellida confronts the Stranger for the last time she is for the first time fully confronting herself. Her ability to withstand the Stranger’s seductiveness means that she has conquered her daemonic urge to wander. (1962, 122)

22 Rees 2013, 82. Indeed, the physical environment in all its celebrated beauty is present in other Ibsen plays as well (See *Little Eyolf’s* lethal sea [1894], *John Gabriel Borkman’s* snowy mountains [1896] and *When We Dead Awaken’s* scenic alternation between a fjord and a rocky mountainside [1899]). That said, most of his contemporary plays are set in closed living rooms.

23 Ibsen had foreshadowed his extensive treatment of the water element: “There is something extraordinarily captivating in the sea. When one stands and stares down into the water it is as if one sees that life which stirs about on land, only in another form. There is connection and similarity in everything. In my next work the sea shall play a part” (Holtan 1970, 65–66).

And think how far it is from people
How dark it is
How quiet it is going to be
And think how the wind blows
How the waves crash
Think how it will be in the autumn
In the darkness
With the rain and the darkness
A sea that is white and black
And only you and I
In this house
So far from people. (13)

Despite the lack of any overt references in the stage directions, the Sea is conjured up through dialogue. Ironically, the more abstract the physical description of the setting, the more emotional weight the metaphor of the sea seems to obtain. As He and She speak of its mysterious qualities, the Sea's affective impact infuses their reality further. At the same time, the rhythm of speech appears to follow the rhythm of the waves, adding to the otherworldly mood:

HE:
And there
[points]
is the sea
no one is going to come
And look how beautiful the sea is
The house is old
And the sea is beautiful
We are alone
And no one is going to come
No one is coming
And down there is the sea so beautiful
Look at the waves
Look at how the waves
Roll themselves up against the round rocks
Down there on the beach
Wave after wave [...] (15–6)

Identified with the spiritual and the opaque, the Sea becomes the central image-symbol that defines and hierarchizes all additional elements of the play. In Ibsen, for one thing, it designates identity and sharpens characterization. The Stranger stands for the freeing, seductive and yet inexorable nature of the ocean, and Ellida seems sculpted after Hans Christian Andersen's *Little Mermaid*, in reversed manner: while the love-stricken Mermaid longs for the earth, where she can join her terrestrial lover, Ellida craves the open Sea: "Yes. Night and day, winter and summer, the same, it does oppress me. I have this longing" (3:39).

Wangel accepts Ellida's aquatic bonding by recognizing that sea-bound creatures are "a law unto themselves. It's almost as if they are the sea, they come and go, in their minds and in their bodies and all their instincts" (4:74). It is this very quality that attaches Ellida to the Stranger. Indeed, Freeman insisted that the two should "marry" themselves "to the sea," as Ellida confides to Wangel (2: 44), further confessing that she and her past lover spoke mostly

[of] yes, the sea. The raging storms and the perfect stillness. The black nights and then how it shimmers in the sunshine. How it comes in and then goes out. But most of all we talked about the whales and the dolphins and the seals that used to lie on the rocks in the sun. The seagulls and the eagles and all the other sea birds. Imagine, isn't it strange, that when we talked, it seemed to me as if the creatures were all related to him. (2:43)

Considering the multitude of maritime symbols that run through Ibsen's text – as is, for example, Ellida's former home of the Lighthouse or the steamer that brings the Stranger in and takes him out of the Wangel household forever – the Sea is either openly discussed, or subtly alluded to. Yet, its presence is omnipotent: it is less a mere element of geography and more of a mental state, an imagined escape into a life of independence. In addition, it nurtures the desire for the Stranger, who "belongs to the sea. He belongs out there" (3:64). What is more, the fascination with the sea [...] intimates a desire to break off contact with other people, to disappear into oneself, to close oneself off from social situations."²⁴

In this respect, in both Ibsen and Fosse, landscape determines inner action. Scholarly research has been conducted on the textual and stage representations of the so called "village-fjord mentality," suggesting that the topography of Western Norway, with steep fjords and "impossibly steep mountainsides" is inextricably a part of the settings of the plays, much though it can be treated as universal.²⁵ The slippery nature of space is here more of a mental notion, since, in Fosse's words, "the place disappears in a way, at the same time as it exists. It is as if the place gets its "not," [it] becomes a "not-place."²⁶ Not only does nature create boundaries between the actuality of the given house and the illusion of an imagined space of possibility; it is the agent and ruler of human emotions, which fluctuate according to its ever-transforming temperament. While the setting in *Someone is Going to Come* is relatively static – the desolate seascape hardly changing in the course of the play – in *The Lady from the Sea* we are confronted with several manifestations of the aquatic element. As becomes manifest in the dialogue and in the stage directions, its distinct symbolism functions rather emotively, determining Ellida's disposition. For instance, reference is made to the therapeutic properties of

24 Rønning in Rees 2011, 209.

25 Rees 2011, 213.

26 Korynta 2012, 198.

Skjoldviken, an isolated town by the ocean, where Ellida grew up, which is chimerically portrayed in sharp contrast with the stifling toxicity of her current residence in a small fjord village. In its least attractive form, the water is present in the carp pond in Wangel's garden, a liquid reflection of entrapment and decay.

In a future staging of either *The Lady from the Sea* or *Someone is Going to Come*, the director's manipulation of scenography on the level of allegory could support such dramaturgical emphases. Ambitious as it is to provide full naturalistic detail in the set design – particularly so in Ibsen, where the setting changes dramatically over the five acts – it is altogether worth exploring the value of an organic and minimalist design, where lighting monitors any changes in location and in mood. The distinction between exterior and interior space underlines the constitutive conflicts in both plays, and so one of the challenges becomes to come up with clever ways to either physically separate the two areas altogether or, conversely, hint subtly at the different identities of each area in a much more suggestive set. To that purpose, the use of projections – whether of video or still photographs – can offer a compelling alternative to handling the textually expansive, symbolist scope of space.

HOME AS EXILE

Fundamentally, the physical environment of the plays (exterior as well as interior) functions heterotopically, containing in one single spatial dimension the assumed symbolic attitudes of several other places, both experienced and imagined. The visual emphasis on the imprisonment and forlornness of the domestic setting impresses the pungent reversal of the “home” notion and reinforces feelings of isolation and disconnection from one's natural milieu – a state in which both Ellida and Fosse's couple are locked. Set design is in this sense instrumental in communicating the old, decrepit, and decaying atmosphere in He's and She's house, as well as the claustrophobia and emotional chilliness of the Wangel household, wherein Ellida feels a mere guest. In either context, the audience's perception of the protagonist's attachment to “home” appears to be that of non-belonging, although the mood of the setting varies significantly from play to play.²⁷

Ellida's entrapment in a house to which she has little personal connection

²⁷ Mark B. Sandberg gives an insightful analysis of the play's metaphoric use of space. He makes an argument for the “spatialisation of a delegitimized domesticity” and the liminal nature of the setting, of an action taking place “in border zones” and an “extraordinarily nuanced gradation of space [...] with the home's innermost interior and the wild ocean occupying the conceptual extremes of the play”:

Moving from most enclosed to the most open, this sliding scale would move from the undepicted interior of the Wangel home to the garden room, the veranda, the garden, the arbor, the shaded corner of the garden with the carp pond, the viewpoint clearing on the hill, the landing, the inner fjord, the outer fjord, the coastal mountain peaks, Ellida's childhood home at the lighthouse on the coast, and finally to the open sea. One might call this a continuum of freedom, or moving in the opposite direction and adopting the play's own eventual terminology, a continuum

is a predicament that aggravates her need to escape back to the open Sea. Wangel's house was built for another family – the doctor's former wife, now dead, and their offspring. Given that textual evidence supports Ellida's suffocation in a family residence where the shadow of a dead woman continues to rule, applying specific staging ideas such as using harsh and cool lighting, or having the actor move in a way that emphasizes discomfort or emotional disengagement, can foreground the emptiness of her life. For instance, the walls can be "narrowed" to convey her restlessness. Similarly, cluttering the set with memorabilia (family pictures, old clothes, etc.) from Wangel's previous marriage may help allude to her outsider's status even more emphatically.

In *Someone is Going to Come*, after the opening's warm celebration ("a lovely house"; "the house which is our own," 12), the new house is soon declared an utter disappointment, not just to She, who initially considers it "slightly different" (12) until she finally realizes that "it smells of ingrained age" (48), but also to He, who comes to the conclusion that they should "never have bought this house" (48). The couple's disillusionment grows stronger at the discovery of the old woman's chamber pot, still semi-filled with old urine, and, more importantly, at the realization that the house continues to be occupied by its previous owner. Far from feeling welcomed into their new life, He and She experience exile in its most abject form. The staging of homelessness within a home picks up several clues from Fosse's stage directions and his description of worn-out domestic paraphernalia: whether naturalistic or abstract, the set could only emanate the staleness of the household, contrasting directly with the fairy-tale house fantasy suggested at the opening of the play.²⁸ In my staging of the scene, it was rather warm lighting – dirty yellow-green – that added to the general impression of decay and filth.

On all accounts, space for both writers becomes an inexorable indicator of mood and emotion. Fosse once claimed that his writing is about the relationship between people, "the spaces between them," and that in a way what he writes are "the empty spaces." "And more than writing about place I feel I am writing what is in a place and doesn't belong to that place in any visible or concrete sense."²⁹ Ultimately, the power of the two plays lies in their metaphorical potency: Ellida's home is the "great unknown," the infinite place, as Dr. Wangel quietly recognizes:

of responsibility; although until the very ending of the play, the notion of freedom prevails as the play's central concept. This spatial continuum is nowhere visible in the play; one constructs it in one's mind the same way one reorders the details of an Ibsen plot – analytically and retrospectively.
(Sandberg 2015, 104–5)

28 On a more literal level, directorial readings might conceivably employ photo or video projections with enticing fairy-tale imagery as a background to the opening movement.

29 In Sunde 2007, 57–60; 59.

I see it well, Ellida. You are slipping away from me already. What you desire is boundless, it is infinite, it is unobtainable. And the need will only serve to drive your mind further into the darkness. (5:104)

For Jon Fosse, the ideal home will always be that, just an ideal, a utopia stretching further and further out of reach, the more He and She try to capture it:

SHE:

Here we are beside our own house

Our own house

Where we shall be together

You and I alone

The house

Where you and I shall be

Alone together

Far away from all the others

The house where we shall be together

Alone

In each other

[...]

HE:

The house which is our own

The house where no-one shall come (12)



FIGURE 3: House

From the production of Jon Fosse's Someone is Going to Come. Nicosia, Versus Theatre, 2013. Director Avra Sidiropoulou.

Photo Credits: Socrates Socratous.

Inevitably, Ibsen's pictorial imagination and the metaphoric scope of Fosse's writing will inform any potential staging of *The Lady from the Sea* and *Someone is Going to Come*. That representing space on stage is an elaborate, intriguing process is no less than a truism. Yet, an inspired mise-en-scène can transform a physical landscape into a mental event – in itself, a fascinating and necessary undertaking, most applicable in the case of the plays we are considering. Ibsen and Fosse use symbolism as a bridge between the factual and the ambiguous, the experienced and the imagined, the known and the unnamed. In this light, working on either one of these plays can be both challenging and rewarding. In comparing the two texts, one immerses deeper and deeper into the mechanics of intertextuality, with readings that acknowledge, beyond plot-line and characters, a complex landscape affinity, a mental state born at the moment of the plays' reception, relentlessly pointing to the Nordic element, with all the preconceptions, fantasies, and associations this generates in the mind of the spectators.

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