

“Theatre Phenomenology” and Ibsen’s *The Master Builder*

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ABSTRACT

How might an actor find inspiration from philosophy to build a world on stage? This article examines how phenomenology can offer a framework for creating performance and a vocabulary for action in rehearsal. Taking Henrik Ibsen’s *The Master Builder* as a case-study, a number of exercises and approaches are suggested for exploring the text while drawing on Martin Heidegger’s lecture, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” which ponders the nature of “building”. Far from merely “constructing” an environment, essentially, building is “dwelling”. As the characters in Ibsen’s drama go about their dwelling, actors must build a world by bridging the gap between the stage, the ensemble, and the audience.

KEYWORDS

Phenomenology, Ibsen, The Master Builder, Heidegger, Building, Dwelling, Thinking, The Fourfold, Being, Rehearsal

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Introduction

What does it mean to build a world? Humans do it in their everyday activities and interactions with others. Actors build a world in a different way. This article examines how one of continental philosophy’s most significant movements—phenomenology—can examine the meaning of “world” and provide a fertile source of inspiration for creative practice. Theatres are uniquely located at the intersection of multiple worlds—both real and imagined—of actors, characters, and audiences.¹ This connection permits the theatrical event to explore what it means to make a world in a fictional context while also paying attention to the social context of the performance. It is not surprising, then, that theatre can be “about” world-building both in form and content.² This article explores an actor’s work on a text as world-building through the lens of what might be called “theatre phenomenology”.

Henrik Ibsen’s *The Master Builder* (*Bygmester Solness*) is a particularly apt case study for phenomenological inquiry in rehearsal and for opening a dialogue with “The Question of Being” as famously articulated by the philosopher Martin Heidegger.³ Ibsen’s text explores the meaning of “building” and, as is considered below, how the essence of building is dwelling.⁴ Each character in the work struggles with building: Halvard Solness’ has grand designs for architectural pursuits and an ambition for personal transcendence; Aline, his wife, is “a builder of souls”, though she experiences loss; Ragnar Brovik and Kaia Fossli, the young couple, hope to build a future together; and Knut Brovik hopes to build a legacy for his family. But the mysterious visitor, Hilde Wangel, dreams of living in a castle built for her in the clouds. And by rejecting her responsibility to “the call of Being”, she is in danger of “falling”—as Solness literally does at the end of the play.⁵ In real life, humans create an environment in order to sustain their

1 McAuley 1999.

2 States 1985, 19-47; 119-56; Wilshire 1982, x-iv; 38-91.

3 Heidegger 1962; Ibsen 1981.

4 Heidegger 1978, 350.

5 “Falling” is a technical term that Heidegger uses to describe the tendency to interpret our own being in terms of mere objects in the world rather than as unique beings with the ability to inquire

own “being” as an end in itself. In order to “build” a character in performance, actors can inhabit a role with a kind of “dwelling” that points back to their very own being too.

The approach offered here is not simply a form of literary analysis or thought-experiment, however. It considers the actor’s quest for truth in performance (or “poetry” in Heidegger’s later philosophical writings).⁶ Such a philosophical frame can offer a practical guide for building a character.⁷ For example, Solness, Hilde, Aline, and others in *The Master Builder* fall short of taking authentic action in the world in which they find themselves. On the rehearsal room floor, it would be productive to examine these themes through a series of exercises based around questions such as: What is a world? How do objects and equipment reveal different worlds? How do humans encounter others with the same kind of being as themselves? How do they experience mortality in relation to the infinite? What is the human relationship with death in everyday activity? What does it mean to grasp meaning from a meaningless world? Through these questions, rather than simply gesture towards “Being as such”, the actor can relate an existential context to concrete action and involvement.

The outline for practice in the second half of this article extends upon a recent practical workshop in “theatre phenomenology” at Sheffield Hallam University in 2017.⁸ Working on Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard*, a company of professional actors and undergraduate students carried out a series of exercises designed to examine different aspects of our Being-in-the-world. The first phase included work and reflection on the actor’s own self—observation of the way consciousness takes in the world when moving through the city, its relationship to everyday objects and actions, its connection with others in the world, and its fleeing tendency to be in some other place or time. Having explored these modes of being in the actor’s own experience, the same was explored in the fictional world of a character. Exercises were created to investigate the character’s relationship with their environment, with objects and actions, with others there or not there with them, and their desire to be elsewhere. Finally, the actors reflected on their own experience of artistic creativity and considered the way that the world presented itself to their own conscious experience during rehearsal and performance. The hope was that the creative process itself might open up a different way of approaching specific phenomena in relation to the play’s text. The actor-participants reported that the language provided by this phenomenological workshop was helpful in describing their experiences and considerably sped up their progress in approaching the world of the play and the character they were seeking to inhabit. Each practical exploration was highly specific to the actor, character, and text, and as such, emphasised considerably different phenomenological accounts of experience. With this in mind, the ideas presented below extend such exercises in relation to *The Master Builder*.

It is worth noting that this is not a “theory of acting”, however, but rather a

into their own existence; Heidegger 1962, 219-24.

6 Heidegger 1971.

7 Note Elizabeth Hapgood’s translation of “Building a Character”; Stanislavski 1949.

8 Johnston 2018.

way of understanding what actors already do—or might do—in a different light. Stanislavski, for example, asked many similar questions about the relationship between action, self, and the broader meaning of existence in his approach to theatre-making.⁹ A philosophical frame may therefore develop an understanding of existing approaches and inflect practice. The result may provide a fresh vocabulary—an alternative way of seeing the creative work of the actor.¹⁰ Nor does this approach constitute a purely abstract intellectual contribution to the history of ontology. Heidegger’s “hermeneutics of the facticity of Being” (the interpretation of the way that Being has been understood—both now and in the past) can be applied to creative practice in so far as it issues a call for thinking in a new way of thinking about temporality. The contention is that performance itself can be an impetus for such a rethinking.

Theatre Phenomenology

Phenomenology—arguably the most influential movement in twentieth-century continental philosophy—is the study of the way the world shows itself to lived experience. It advocates a return to “the things themselves”: phenomena as they are encountered rather than presupposed through abstract thought. For this reason, the object of phenomenology should be extremely helpful in the art of acting.¹¹ The approach questions pre-given assumptions about knowledge, consciousness, the structures of perception, the nature of embodied experience, and the conditions that mark the horizon of existence. There is no unified method of phenomenology—its history is a series of revisions, interruptions, and new beginnings.¹² Edmund Husserl, the founder of the movement, proposed a method of bracketing off the question of whether external reality exists outside of one’s mind. By applying what he called the *epoché*, he focused on the way experience presents itself to consciousness in its mode “givenness”. As such, one must step back from the “natural attitude” (an everyday mode of engaging in tasks) and focus in on the phenomenon at hand. In fact, the phenomenologist carries out a series of “reductions” in order to describe the essence of a particular phenomenon (the elements without which it would not be what it is). Later phenomenologists would argue that we should not focus on the *detached* (i.e. transcendental) human subject and indeed denied that this was even possible.

In his early writings, Husserl’s student Heidegger aimed to investigate the structures of Being-in-the-world constituted by the unique being that we have as humans conveyed by the term *Dasein* (being-there). He argued that being human is constrained by various horizons: we exist within time, in a world with equipment, tasks, others around us who share our unique kind of being, we are

9 Stanislavski 2008. Also see Johnston 2011a. I should also note that by drawing attention to specific roles, or “characters” here, I am not intending to reify them as stable ontological figures. As seen below, the basis of character is always in action in the given circumstances.

10 Thomas 2013, for example, provides a full range of social, cultural, and political aspects through which to approach script analysis for actors, directors, and designers. My project here provides a philosophical set of questions with practical exercises for their investigation on the rehearsal room floor.

11 Johnston 2017a.

12 Glendinning 2007, 1.

thrown into a set of circumstances that precede us, and even the very fact that life will end gives meaning to every moment of existence.¹³ Later, Heidegger would turn from examining the being of the specific beings to explore a poetic expression of Being as such. Rather than be limited by philosophical language and technical terms, the poet is free to consider the nature of Being and “found” a world through their work.¹⁴ Yet Heidegger says very little about “performance” in his discussion of the work of art—a gap that this research explores.¹⁵

“Theatre phenomenology”, as employed here, is the inquiry into the way the world presents itself to conscious experience through theatre and considers performance-making as a mode of phenomenology in itself. The phrase points towards the relationship between theatre and phenomenology, modelled on the term “performance philosophy”.¹⁶ By withholding a conjunction/preposition in the phrase (e.g. ‘and’, ‘as’, ‘through’, etc.), theatre phenomenology leaves the connection between the two fields open. On the one hand, one might interpret performance processes in philosophical terms thereby gaining new insight into aesthetic and cultural practices.¹⁷ The upshot is that historical theatre-making processes and understandings of performance can reveal the ontology and metaphysics upon which they are founded. In other words, studying theatre and performance can shed light on an understanding of the history of Being.¹⁸ On the other hand, performance can also draw upon philosophical thought explicitly in order to shape the creative process.¹⁹ If a particular epistemological method or approach provides a faithful account of the world—even if this only be through a useful metaphor—then it may also open up new conceptual frameworks through which artists might approach their work and conceive of themselves as conscious beings.²⁰ Phenomenology can therefore be brought into dialogue with a practical rehearsal—not simply remaining as a theoretical tool for performance analysis.²¹ There is a danger, however, that scholars search for—and inevitably find—examples that fit their particular theory or critical approach to performance and overlook counter-examples that might be identified in other case studies. For this reason, Laura Cull warns against simply “applying” philosophy to performance as it can lead to self-confirming performance theory as well as bring a fixed understanding of what philosophy is in the first place.²²

13 Heidegger 1962, 279-311.

14 Heidegger 1971.

15 For an in-depth discussion of the phenomenological method in practice, see Van Manen 2016; for a discussion of Heidegger’s philosophy of art, see Young 2004.

16 Cull and Lagaay 2014, 15-33; Grant, McNeilly-Renaudie, and Wagner, forthcoming.

17 Carlson 1993; Fortier 1997; Reinelt and Roach 1992.

18 Johnston 2017b

19 Johnston 2018.

20 See Zarrilli 1995, 8-10.

21 Indeed, growing interest in the relationship between theatre and phenomenology is manifest in a special issue of *Nordic Theatre Studies*. Schneider and Skjoldager-Nielsen 2012. Also see Reinelt and Roach 1992, where the editors place phenomenology as a paradigm for critical theory and performance.

22 Cull and Lagaay 2014.

Ibsen and The Question of Being

Nevertheless, the philosophical search for the meaning of being has many parallels in Ibsen's drama. His oeuvre lays out a search for "the self"—whether in an inward quest for transcendence, an examination of conscience and reaching toward the nature of consciousness, or in an outward exploration of social and political tensions. But such an elusive search is obstructed and suppressed for many of Ibsen's protagonists. On the surface of it, none of the characters in *The Master Builder* face their "own-most being" resolutely because they have become absorbed in their own worlds to the detriment of those around them. Halvard Solness, the master builder, manipulates his immediate associates and family through small enactments of power (and possibly mysterious emanations of his will). He is driven by a fear of the next generation nipping at his heels—especially in young draftsman Ragnar, for whom he refuses an employment reference and testimonial. Solness has lived through the immeasurable loss of his own children and broods over an unpayable debt to his wife for the tragedy because he feels responsible for the fire that indirectly caused their death—even though this is not logically possible. He develops the belief that he has the ability to influence others telepathically and bring about his will through purely desiring things to be so. The arrival of the twenty-three year old Hilde (whom it appears he seduced a decade ago) awakens his self-belief and urges him to act on his desires. He climbs to the top of the tower of his newest building construction—a new home built for his wife—in order to place the ceremonial wreath atop of the tower as is customary at such an opening. In conquering his fear of dizzying heights, in achieving the seemingly impossible, he loses his life.

The given circumstances of the play reveal how each character is captive to the constraints in which they find themselves: Solness to his fear, Aline to her loss, Hilde to her fantasy, and Ragnar to his suppressed achievement, and so on. And yet still, Ibsen offers a picture of humanity's relationship to "the Absolute"—a metaphysical power that Solness confronted at the top of a tower ten years ago and apparently also strives with at the end of the play—and our ability to be with and communicate with one another (an extension of themes from his early plays about vocation and responsibility in his earlier play, *Brand*). In this sense, *The Master Builder* follows a philosophical inquiry into duty and freedom, ageing and youthful potential, grief and closure, and transcendence and "letting be" what is. For this reason, it is appropriate to turn to philosophy as a lens in so far as it might give an account of these conflicting demands on existence. Of course, a philosophical interpretation of Ibsen's drama is not new. Brian Johnston, for instance, argues that Ibsen's later plays followed a cycle investigating the various stages of developing self-consciousness of the world spirit as articulated by G.W.F. Hegel.²³ Walter Benjamin interprets Ibsen's exploration of building "homes for human beings" in this play in opposition to modernist approaches to building and renunciation of human attributes to the environment.²⁴ Others offer a Nietzschean reading of Ibsen's drama as an attempt to overcome a guilt

23 Johnston 1992.

24 Benjamin 2003, 221.

ingrained in the (slave) Christian resentment through an act of self affirmation.²⁵ The interpretation below offers a broader approach: developing phenomenology is appropriate in this case because it can help to ask the existential-ontological questions about building and dwelling and account for the actions of each role in the play rather than just the protagonist.

Ibsen also explores the nature of creativity. For example, Solness' quest is to turn his art into something useful in human terms—building homes for people rather than numbers and providing the structures for the possibility of happiness. On the surface of it, Solness has realized the many shortcomings in contemporary architecture. He yearns for more than pragmatic shelters for families—even though he has made a career out of exactly that. It is significant that his foray into the mass-production of houses came after his (and Aline's) family home burnt down and the garden was divided into lots. As mentioned, he believes that the cost of his business success is the personal pain that he has suffered. In the end, he endeavours to build castles in the clouds—rejecting societal conventions, norms, and duties in favour of an elusive freedom. But this is precisely because he cannot reflect upon, or come to terms with, his *own-most* being: the fact that his career will come to an end, the fact that he has experienced much sacrifice and loss in order to gain his expertise and acclaim, the fact that he has closed himself off emotionally from his world yet imagines a causal connection between his innermost wishes and key events that have turned his life around.

Building and Dwelling

In practice, theatre phenomenology should begin by investigating the actor's own "being there". One might identify elements of Being-in-the-world and describe each phenomenon through personal experience in relation to *The Master Builder*. The text (including the contemporary socio-political environment) can provide a touchstone for a corresponding aspect of the way we encounter being. Such exercises could be developed over a number of years if in a conservatoire context or in a shorter time-frame of rehearsal as required. In this way, the work might inflect or supplement actor training and offer a new vocabulary for its processes. On a smaller scale, it can be applied through exercises of self-investigation in rehearsal.

Heidegger's lecture at the Darmstadt Symposium on "Man and Space" in 1951, entitled "Building, Dwelling, Thinking" is pertinent to the theme.²⁶ Writing more than half a century after Ibsen, Heidegger's meditations on space are useful in approaching this play partly because *The Master Builder* takes "building" as its essential theme as we will see. Heidegger also attempts to think about the nature of building against the context of a national housing shortage following the Second World War, where there was an urgent need for homes for the German people. He puts off the broader practical political and technical problems of this crisis to ask what building is in essence. The obvious answer is that humans build structures so that they can dwell in them. But it is not that simple. Not

25 See Kaufman 1972; Hinden 1972; and Helland 2009.

26 Heidegger 1978, 343-63.

all buildings are directly made for dwelling—factories, offices, and other public buildings, for instance. It follows that one must consider exactly how buildings allow for dwelling in the first place. The examination below will alternate between exploring Heidegger’s reflection on dwelling and how they might open up Ibsen’s text for the actor.

At the opening of *The Master Builder*, the stage contains the plainly dressed workroom between the inner rooms of the house and outwards to the hall. At the back is the draftsmen’s office and around the stage are various pieces of modest furniture, books, papers, tables, water etc. The shaded lamps provide a focus on the work of drawing up plans. The book-keeping area occupied by Kaia standing at her desk is separated from the draftsmen at the back, perhaps adding gendered regions of the stage. The bodily frames of these employees are stooped over their work. And the outwardly displayed carefulness of Knut’s clothing shows his propriety and ageing tradition, and the neatness of the younger couple perhaps a humbleness and diligence.

Heidegger’s account of “building” offers some clues for exploration here. For him, the post-war public housing shortage and its underlying causes both sever the link between building and dwelling.²⁷ This is because humans have forgotten the true meaning of these terms in the face of a pressing practical need. He claims that the etymology of *bauen* (building) can be traced to an archaic word for “being”. Therefore, the way that people dwell is bound up in the way that they “are”—how they exist, and who they are both as individuals and as a community. Building is a particular way of Being-in-the-world and is a specific mode of dwelling. It is a way of nurturing both the natural and man-made world. According to Heidegger, the modern epoch has failed to recognise this connection because it conceives of the problem merely in technical terms (e.g. perhaps in terms of budget efficiency or project simplicity). Yet building is not simply an operational response to a need for homes; it is part of a tradition. It is a way for a community to experience being-together from an historical past into the future. Architecture, therefore, is not universal and unchanging in terms of function, but highly contextual and regionally specific.

In rehearsal, each actor could ask, “*what* is built in this play?” and “*what* is *disclosed* through the dwelling of each character?” In fact, there may well be multiple worlds overlapping. Kaia and Ragnar inhabit a world where they are about to set off on their lives together. Knut is in a world that is slowly drawing to a close where he wants to set things right. It is as if Aline is in a ghost world haunted by the past. Hilde is in a fantasy world wanting to claim an impossible kingdom and fleeing from her father. For this exercise, the cast might read a section of a scene, moving on the rehearsal room floor and freezing at any given point, letting the characters step forward to answer a series of questions. What is each character building at this particular moment? What is disclosed about dwelling in the moment right now? The ensemble might map how specific events in the play alter what they are building. How do they *change* what they are building throughout the play? What are the major turning points in a “way of being” for each character? A series of tableaux could represent these points.

27 Ibid.

Then, focusing in on the everyday activities of dwelling, the actors might attend to various objects in the scene, describe them, and feel them. One could think about how they are used and in what context. Following this, one might consider how these objects fit into a broader set of objects indicating a specific world. One could explore the intersection between the world of accounting, medicine, architecture, home-making etc. at various moments. How are those objects observed in the scene connected through human action? A specific example could be when Hilde arrives in Act I and searches around the room, looking at things in order to get some sort of a picture of this man that she met ten years ago. Next, one might think about objects that are no longer present—Aline’s dolls, for instance. They could be seen as a metaphor for her lost children, but on deeper inspection consider how they represent the loss of self for her, or a childhood and happiness left behind. Through improvisation, each character could articulate their relationship with an object—how it makes them feel, what desires it spurs on, what world it brings them to, what it allows them to build.

The ensemble might consider the function of “constructing” at play here (in Heidegger’s conception of the “ontic” solution to building rather than any deeper attention to our relationship with dwelling). Ragnar draws up plans for the firm. Knut calculates tensions and angles for Solness. Kaia counts the ledger and settles credits and debts. Dr Herdal attends to his patients. But there is something that falls short in “constructing” in this sense—or rather that it is not essential to dwelling; it is perfunctory and tends to overlook meaning. What technical mode of constructing does each character carry out? How might they use this perfunctory action as a means of escaping a deeper relationship with Being—both in relation to their own self and Being-with others there in their world.

Similarly, one might explore “space” in relation to dwelling for a scene. Each character could walk around the space and narrate or demonstrate their disposition towards different areas of the scene. What thoughts, experiences, and emotions come out when they encounter each area? For instance at the beginning, is the workspace a kind of prison for Ragnar and his family? He is not held there against his will, but rather confined by the career of draughtsman and seeking praise from the master. For other characters, the nature of confinement is different. What is it about this place that allows its inhabitants to dwell? The location of the first act is both workspace and homespace with its different areas for different characters. Consideration could be given to how character is stopped from “being at home” in this space.²⁸ Each of these themes could be developed, for example, by encouraging the actors to externalize their reactions, perhaps even in a physically abstract way, improvising a sense of what it is like to “be at home”, demonstrating how they behave and move in different worlds, or creating a physical depiction around the types of equipment found in this world.

The Fourfold

In the Second Act, the *mise-en-scene* is a small drawing room in the same house. At the back is a glass door leading to a verandah. Note that the area

²⁸ In Heidegger 1962, 233-234, *Unheimlich* is also translated as “uncanny” as well as “not-being-at-home”.

represented on stage makes its way to the exterior as the play unfolds. There is also a bay window with flowers and a console table with mirror. The setting is domestic and perhaps “feminine”—Aline is attending to the flowers and moving quietly through the space in a nurturing and preserving role. It is early in the morning and the master builder is inspecting his young draftsman’s plans. He holds another person’s life in his hands—with further ramifications, if one is to take Kaia and Knut into account. Although neither Solness nor Aline speak, he follows her occasionally with his eyes. Kaia arrives with the news that Knut is gravely ill and taken to bed.

In this section, Heidegger’s discussion of *das Geviert* (“the Fourfold”) that informs his conception of dwelling is relevant.²⁹ Inspired by Friedrich Hölderlin, the Romantic poet, he articulates a mysterious unity in our experience of Being.³⁰ Heidegger considers the way that we dwell on the earth, under the sky, as mortals waiting for divinities to arrive.³¹ Dwelling enables the Fourfold through a productive opposition between the finite and the infinite. Our living within the spaces of the earth for the duration of our life brings the nature of Being to light. This gathering “lights up” the world as every individual moves through space and time within their daily activities. In other words, different aspects of the world—the earth, sky, gods and mortals—are gathered together in each experience of being, although these aspects can be brought into focus individually. Earth is the supporting ground, provides a physical sense of being, and sustains us by watering and providing for us. The sky is the firmament under which humans live and gives the seasons, the path of the sun, the movement of the stars, and the rhythms of the environment that surrounds them. But in gazing upwards, mortals notice that they are both “here” and “beyond”. The heavens themselves stand in for eternity and a horizon for apprehending space. This leads to the third element of the Fourfold: mortals. Mortals always have a finite existence. But in remembering our certain and immanent death, one can come to terms with our essential being. Although there is “nothing” at the heart of being in itself, facing up to this fact and acting resolutely, one can grasp meaning from that limited being. The inevitability that life will one day come to an end actually gives meaning to every moment. Finally, there are “divinities” who have fled the earth. They create and provide the earth—they have left behind that which allows mortals to live—although mysteriously concealed in the world that surrounds them. In another sense, one might think of the gods as “divine destinies” or laws holding the fabric of society together. These are not simply subject to “public opinion” but are much deeper and eternal laws that demand to be obeyed.

The Fourfold essentially allows humans to be in space—the space within which dwelling takes place. Conversely, the act of dwelling sustains the Fourfold in its unity and gathers each aspect together. If carried out in an attentive way, dwelling involves tending to the earth so as to maintain it without exploitation. In

29 Young 2006; 2002, 92-102.

30 There are parallels here with Stanislavski’s use of mystical terms in relation to acting through religious connotations in terms such as in ‘communion’ (which is lost when translated as ‘communication’); Stanislavski 2008, 229-57.

31 Heidegger 1978, 351-53.

this sense, as Heidegger notes, building is not merely perfunctory constructing, but a “preserving” of Being:

In saving the earth, in receiving the sky, in awaiting the divinities in initiating mortals, dwelling appropriates as the fourfold preservation of the fourfold. To spare and preserve means to take under our care, to look after the fourfold in its essence. What we take under our care must be kept safe. But if dwelling preserves the fourfold, where does it keep the fourfold’s essence? How do mortals make their dwelling such a preserving? Mortals would never be capable of it if dwelling were merely a staying on earth under the sky, before the divinities, among mortals. Rather, dwelling itself is always a way of staying with things. Dwelling, as preserving, keeps the fourfold in that with which mortals stay: in things.³²

Turning back to Ibsen, the creative ensemble can ask how the world is gathered in rehearsal of *The Master Builder*. One might think about the “preserving” actions that each character takes at any given moment. What do they “care” for? What do they attend to? Aline is a good example in the way that she tends to flowers, prepares the house for guests, and preserves the memory of her lost children in the empty nurseries of the house. Speaking and listening is also an attentiveness in that it preserves, reflects and brings the past to presence. Note how Solness does not like to talk about the past and rarely brings it up. The cast might play with various sections of the scene to have each character listen or not listen to those around them. Further experiment might explore “tending” to different things past, present, and future—it could be a memory, a burning present desire, or a hope for the future. The key is to think about how this “preserving” guides action in the here and now.

Next, the process could explore different aspects of this strange notion of the Fourfold. What is the sustaining “earth” here? Each actor could simply consider the materiality and everyday needs that sustain their character. What do they need to survive? How do they cultivate for their environment, home, or work-place? They could explore this in a series of improvisations about being “grounded” in the earth. How does each character stand? How do they move and manipulate and order their surroundings? How do they rely on the apparent stability of “things” there in the character’s immediate lifeworld?

What is the horizon of the play or how one can think of the “sky” as it is manifest here? What is the “beyond” for each character? The ensemble could consider the limits of this world depicted, whether it be the new building looming in the distance or the confining tasks of the master builder’s work. What are the natural rhythms that underpin the world of the play? What are the ebbs and flows of each character’s day? How do those harmonics affect the way that they move and respond? Perhaps for this set of questions, the cast might use an “image theatre” technique sculpting human bodies in the space to depict an answer.

Each actor can then think about instances of “mortals” and mortality that rise up from the text. The most obvious example is Knut’s impending death, but also Solness and Aline’s ageing. Does a fear of death haunt each character? How does this affect their actions and tasks? What are the triggers that spring the

32 Ibid., 353.

thought of death to the front of their mind? How do they react and suppress it? The cast could rehearse part of a scene and get each actor to vocalise (abstractly) and physicalise a reaction at such trigger points as they encounter them, before continuing on with the scene.

Finally, the process might consider the “gods” at play here. One can begin to glimpse divinity in Solness’ attempt to transcend the moral demands of religious convention and accepted behaviour. Or rather, he offends a divine order not simply in terms of arbitrary social norms but something much deeper in trying to become a god himself. There might be a complex piety such as Aline’s which in many ways tries to cover up a sense of guilt and loss. What is the nature of Dr Herdal’s belief in medicine? What is the mystical force that pulls Hilde forward in her pursuit of Solness? In what way does Kaia see Solness as a kind of divine presence? Where does Knut see consolation in his dire circumstances? The cast could act out a scene silently and imagine each character’s actions being guided by a silent divinity. At times, they might resist and others surrender to the gods controlling each activity. The director might conduct a “meditation” exercise where each actor considers these questions and allows the answers to inform their imagined performance.

Making Space

In the final act, the scene has moved to the outside deck area of the house. A set of stairs leads to the garden below with tall trees spreading their branches towards the house (incidentally, which Ibsen calls the “dwelling house” in his stage directions). In the distance is the lower part of the new villa Solness is building for his wife and himself. An old wooden fence forms a boundary at the back of the space before a street and tumble down cottages. Various benches and outdoor furniture adorn the stage together with some tools. Perhaps this is more a public setting with its outward vistas. It is evening with sunlit clouds—a liminal atmosphere of twilight, intimating a fairytale kingdom in the sky above.

Heidegger’s conclusions on “man and space” are germane to this final act. For him, a building is that which allows for spaces of dwelling to occur. Heidegger gives the example of a bridge. It gives a sense of space by being stretched across a river and is one of many possible sites for such a crossing. It is not simply a functional construction, nor object of symbolic meaning. It is an example of the gathering power of the Fourfold in so far as it allows for dwelling. It gathers the earth, sky, mortals, and gods into a “thing”:

The bridge lets the stream run its course and at the same time grants mortals their way, so that they may come and go from shore to shore. Bridges initiate in many ways. The city bridge leads from the precincts of the castle to the cathedral square; the river bridge near the country town brings wagons and horse teams to the surrounding villages. The old stone bridge’s humble brook crossing gives to the harvest wagon its passage from the fields into the village and carries the lumber cart from the field path to the road. The highway bridge is tied into the network of long-distance traffic, paced and calculated for maximum yield. Always

and ever differently the bridge initiates the lingering and hastening ways of men to and fro, so that they may get to other banks and in the end, as mortals, to the other side. Now in a high arch, now in a low, the bridge vaults over glen and stream—whether mortals keep in mind the vaulting of the bridge’s course or forget that they, always themselves on their way to the last bridge, are actually striving to surmount all that is common and unsound in them in order to bring themselves before the haleness of the divinities. The bridge gathers, as a passage that crosses, before the divinities—whether we explicitly think of, and visibly give thanks for, their presence, as in the figure of the saint of the bridge, or whether that divine presence is obstructed or even pushed wholly aside.³³

Space is therefore more than something that stems simply from connecting particular locations—it gathers different regions together. Heidegger suggests that building creates and allows us to apprehend particular space in the first place. Space needs to be created in order to be experienced. Thus, for Heidegger, the paradigm of a dwelling is the Black Forest farm house.³⁴ He draws on a very personal experience of place linked to a specific cultural and folk tradition which sustains and preserves the surrounding land and provides shelter for its inhabitants. Dwelling in this sense is to “make oneself at home”. It is also a form of thinking because of its openness to being as preserving and sustaining. Dwelling represents the gathering of the Fourfold as a mode of being. It makes space for Being.

A rehearsal of this section of the play might ask: in what way does each character “make space”? Thought can be given to the spaces that are “founded” in the play. The ensemble could create a scene playing with different magnitudes of space, from clumping together in a tiny part of the stage to using the vast expanses available. How are particular “locations” founded? What spaces are separated from one another? What is needed to bring them together? The work of Solness’ firm does so literally, of course. And he is constructing a new house for his wife—with many rooms although he claims that it will never be a home for him. In what does the contentment of each of the characters rest? What stands in the way of that contentment and fulfillment in happiness? The many social interactions and conversations in the play build a world for these characters and for the audience as they reveal themselves to one another in conversation. Conversely, the cast might ask what closes off space in the play? To this end, each actor could physicalise a “shutting down of space” for another through an improvisation. As well as “building”, what destructive forces operate in the world here? Perhaps lust, duty, fantasy, or even self-interest. Solness loses sight of the fact that he has a world right in front of him. At the heart of the inevitable events that unfold, there is a refusal by the characters to make space for one another that propels the drama. These questions should be explored in a physical way. The actors could experiment with being close to the rest of the ensemble, gravitating to the people and places of comfort. Then each character

33 Ibid., 354-55.

34 Ibid., 362-63.

might move away from those that they want to avoid. This part of the rehearsal could be a moved reading or silent improvisation.

A Phenomenology of *The Master Builder*

In order to avoid simply “applying” philosophy to this case study, one must also ask, “what phenomenology does (or might) *The Master Builder* offer?” The answer depends on each interpretation of the text in production. In Ibsen’s text, the “truth” when presented in performance is indeterminate. Many questions remain. Was Solness really responsible for the fire at his former house? Was he really able to control the minds of others such as Kaia and Hilde? Or perhaps was it Hilde who had cast a spell on Solness all those years ago as she returns to claim the soul of her victim. Solness made a Faustian pact with the devil (or troll, perhaps) and it is now due to be repaid. Did this ecstatic moment between Solness and Hilde happen all those years ago, or is it a fantasy of a young girl, struggling to find her own freedom, suppressed by the stifling restrictions of her father’s home? Is Solness really losing his mind and susceptible to fragmented memory recall or is he privy to a mysterious power? Is Aline truly conflicted by duty or perhaps involved with Dr Herdal herself? What is to be made of Ragnar’s revenge in having all of his fellow builders neglect to witness his master’s impotence? Is it possible that Solness did indeed achieve transcendence even though his mortal body plummeted to earth?

Heidegger’s articulation of “truth” as ἀλήθεια is relevant here, because each choice in rehearsal is a moment of revelation and concealment.³⁵ Every action taken in rehearsal and performance closes down other possibilities. On this account, truth is not a correspondence between propositions and states of affairs, but rather a “happening”; truth is the event of disclosure.³⁶ This connects to the way in which humans might dwell “poetically” through opening up possibilities of being and foregrounding language and meaning, which makes our existence and apprehension of the world possible in the first place.

In the process of rehearsal, actors rarely work in isolation, of course. By coming together as an “ensemble” of theatre makers (including the extended creative and technical teams), rehearsal is never about “individual being” represented on stage but constitutes a collective and collaborative act gesturing towards something larger. Nor can the concept of “character” be reified as a “thing”: practical exploration only ever finds “being there” through action—never as a static transcendental ego. Each of the exercises above should be taken as experiments in various aspects of dwelling rather than a system of building a determinate character or role. What is learnt in the experiment and used as an embodiment of the role may very well be discarded by the performance in production.

One might therefore ask how a theatrical exploration can “push back” on Heidegger’s phenomenology and offer something new to the philosophical conversation. Firstly, the power of theatre phenomenology is in approaching Being through the specific being of the given circumstances. There is no other

35 Ibid., 115-38.

36 Johnston 2011b.

way. However, an artistic approach can gesture beyond representation in a way that ordinary language cannot. In order to do so, one must attend to one's own being in order to get at Being. Secondly, Heidegger's return to a folk tradition, the theme of "homeland", and his description of the revealing experiences of his cabin in the Black Forest do not transfer neatly to this play. Ibsen articulates a different hope for "making space". One may very well experience a different paradigm of Being in the present time in each particular place that differs from any that have gone before. Thirdly, a Heideggerian approach brings something useful through its illuminating vocabulary and way of questioning when it comes to the meaning of Being—a pathway that is also central to the creative task of the actor. Each rehearsal, however, may inflect this vocabulary or offer new ways of describing our relationship to Being that may not always follow Heidegger's path.

Whereas the characters in *The Master Builder* go about building a world, actors approaching each role do so in a double sense—not only in terms of creating a fully fleshed-out character with purposive action in the given circumstances, but also in communicating with the audience and constructing a dialogue of self reflection—of philosophy in action. Following this phenomenological approach, one can say that performance opens up a set of possibilities, meanings, and locations for being. The performance ensemble creates a connection between people, place, and history. In this sense, the process of building a character is akin to constructing a bridge (to take Heidegger's famous example).³⁷ It establishes locales and makes room for the possibilities and activities of dwelling. "Building" in this way *allows* those places to come in to being rather than simply connect what already existed. But the process is not an internal, psychological, analytical task simply involving an actor's work on self; it involves creating a world that crosses over to the audience and fellow performers. In this way, the theatrical event also uncovers something essential about dwelling. Dwelling in the theatre has the potential to "found" a way of being by gathering people together and allowing Being to come in to presence.

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³⁷ Heidegger 1978, 353-59.

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