

# **Being European: Staging the Nation in 1920s Icelandic Theatre**

**Magnús Þor Þorbergsson**

## **ABSTRACT**

During the campaign for Iceland's independence in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, theatre was considered an important site for the representation of the nation. Emphasis was placed on producing and staging local plays dealing with the nation's folklore, myths and history, thereby strengthening a sense of the roots of national identity. The article examines the longing for a representation of the nation in late nineteenth-century theatre as well as the attempts of the Reykjavik Theatre Company to stage the nation during the so-called 'Icelandic Period' (1907-20), before analyzing the distinctive changes in the company's repertoire following the decision of the Icelandic parliament to build a national theatre in 1923. The staging of the nation, which had been dominated by nineteenth-century cultural nationalism, took a turn in the late 1920s towards representing the nation as a member of European metropolitan culture through an increased focus on international contemporary drama, bourgeois bedroom farce and classical drama. The image of the modern Icelanders, as represented on the stage in the 1920s, was that of the middle-class bourgeoisie.

## **BIOGRAPHY**

Magnús Þor Þorbergsson (born 1971 in Reykjavik) holds a BA in Comparative Literature from the University of Iceland (1994) and an MA in Theatre Studies from Freie Universität Berlin (1999). He has lectured at the Theatre Department of the Iceland Academy of the Arts since 2001, in the years 2005–12 as director of the newly founded programme Theory & Practice, and he became Assistant Professor in 2007. Currently, he is working on his PhD thesis on the Icelandic theatre of the 1920s and its contribution to the construction and development of Icelandic cultural identity and tradition.

# Being European: Staging the Nation in 1920s Icelandic Theatre

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In May 1905, a 'colonial exhibition' opened in Tivoli in Copenhagen, which presented cultural artefacts, pictures, paintings and people from the Danish colonies: Greenland, Iceland, the Faroe Islands, and the Caribbean Islands of St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix. Originally, the exhibition was supposed to have the simple title: "Danish colonial exhibition", but due to a strong protest by Icelandic students in Copenhagen, the title was changed to, "Danish colonial exhibition, along with an exhibition from Iceland and the Faroe Islands." The protesting Icelanders had, in fact, nothing against such colonial shows but they resented the thought of being part of an exhibition in which, as one of the protesters put it, "Icelandic ladies in national costumes are displayed alongside Eskimos and negro women."<sup>1</sup> Due to the protests the Icelandic part of the exhibition was heavily reduced and did not involve the display of people.<sup>2</sup>

The strong reaction on behalf of the Icelandic students towards this exhibition points to a central issue in the political and cultural debates in Iceland at the beginning of the twentieth century: the nation's identity as an independent civilized country and its cultural, historical and political affiliation to Europe. As appears from the reaction to the colonial exhibition the Icelanders identified themselves (and demanded to be identified) as civilized European spectators and not as part of the exotic Other on display. The Icelandic students were, in a way, protesting the staging of their nation.

Debates about national identity and issues of cultural nationalism reflected the growing momen-

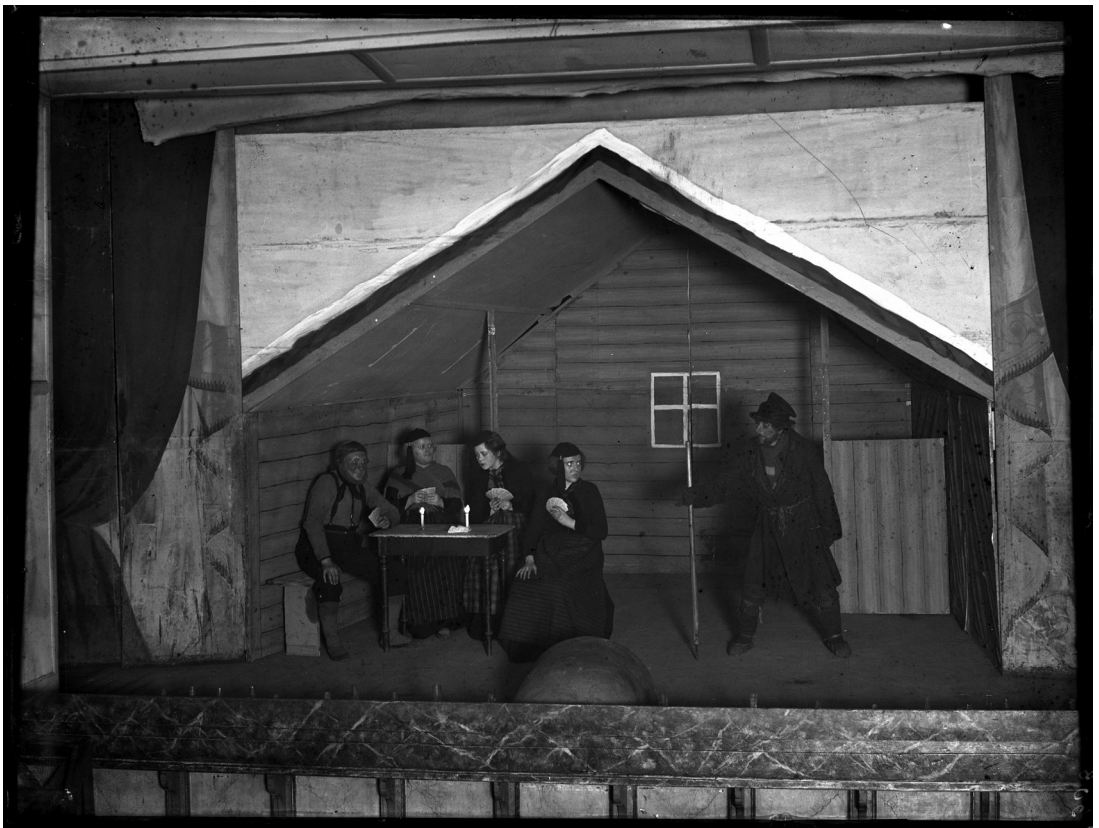
tum of the nationalist movement in Iceland and the distinctive steps that were taken towards independence from the Kingdom of Denmark: Home Rule in 1904 and sovereignty in 1918.<sup>3</sup> In a recent study on nationhood, gender and power in Iceland in the years 1900-30, the historian Sigríður Matthíasdóttir states that these political changes brought about a significant transformation in the national identity of the people of Iceland, which, according to Matthíasdóttir, has escaped the notice of researchers.<sup>4</sup> She claims that there was an undisputed agreement in the early twentieth century that the goal of Icelandic nationalism was to establish a modern national state in Iceland headed by an uncontested Reykjavik bourgeoisie. The most intense debate, according to Matthíasdóttir, revolved around the question of how and to what extent the modernization of Icelandic society should be put into practice, which has traditionally been described as a conflict between *modern* and *anti-modern* views: should the idea of a rural, traditional Icelandic way of life be preserved and strengthened or should the nation welcome and celebrate the lifestyle changes of modernization?<sup>5</sup>

In his study of Icelandic culture and social power in the years 1910-30 the historian Ólafur Rastrick questions this clear-cut dichotomy between modern and anti-modern views, which not only generates a certain historical determinism but also limits the possibilities of evaluating the varieties and similarities within the discourse on the process of modernization in early twentieth-century Iceland. Considering the various and conflicting views on the national identity of the Icelanders in this period a

certain agreement may be recognized regarding the aim of constructing a civilized society, a vision of how the Icelanders should be.<sup>6</sup> Rastrick sees a strong connection between the ideas of ‘a better society’ or ‘the civilized being’ on the one hand and bourgeois ethics, aesthetics and ideology – in short the undisputed bourgeois class – on the other.

While renewing the research within the field of national identity and emphasizing the role of cultural nationalism, these studies have given little attention to the significance of theatre in the representation of national identity.<sup>7</sup> But as has been shown repeatedly by theatre historians, theatre has been and continues to be an important site for the staging of the nation and the representation of national identity and political change, including democratization.<sup>8</sup> Loren Kruger uses the term ‘theatrical nationhood’ to describe the staging of the nation in the theatre, which she associates with

democratic developments: theatrical nationhood “manifests itself fully only in the course of the nineteenth century with the rise of mass national politics, ‘universal’ (male) suffrage, and the demand of the people for legitimate representation as protagonists on the political stage.”<sup>9</sup> In the search for an Icelandic identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as described by Rastrick and Matthíasdóttir, a strong emphasis was put on the ‘theatrical nationhood’ of Iceland. The theatre repeatedly addressed the conflict between modern and anti-modern views, which Matthíasdóttir analyzes, but it also reflects the complexity of this conflict, to which Rastrick has pointed, especially since it emphasizes transnational conditions in the representation of national identity. This article explores the changes in the staging of the nation, which took place in Icelandic theatre following the decision to build a National Theatre in 1923, and their political



The Reykjavik Theatre Company's production of *New Year's Eve* by Indriði Einarsson in 1907. Photo: Pétur Brynjólfsson. The Photography Museum of the National Museum of Iceland.

implications. The article examines the emphasis on cultural nationalism in the Icelandic theatre in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the turn in the 1920s towards an increased connection to bourgeois European culture, which served as groundwork for a new form of national identity strengthened through a certain democratization of culture.

### LONGING FOR A STAGING OF THE NATION

The longing to see national ideals represented on stage runs as a leitmotif through nineteenth-century Icelandic theatre, following the first public performances around 1850. The poet, playwright and clergyman Matthías Jochumsson (1835-1920) explicitly gave expression to this longing in a brief article covering the theatre activities of the month, in the fortnightly *Þjóðólfur* (Thjodolfur) from February 1879. After counting the plays performed – all of them Danish comedies by Ludvig Holberg, Jens Christian Hostrup and Johan Ludvig Heiberg – Jochumsson adds: “If dramatic art is not going to be just a simple, or even dubious entertainment, if it is to be an art that educates, embellishes and improves the life of the nation – as all art should do – then one must learn to play *one’s own national life*.”<sup>10</sup> Jochumsson had himself reacted against the dominance of the Danish trio of Holberg, Hostrup and Heiberg with his first play *The Outlaws* (*Úrlegumennirnir*) from 1862.<sup>11</sup> Along with *New Year’s Eve* (*Njárnsóttin*) by Indriði Einarsson (1851-1939), which was premiered in 1871, Jochumsson’s play quickly attained the status of a national play and was performed repeatedly well into the twentieth century.

Steve Wilmer has emphasized the important role of national theatres in the establishment and heightening of cultural nationalism, which in general “investigated and exploited folklore, myths, legends, and local history, and also romanticized the lives of the rural folk,” to which he adds, “[d]rama in the vernacular language was one of the principal and most visible forms of this cultural nationalist movement of ‘recovery’ and mythification in emerging European states.”<sup>12</sup> Wilmer describes the characteristics of such nineteenth-century ‘national

dramas’ as “historic plays portraying heroic national characters from the past or images from national folklore or rural life.”<sup>13</sup> The two Icelandic national plays, *The Outlaws* and *New Year’s Eve*, fit perfectly into this category, as may be said of nearly all of the plays written in Icelandic in the late nineteenth century, many of which were never performed. With the exception of a handful of plays, Icelandic national drama was a rather rare exception on the Icelandic stage in the period, which was dominated by Danish comedy writers.

This domination of Danish comedies on the nineteenth-century Icelandic stage was therefore barely challenged despite a pronounced longing for the staging of the nation. In 1890 leading members of the Icelandic bourgeoisie announced a drama competition, which explicitly called for “national plays” dealing with “scenes from the history of the nation or from the life of the nation in modern times.”<sup>14</sup> When the deadline passed, no plays had been handed in, so it was extended by one year, which finally resulted in four delivered plays, none of which was deemed worthy of receiving the prize, but two of which were declared ‘praiseworthy’.<sup>15</sup> Despite the clear longing for the representation of the nation on stage among the growing Icelandic bourgeoisie, which was in accordance with its political demands for national sovereignty, such representation was an exception rather than the rule before the twentieth century.

### THE ‘ICELANDIC PERIOD’ AND CULTURAL NATIONALISM

The conventional repertoire did not change immediately with the establishment in 1897 of the first regular theatre company in Iceland, the Reykjavik Theatre Company (Leikfélag Reykjavíkur). The company quickly became a leading institution in Icelandic theatre, receiving subsidies from the state and the city as early as 1900 and was more or less the only regular theatre company in Reykjavik for the next decades, whereby it legitimized itself as a theatrical institution with national aspirations. In the beginning, the company mainly continued to perform the well-known plays from previous years, and in the first decade they only performed one Ice-

landic play: Indriði Einarsson's *The Ship Sinks* (*Skip-ið sekkur*) in 1903.<sup>16</sup> From 1907 onwards, however, increasing emphasis was placed on the staging of the nation in Jochumsson's terms, the RTC entering a phase that has later become known as 'the Icelandic Period'. On Boxing Day 1907, the RTC performed Indriði Einarsson's national play *New Year's Eve* for the first time, followed by Matthías Jochumsson's *The Outlaws* the following season. The two national dramas were followed by eleven new Icelandic plays that were premiered between 1908 and 1920. The majority of these plays belong to the category that Wilmer describes as 'national plays': they mostly play in rural settings and draw on events from the nation's past or folklore material, often portraying heroic national characters.<sup>17</sup> The themes frequently referred to current topics of the political and cultural debate: the struggle against foreign rule and influence, or the conflict between rural life and growing urbanization. Most of these plays enjoyed considerable popularity and some were revived repeatedly in the years to come, including Jóhann Sigurjónsson's *Eyvindur of the Mountains* (*Fjalla-Eyvindur*).<sup>18</sup>

A clear example of a national play from this period would be *Governor Leonhard* (*Lénharður fógæti*) by Einar Kvaran (1859-1938) from 1913, which is based on legends about a revolt against the Danish governor Leonhard in the early sixteenth century. Kvaran emphasizes the patriotic spirit of the Icelandic farmers in the play, presenting characters such as the young farmer Eysteinn 'the Strong' and the county magistrate Torfi Jónsson as national heroes through their acts of bravery and integrity and their steadfast and valiant spirit. The play was not only well received by the Reykjavik audience, running for two consecutive seasons and being revived in 1918, but also by the press, which particularly celebrated the 'truthful' portrayal of the nation's past. One of the reviewers described the play as a possible weapon in the nation's struggle for sovereignty and hoped that it would be performed in Denmark as well, so the Danes might realize how they had treated Iceland.<sup>19</sup>

In general, the plays of the 'Icelandic period' (1907-20) reflect an attempt to stage the nation in terms of cultural nationalism, the nation's history, myths and folklore serving as a setting for the rep-

resentation of national identity, in accordance with the notions of the history and identity of the nation that were current during the period.<sup>20</sup> Not surprisingly, the 'Icelandic period' coincides with the steps towards Iceland's political independence – home rule and sovereignty – though previous research on the 'Icelandic period' has paid little attention to the political context of these plays.<sup>21</sup>

#### A HATCHERY OF NEW DRAMA?

In June 1923, the Icelandic parliament passed a law that ensured the construction of a national theatre. By that time the Reykjavik Theatre Company had strengthened its status as a leading institution in Icelandic theatre and in effect served as a substitute for a national theatre, due to official acknowledgement and financial support as well as to the emphasis on local drama in the previous decade. It was, therefore, generally understood that the RTC would inhabit the house of the National Theatre once it was built.<sup>22</sup> Indriði Einarsson had issued the first public demands for a national theatre in two articles from 1907 and 1915, which coincided with the RTC's 'Icelandic period'. Einarsson adduces the traditional arguments for the building of a national theatre, which should primarily serve as a hatchery for local drama.<sup>23</sup> The National Theatre should be a site where the nation might gather and see itself represented on stage, and hence a continued emphasis on local drama in the repertoire of the RTC was to be expected, since this might help legitimize a theatre institution with national aspirations, as Loren Kruger terms it.<sup>24</sup> But in fact, the opposite was the case in the years following the parliament's decision. Instead of focusing on local plays, the RTC placed increasing emphasis on foreign drama: contemporary European plays, bourgeois bedroom farces and classics, especially Shakespeare, which offered a completely different representation of the nation than had happened earlier. The second half of the 1920s saw a decrease in the number of new local plays in the repertoire of the RTC, and in quite a few instances the plays had already been premiered elsewhere in the country or had been published several years before. Between 1921 and 1931 the RTC performed only five new Icelandic plays. November

1923 saw *Mother-in-Law* (*Tengdamamma*) by Kristín Sigfúsdóttir (1876-1953), which had premiered several months earlier in a rural district outside the small town of Akureyri, and *Storms* (*Stormar*) by Steinn Sigurðsson (1872-1940), which had been performed in Hafnarfjörður in 1922 and in Akureyri in the spring of 1924 before it was played by the RTC in November. *Verdicts* (*Dómar*) by Andrés Þormar (1895-1906) and Indriði Einarsson's *The Dance at Hruni* (*Dansinn í Hruna*), which were premiered by the RTC in 1931 and 1925, respectively, had both been published some years before. The only two new Icelandic plays that had not already been published or performed elsewhere were *The Monks from Möðruvellir* (*Munkarnir frá Möðruvöllum*) by Davíð Stefánsson (1895-1964), which was premiered in 1927, and Einar Kvaran's *Hallsteinn and Dora* (*Hallsteinn og Dóra*), which was premiered in 1931. The Reykjavik Theatre Company seemed to have given up its role as a hatchery of new drama.

Some of these plays might still fit into the category of national drama, drawing on folk tales (*The Dance at Hruni*) or historical events (*The Monks from Möðruvellir* and *Verdicts*), but the question of national identity is far less central here than in many of the other plays of the 'Icelandic period'. The conflict between rural and urban culture is still present (*Mother-in-Law*), but other contemporary issues, such as class struggle (*Storms*), had clearly become more relevant. References to national history, folklore or traditions seem to have been less related to problems of national identity, as was the case with e.g. Kvaran's *Hallsteinn and Dora*, which, though it makes use of a folktale about trolls and refers to national celebrations, first and foremost focuses on ethical issues and questions of the afterlife, which were popular in Reykjavik's bourgeois society in the 1920s.

Nor were the Icelandic plays by any means as popular or central to the repertoire as they had been earlier. Seasons would pass without the premiere of a new Icelandic play or even without an Icelandic play on the repertoire at all. The reason for the decreasing number of new Icelandic plays does not seem to have been a lack of new plays. In October 1923 the daily paper *Vísir* published an article celebrating yet another revival of RTC's production of

Jóhann Sigurjónsson's *Eyvindur of the Mountains*.<sup>25</sup> The article applauds the high number of plays published that year, including *Mother-in-Law*, which the RTC had announced as their next production. The article concludes by stating that it is the RTC's primary obligation to stage local plays, the traditional duty of a national theatre. The article lists five recently published plays, but obviously the RTC did not consider it their obligation to stage these plays immediately, if at all.<sup>26</sup>

Since the production of local drama was considered essential to national theatres all over Europe,<sup>27</sup> it may seem strange that the RTC did not put greater emphasis on new Icelandic plays, as it had done between 1907 and 1920. One might assume that the need for plays dealing with national identity had diminished with the obtainment of sovereignty in 1918, but as both Rastrick and Matthíasdóttir point out, the cultural identity of the nation was the central issue of debate in Iceland in the 1920s, which would therefore perhaps call for continued theatrical representations. There seems to have been little pressure on the RTC in the press to focus on local drama, however. The 1923 article in *Vísir* is one of the rare cases when the staging of Icelandic plays was encouraged (rather than demanded), and in the reviews of the Icelandic plays in the 1920s there was hardly any mention of the staging of local drama as the primary obligation of a national theatre. Clearly, the production of new local drama was not central to the legitimization of the RTC as a theatre institution with national aspirations, as a substitute or forerunner of the National Theatre. In fact, the staging of foreign drama was considered no less important in the creation of a national theatre.

#### THE INTERNATIONAL INTELLECTUAL

Ever since the establishment of the Reykjavik Theatre Company in 1897, most of the repertoire consisted of foreign plays in Icelandic translation. During the first years, Danish comedies and vaudevilles were featured prominently, before the company turned towards realism in the first years of the twentieth century with a series of plays by Henrik Ibsen, Ludwig Fulda and Hermann Sudermann. In the mid-1920s, however, the RTC focused increas-



The Reykjavik Theatre Company's production of *Windows* by John Galsworthy in 1926. Photo: Ólafur Magnússon. The Photography Museum of the National Museum of Iceland.

ingly on plays that had been premiered abroad just a few years earlier, such as John Galsworthy's *Windows*, Sutton Vane's *Outward Bound* and *Overture* and Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Vane's *Outward Bound* became one of the most popular plays of the RTC, which, with twenty performances in one season, was outnumbered only by two plays since the founding of the RTC. The extraordinary popularity of Vane's play, about a group of people travelling to the afterlife, can probably be explained by the increased interest in spiritualism in Iceland. This movement, as theology professor Pétur Pétursson has noted, "served an ideological function within the emerging middle class", its ideology giving "this class a feeling of membership in an international order and unity with the middle-classes of other countries."<sup>28</sup> The two plays by Sutton Vane (as well as Einar Kvaran's *Hallsteinn and Dora*) are clear examples of this trend; they stage the interests and

anxieties of the middle class and its feeling of belonging to an international community. In general, the contemporary foreign plays in the repertoire of the RTC during the 1920s are typical of intellectual bourgeois theatre. They can be identified as the kind of "new drama" that Loren Kruger describes (including John Galsworthy), which "favors middle-class conflicts about individual moral attitudes toward the disenfranchised rather than portraying the dialectic between collective and individual claims on working-class characters."<sup>29</sup> There is no sign of diversion from this worldview in the repertoire of the RTC.

It has been suggested that the mounting of Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* only five years after the Italian premiere in 1921 bears witness to the avant-garde inclinations and experimental spirit of the company,<sup>30</sup> but it might be more appropriate to see this choice as an expression of the

RTC's attempt, as a bourgeois theatre, to imitate similar theatres abroad.<sup>31</sup> The novelty of Pirandello's play was generally acknowledged and celebrated in the Icelandic press and while it had caused outrage at the Italian premiere there were hardly any negative reactions to the play's production in Iceland. A single short article in the newspaper *Timinn* takes a somewhat reactionary stance towards the play when stating that the creations of Italian revolutionaries are too far removed from "northern mentality", but accepts that it is interesting and legitimate to show this kind of drama once in a while.<sup>32</sup> The play did not gain the popularity that the company and some of the reviewers may have hoped for, but the press reactions were generally very positive. In the socialist paper *Alþýðublaðið* (Althydubladid) the play was celebrated for its attacks on the conservative bourgeoisie,<sup>33</sup> but the bourgeoisie, clearly, did not feel attacked. On the contrary, the play's production in Iceland must be considered an integral part of the creation of an intellectual bourgeois theatre striving to attain the status of a modern metropolitan institution.

The choice of contemporary foreign plays was repeatedly applauded in the press, and in most cases it was compared to 'theatres abroad'. In an article in *Vísir* the new plays, such as *Six Characters* and Vane's *Outward Bound*, were celebrated in particular, and the repertoire was claimed to be on a par with that of the theatres in the "big cities."<sup>34</sup> Just as the esoteric movement of spiritualism served to give the middle class a sense of belonging to an international culture, the emphasis on contemporary foreign plays in the repertoire of the Reykjavik Theatre Company should be seen as an attempt to establish a connection to the metropolitan culture of contemporary Europe.

### THE LOWBROW BOURGEOISIE

When regarding foreign plays on the Icelandic stage as a representation of class and national identity, the issue of comedy is of particular interest. In the first two decades of the twentieth century, as mentioned, Danish nineteenth-century comedy dominated the repertoire of the RTC, but 1925 saw a significant turn in the choice of comedies. With the exception

of Hostrup's *Adventures on the Journey on Foot* (*Eventyr paa Fodreisen*), which remained one of the most performed plays in Icelandic theatre, Danish comedies almost completely vanished from the stage and were replaced with (mostly German) bourgeois bedroom farces, such as Carl Laufs' *Pension Schöller* (in 1925) and Franz Arnold's and Ernst Bach's *Die spanische Fliege* (in 1926).

Although they were repeatedly described as being of little or no literary value, the reaction to the bourgeois bedroom farces in the Icelandic press was generally positive. Their merit was simply thought to be of a different kind and their ability to provoke laughter was claimed to legitimize their production, but the obligations of a national theatre were never mentioned in the reviews of the bedroom farces, in contrast to what often occurred in the reviews of new Icelandic plays and contemporary foreign plays. It was apparently not degrading for a theatre striving to legitimize its status as a national institution to produce such plays. The presence of the bedroom farces in the repertoire of the RTC cannot be explained by merely noting the popularity of lowbrow comedy, since more serious plays, such as Vane's *Outward Bound* and Ibsen's *The Feast at Solhaug* attracted larger audiences.<sup>35</sup> The critical approval of the bedroom farces should probably be explained as an acceptance of the theatre's obligation to offer 'something for everyone'. Though there were a few negative remarks, the performance of plays of inferior literary quality was generally accepted when it came to comedy,<sup>36</sup> and the bedroom farces do not seem to have affected the status of the RTC as a stand-in for a national theatre negatively.

This switch from nineteenth-century Danish comedy to contemporary bourgeois bedroom farce, or *Schwank*, in the 1920s has interesting implications, too, for the staging of the nation and the question of class identity. Volker Klotz has pointed to the strong connection between the rise of the middle class in France and Germany in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and the advent and increased popularity of the *Schwank*. According to Klotz, the sexual undercurrents of the bedroom farce and its plots centring on adultery must be understood in the context of capitalistic relations and the ideology of the middle class, which,



after having become economically stronger but politically less ambitious, tends to focus on merely private concerns. This tendency is reflected in the bedroom farce, which is set in the bourgeois home and stages the sexual and political anxieties of the middle class.<sup>37</sup> It is another way of representing the bourgeoisie than is encountered in the more literary 'new drama' of Galsworthy, Vane and Pirandello. The RTC thus gave room to the highbrow as well as to the lowbrow, but when it comes to performed identity, the middle class was the uncontested paradigm.

### ADAPTING THE EUROPEAN CANON

The emphasis on the staging of foreign contemporary drama and bedroom farce may be seen as an attempt to bring Icelandic theatre (and Icelandic culture) closer to Europe. But the most obvious attempts to create a link to European culture are probably the first Shakespeare productions in the history of Icelandic theatre, when the RTC staged *Twelfth Night* in April and *The Winter's Tale* in December 1926. A unanimous press not only described these productions as important events for the Reykjavik Theatre Company, but as milestones in the history of Icelandic theatre, emphasizing the symbolic significance of staging Shakespeare for the cultural identity of the nation. It appears from the public reactions to these productions that Shakespeare somehow represented a connection to theatrical tradition, an entrance ticket to the cultural heritage of Europe, or even the membership of an exclusive club of culturally independent countries.

The general opinion was that the RTC had taken decisive steps towards artistic maturity, or had even been transformed by staging Shakespeare. This view is clearly visible in the review of *Twelfth Night* by the writer and later head librarian at the National Library Guðbrandur Jónsson, in *Vísir*. Jónsson compares the performance to his first childhood experience of theatre in 1898 and remarks that even the curtains were different and that the rustle in the auditorium was not the same. By playing Shakespeare, in Jónsson's view, the RTC had made

the leap from being simply an amateur theatre society (Icel. *leikfélag*) to being a theatre institution (Icel. *leikhús*), and he explicitly attaches the label 'national theatre' to the company.<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, Guðbrandur Jónsson was not the only one who addressed this transformation of the Reykjavik Theatre Company into a 'proper' theatre. In a short article in the daily paper *Alþýðublaðið* two days before the premiere of *Twelfth Night*, it was claimed that the staging of Shakespeare is the measure of a theatre's courage and competence, and the author concludes: "We therefore now have a theatre."<sup>39</sup> The emphasis on the 'we' (the nation) also occurs in a review in *Alþýðublaðið* a few days later, according to which the Reykjavik Theatre Company is not only a proper theatre institution, but a national treasure.<sup>40</sup>

In the press, this transformation was considered a necessary requirement if the company was to compare with theatres in other countries, and if Icelandic theatre was to take its place in the context of European theatre tradition. This connection was drawn in practically every review of *Twelfth Night* though nowhere as explicitly as in Guðbrandur Jónsson's review in *Vísir*: "The audience is also different. Well-dressed gentlemen (in dinner jackets) and ladies in short, low-cut silk dresses with modern bobbed hair – a theatre audience like theatre audiences abroad."<sup>41</sup> Not only does it seem natural for Jónsson to place the RTC among the established theatres abroad, but he describes the Icelandic audience as correctly performing its role as an audience within an established theatre tradition. The Reykjavik audience is dressed to the occasion: in the bourgeois attire of a high-culture, metropolitan environment. By defining the company as a national theatre, the audience becomes a stand-in for the nation as a whole. When describing the audience as being "like theatre audiences abroad", Jónsson also gives voice to the ideal of the nation as a European intellectual bourgeoisie: dressed according to the latest trends in bourgeois fashion, enjoying the canon of European high culture. Shakespeare clearly was instrumental in the legitimization of the Reykjavik Theatre Company as a national theatre institution.

## A THEATRE FOR ALL

Despite being a private enterprise, run by a society of registered members, the Reykjavik Theatre Company gradually attained a status of a theatre for and of the nation, and from the founding of the company in 1897 there was a general consensus in Iceland that every citizen should have access to the theatre. In 1915 the RTC began offering so-called 'people's performances' (*alþýðusýningar*) at reduced prices, which was one of the city council's conditions for continuing to provide financial support.<sup>42</sup> Such a democratization of the arts, reflecting an attempt to make the theatre available to all regardless of class, further strengthened the status of the company as an important public site, as a place where the nation might gather and see itself represented on stage. It is clear, however, from the Icelandic press of the 1920s that the staging of the growing middle class was accepted as a scenic representation of the nation. Even the socialist newspaper *Alþýðublaðið* celebrated the chosen repertoire and encouraged its readers, the working class, to use the people's performances as an opportunity to attend the theatre. The working class had grown in the first two decades of the twentieth century, and began to claim a legitimate representation on the political stage and access to public discourse.<sup>43</sup> As historian Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir has pointed out, a central aim in the workers' struggle in this period was to be considered a legitimate part of the Icelandic nation.<sup>44</sup> Instead of proposing a workers' theatre, the workers were encouraged to attend the bourgeois RTC, which offered only representations of a middle-class worldview.

As a central cultural institution in the Icelandic community, the Reykjavik Theatre Company was a vital site for the staging of national identity in the early twentieth century. But as Guðbrandur Jónsson noted in his review of *Twelfth Night*, the theatre's repertoire as well as the audience had changed in the mid-1920s, offering different yet partial possibilities of identification. The image of the audience in their "dinner jackets and low-cut silk dresses with modern bobbed hair", which saw itself represented on stage in the forms of bourgeois (highbrow and lowbrow) drama, remained uncontested as a new kind of national identity: a metropolitan European bourgeoisie.

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Vilhjálmur Finsen, *Hvað landinn sagði erlendis*, Norðri, Akureyri, 1958, p. 31.
- 2 See Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson, “Af reiðum Íslendingum: Deilur um nýlendusýninguna 1905” in *Þjóðerni í þúsund ár?*, ed. Kolbeinn Óttarsson Proppé, Jón Yngvi Jóhannsson and Sverrir Jakobsson, Háskólaútgáfan, Reykjavík 2003, pp. 135-50.
- 3 Iceland was a sovereign part of the Kingdom of Denmark from 1918 and until the founding of the Republic of Iceland in 1944.
- 4 Sigríður Matthíasdóttir, *Hinn sanni Íslendingur: Þjóðerni, kyngervi og vald á Íslandi 1900-1930*, Háskólaútgáfan, Reykjavík 2004, p. 43.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 115.
- 6 Ólafur Rastrick, *Íslensk menning og samfélagslegt vald 1910-1930*, Hugvísindastofnun, Reykjavík 2011, pp. 73-9.
- 7 Rastrick discusses the parliament’s decision to build a National Theatre in 1923, but his short chapter focuses more on the significance of implementing an entertainment tax to finance the building of a national theatre, than on the theatre itself. *Ibid.*, pp. 158-63.
- 8 For some recent contributions to the question of theatre and national identity, see: Steve E. Wilmer (ed.), *National Theatres in a Changing Europe*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke & New York 2008; Kiki Gounaridou (ed.), *Staging Nationalism: Essays on Theatre and National Identity*, McFarland & Co., Jefferson, N.C. 2005; Steve E. Wilmer (ed.), *Writing & Rewriting National Theatre Histories*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City 2004; Nadine Holdsworth, *Theatre & Nation*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke & New York 2010.
- 9 Loren Kruger, *The National Stage: Theatre and Cultural Legitimation in England, France, and America*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1992, p. 1.
- 10 Matthías Jochumsson, “Sjónarleikir,” in *Þjóðólfur*, vol. 31 no. 6, 1879, p. 23. Bold in original. My translation.
- 11 Steingrímur Matthíasson (ed.), *Bref Matthíasar Jochumssonar*, Menningarsjóður, Akureyri 1935, pp. 6-7. In spite of the stated aversion to Danish comedies, the historian Þórunn Valdimarsdóttir points out that the play is under strong influence of a handful of Danish comedies. Þórunn E. Valdimarsdóttir, *Upp á Sigurbæðir: Saga Matthíasar Jochumssonar*, JPV útgáfa, Reykjavík 2006, pp. 153-62.
- 12 Steve E. Wilmer, “The Development of National Theatres in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries” in Wilmer 2008 op. cit., pp. 14–15.
- 13 Steve E. Wilmer, “Theatrical Nationalism and Subversive Affirmation” in *Playing With Theory in Theatre Practice*, ed. Megan Alrutz, Julia Listengarten and M. Van Duyn Wood, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke & New York 2011, p. 88.
- 14 “Þjóðlegt Leikrit! 500 Króna Verðlaun!” in *Ísafold*, 15 February 1890, p. 1.
- 15 Sveinn Einarsson, *A People’s Theatre Comes of Age: A Study of the Icelandic Theatre 1860-1920*, University of Iceland Press, Reykjavík 2007, p. 111.
- 16 The play was originally written in 1890 and submitted to the above-mentioned drama competition.
- 17 One of the rare exceptions is Guðmundur Kamban’s *Vér morðingjar* (We, the Murderers), premiered in 1920, which was set in a bourgeois New York environment.
- 18 *Fjalla-Eyvindur* was revived by the RTC seven times between the premiere in 1911 and 1923 with the same two actors in the lead roles. It was also performed in various theatres across Europe and can be said to have replaced *Úrilegumenn* as the canonical Icelandic national play.
- 19 Jón Ólafsson, “Lénharður Fógeti” in *Árvakur*, vol. 1 no. 8, 1914, p. 26.
- 20 Such ideas were promoted by the historian Jón Jónsson Aðils in popular lectures and books. See: Jón Jónsson Aðils, *Íslenzkt þjóðerni: Alþýðufyrirlestrar*, Sigurður Kristjánsson, Reykjavík 1903; See also: Matthíasdóttir, op.cit.
- 21 See Sveinn Einarsson, *Íslensk leiklist II: Listin*, Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, Reykjavík 1996, pp. 194-308; Árni Ibsen, “Íslensk leikritun frá upplýsingu til fullveldis” in *Íslensk bókmenntasaga*, vol. 3, ed. Halldór Guðmundsson, Mál og menning, Reykjavík 1996, pp. 636-49, and Einarsson 2007, op. cit., pp. 137-47. Sveinn Einarsson makes some general remarks on the political context of the period in his books, but Árni Ibsen does not mention it at all.
- 22 Constructions on the National Theatre started in 1928 but came to a halt in 1932 following the world economic crisis. The theatre finally opened in 1950 as a state-run institution, not operated by the RTC, although the majority of the artists active within the RTC were consequently employed by the National Theatre.
- 23 Indriði Einarsson, “Þjóðleikhús” in *Skírnir*, vol. 81 no. 2, 1907, 142-56, and Indriði Einarsson, “Íslenskt leikhús”

- in *Óðinn*, vol. 10 no. 10, 1915, pp. 73-84.
- 24 Kruger 1992, op.cit., p. 26.
- 25 Leikvinur, "Leikhúsið" in *Vísir*, 29 October 1923, p. 2.
- 26 In addition to *Tengdamamma* the plays mentioned were *Stormar* (performed 1924), *Dómar* (performed 1931), *Hilmar Foss* by Kristján Albertsson and *Smaladrengrurinn* (The Shepherd) by Freymóður Jóhannesson. The last two plays have never been performed.
- 27 See Wilmer, "The Development of National Theatres" in Wilmer 2008 op. cit.; Marvin Carlson, "National Theatres: Then and Now," in Wilmer 2008 op. cit., pp. 21-33; Loren Kruger, "The National Stage and the Naturalized House: (Trans)National Legitimation in Modern Europe," in Wilmer 2008 op. cit., pp. 34-48.
- 28 Pétur Pétursson, "Trúarlegar hreyfingar í Reykjavík tvo fyrstu áratugi 20. aldar: Þriðji hluti. Spíritisminn og dultrúarhreyfingin" in *Saga*, vol. 22 no. 1, 1984, p. 171. See also: Pétur Pétursson, *Trúmaður á tímamótum: Ævisaga Haralds Nielsonar*, Hið íslenska bókmenntafélag, Reykjavík 2011.
- 29 Kruger 2008, op. cit., p. 103.
- 30 See Þórunn E. Valdimarsdóttir and Eggert Þór Bernharðsson, *Leikfélag Reykjavíkur: Aldarsaga*, Leikfélag Reykjavíkur/Mál og menning, Reykjavík 1997, p. 104; and Sveinn Einarsson, *Leikhúsið við tjörnina*, Almenna bókafélagið, Reykjavík 1972, p. 25.
- 31 In many instances, the repertoire of the RTC took the Danish Betty Nansen Teater as a role model. Both Vane's *Outward Bound* and Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author* were performed there before turning up on the Icelandic stage. See Kela Kvam, Janne Risum and Jytte Wiingaard, *Dansk teaterhistorie*, Gyldendal, Copenhagen 1992, pp. 102-10.
- 32 "Leikfélag Reykjavíkur" in *Timinn*, 20 November 1926, p. 195.
- 33 "Sex verur leita höfundar, leikrit sem ætti að semja" in *Alþýðublaðið*, 12 November 1926, p. 2.
- 34 Amicus, "Leikfélag Reykjavíkur og leikdómendur" in *Vísir*, 24 November 1926, p. 2.
- 35 Vane's *Outward Bound* was by far the most popular play between 1923 and 1931, performed 22 times, followed by *The Feast at Solhaug* (18), Einarsson's *Dansinn í Hruna* (17), *Twelfth Night* (16), *The Winter's Tale* (16) and Einarsson's *Njárnsnóttin* (15). The most popular farce was *Die spanische Fliege*, performed 14 times, but *Laufs' Pension Schöller* only received 9 performances.
- 36 Njörður P. Njarðvík, *Sá svarti senuhjófur: Haraldur Björnsson í eigin hlutverki*, Skálholt, Reykjavík 1963, p. 122.
- 37 Volker Klotz, *Bürgerliches Lachtheater: Komödie, Posse, Schwank, Operette*, Winter, Heidelberg 2007, pp. 207-37.
- 38 Guðbrandur Jónsson, "Leikhúsið. Þrettándakveld eftir Shakespeare" in *Vísir*, 28-29 April 1926. Jónsson's review was quite extensive and was printed in two consecutive issues of the paper.
- 39 Br., "Merkisatburður í leiksögu landsins" in *Alþýðublaðið*, 21 April 1926, p. 4.
- 40 Br., "Þrettándanótt", in *Alþýðublaðið*, 26 April 1926, p. 3.
- 41 Guðbrandur Jónsson, "Leikhúsið. Þrettándakveld eftir Shakespeare" in *Vísir*, 28 April 1926, p. 2.
- 42 Einarsson 1915, op. cit., p. 99.
- 43 The paper *Alþýðublaðið* was first published in 1919 as an organ of the Social Democratic party *Alþýðuflokkurinn*, founded three years earlier.
- 44 Ragnheiður Kristjánsdóttir, *Nýtt fólk: Þjóðerni og íslensk verkalyðsstjórnsmál 1901-1944*, Háskólaútgáfan, Reykjavík 2008, p. 97.