

Review

Djævelens billede. Maskens magt – fra karneval til Dario Fo
[The Devil's Image: The Power of the Mask, from Carnival to Dario Fo]

Bent Holm

Copenhagen: Multivers, 2016, 400 p.

Reviewer: Magnus Tessing Schneider (*Stockholm University*)

This generously illustrated collection of essays written between 1980 and 2012 (and some of them not published before) offers a rich and engaging overview of Danish theatre scholar and dramaturge Bent Holm's wide-ranging research interests and historiographical and theatrical thinking. The eighteen essays, which cover the period from the sixteenth century till today, deal with such diverse topics as Carnival ritualism and clerical anti-theatricality, the representation of Turkishness in Shakespeare's *Othello*, the absolutist staging of power in France and Denmark, commedia dell'arte, circus and puppet theatre, the aesthetic of Giorgio Strehler, the profession of the modern dramaturge, and the plays of Ludvig Holberg, Carlo Goldoni, Eduardo De Filippo, Jess Ørnsbo, Line Knutzon, and Holm's long-time collaborator Dario Fo – whose preface to the book was signed just two months before his death in October 2016.

The book is divided into four sections. Part one, "Ritual and Masks", examines the emergence of modern European theatre as a response to the suppression of Carnival folk culture by the Church in the sixteenth century. To put it shortly: when the rituals of the seasonal festivals were removed through the official segregation of cult and theatricality, theatre as an art form took over their functions in people's lives. Though cult and theatre differ through the way we act as participants and receivers, respectively, they both operate "with spectacularity as a means of

activating an immaterial field, an imagination zone” (p. 34).¹ And till the present day, the necessity of theatrical performance in society relies on its privileged access to this “pictorially structuring cognitive apparatus” (p. 33), which allows us to perceive reality in ways that differ from the ones that have been institutionalized by the Church, the Crown, the Nation, etc. Holm goes on to explain the battle of pietistic theologians in eighteenth-century Denmark against masquerades and theatre as a battle against the continued influence of the subversive Carnival counterculture. It is from one of these theologians, the Norwegian bishop Erik Pontoppidan, that the book has taken its title. At the fall of man, Pontoppidan maintained in 1737, we lost “God’s image, which was replaced by the Devil’s image, or by a resemblance to this enemy of God” (quoted on pp. 47-48). According to the logic of the pious Lutheran, the actor’s mask prevents onlookers from beholding the true face of God.

In part two, “The Masks of Power”, Holm changes focus from the religious to the political field, tracing a development that runs parallel to the one he traces in the area of theology. During the early reign of Louis XIV of France, the Italian comedians in Paris served a function similar to that of the medieval court fool, comically reversing the Sun King’s ceremonial displays of power. In this way, they remained faithful to the parodic Carnival spirit. With the centralization of cultural expressions by the absolutist regime, however, and the increasing ritualization of royal power, the counterculture of Harlequin and his associates gradually became unacceptable, and their theatre was finally shut down in 1697. Holm traces the eighteenth century’s devaluation of folk culture and mask comedy back to this politically motivated streamlining of theatrical expression, which also involved a streamlining of human nature.

In part three, “The Power of the Mask”, Holm then turns to comic theatre as a modern art form from the eighteenth century onwards, studying the ways in which the carnivalesque perspective on human existence has survived in the work of comic playwrights, in subgenres such as circus and puppet theatre, and in the experiments of the historical avant-garde. Holberg – the father of Danish drama and enlightened humanism, to whom Holm has devoted three full-length studies – is a figure who recurs in different contexts in all four sections of the book. Peeling off the layers of nationalistic self-fashioning, Romantic sentimentality, and naturalistic conformity, which have accumulated on this iconic author through the centuries, Holm has always striven to restore the original colours of Holberg’s theatre: his cosmopolitan outlook, which combines Italian, French and Danish elements; his progressive depiction of the human mind, which transcends individualized psychology; and his chaotic, comic theatricality, which breaks down barriers be-

¹ All translations are by the reviewer.

tween foreign and national, past and present, illusion and reality. Rethatricalizing Holberg's comedies means changing the emphasis from 'fiction' – which, in Holm's terminology, represents a literary viewpoint and hence involves a clear-cut distinction between art and reality – to 'illusion' which represents a theatrical viewpoint and hence involves a coincidence of art and reality. Theatrical illusion possesses a truth of its own.

In the fourth and final part, "Behind the Mask", Holm then turns to contemporary theatre and the practices of the stage director and the dramaturge, including essays on the productions on which he has worked himself, and on playwrights with whom he has collaborated. This section also outlines Holm's aesthetic as a theatrical practitioner, which has always been directly linked to his approach as a critic and historian. Retrieving the neglected subversiveness of e.g. eighteenth-century comedies is to delve into "the subconscious layers of the works" (p. 274, with a quotation from Peter Brook). These layers are always ridden with paradoxes, of course, and Holm is less concerned with the plays as carefully planned rhetorical *works* than as inherently paradoxical and contradictory *texts*. A compelling production might attempt to reconnect to the Carnival origins of the comic traditions of which Holberg and Goldoni were a part, even though the authors themselves were determined to break with these origins.

As a scholar of Gluck and Mozart, I sometimes find myself disagreeing with Holm's historiography, though this is a minor reservation with regard to a book rich in ideas and perspectives. His depiction of the Enlightenment as mainly concerned with art's utility, schoolroom didacticism and bourgeois propriety does not take the last decades' radical reassessment of the movement by historians such as Vincenzo Ferrone and Jonathan Israel into account. After all, it is to the Enlightenment that we owe the discipline of aesthetics and the concept of art's autonomy, which are directly opposed to any notions of utility and didacticism. It is for this very autonomy that Holm advocates, in fact, with his answer to those who complain that Goldoni's comedies "are not about anything": "They are about nothing," is his pithy reply (p. 209), and that is a different thing altogether, of course.

This insistence on meaningful nothingness makes salutary reading in a time when the theatre is threatened by platitudinous commercialism on the one hand, and by moralistic intellectualism on the other (or even by the two in combination). With characteristic sardonic wit, Holm complains that terms like "exciting" and "unsettling" have become universal clichés in Danish theatre, while the term "why?" has become taboo (p. 270-71). He has little patience with the thematic explicitness of today's self-styled "political theatre", which eschews complexity. In contrast, the theatre of Dario Fo "leaves the stage to the imagination and subconscious pictorial creativity of the audience, by means of story, sound, body, rhythm. As practice and parable, the core of the narration is chaos" (p. 363).