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Review

On Ibsen and Strindberg. The Reversed Telescope.

Franco Perrelli

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Franco Perrelli, Full Professor of Performing Arts in the Department of Humanities at the University of Bari, is one of the few eminent international experts on Scandinavian literature and theory writing today. Both Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg had an enormous European influence during the last two decades of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. In Germany, there was a Strindberg surge from his death in 1912 up to the early 1920s, when almost all his plays were performed. After World War II there were short revivals with productions by Fritz Kortner and Hans Neuenfels. Ibsen, on the other hand, is still the most performed playwright in the world after William Shakespeare, maybe in some competition with Anton Chekhov. In both cases the international canon is narrower than the Norwegian and Swedish tradition: Strindberg, the political writer and narrator of the archipelago, is just as little known as the Ibsen of the early comedies and historical plays.

For the present volume *On Ibsen and Strindberg. The Reversed Telescope*, Perrelli has selected nine of his international conference papers and essays from the last twenty years. In many cases the Italian aspect of the authors, often reduced to footnotes in Scandinavia, remains in focus.

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In the first essay, ”Ibsen and the Italian *Risorgimento*”, Perrelli discusses the young radical Ibsen after the February Revolution and the Magyar Revolution of 1848, and the Prussian-Danish war concerning Schleswig-Holstein in 1864 – events treated in the preface to the 1875 edition of Ibsen’s first drama *Catilina* (1850). For both Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and Ibsen the *Risorgimento* was charged with an ideal power that went far beyond the political questions. Perrelli also mentions Ibsen’s indignation over the Swedish-Norwegian passivity in the Schleswig war. He discusses Ibsen’s lyrical poems relying on Helge Rønning’s thesis that the conflict between Garibaldi and Cavour/Victor Emanuel II has left traces in *Brand* (1866). *Peer Gynt* (1867) was developed during Ibsen’s visit to Ischia and the scene in the Cairo madhouse is influenced by the *Risorgimento*, Perrelli claims. But is it not to go too far to associate the fictive character Hussejn, who considers himself as a pen and commits suicide, to the Swedish politician Ludvig Manderström (who did not commit suicide)? In this case Perrelli does not question earlier Ibsen scholarship, where literary characters too often were traced back to historical persons. More reasonable is Perelli’s assertion that the positions of Garibaldi, Mazzini, and Cavour have had a certain impact on the vision of the late Roman Empire in *Emperor and Galilean.*

The most important essay in Perrelli’s book is his analysis ”Nora’s Tarantella”. Perrelli reflects on one of Ibsen’s earlier neglected possible sources, Jørgen Vilhelm Bergsøe’s *Observations on the Italian Tarantella* (*Iagttagelser om den italienske Tarantel*, 1865). Both authors saw a tarantella dance in Pompei in 1867. The 20th-century scholar Ernesto De Martini has shown that the Apulian tarantel dance preserves signs of heathen orgiastic rites. Most theatre historians know that Neapolitanian dances were in fashion in Scandinavian bourgeois circles in the middle of the nineteenth century. A perfect example is August Bournonville’s ballet *Napoli* (1842). But the roots of the tarantella in maenadism, its evocation of the deities of the underworld, and its orgiastic revolt were of course unknown in Biedermeier Copenhagen. The French scholar, Yves Chevrek, explains, as quoted by Perrelli, that Nora reaches ”the peak of despair and dissimulation in the tarantella scene” (25). The Swedish stage director, Staffan Valdemar Holm, has often declared that modern adolescents look upon *A Doll’s House* not as a play about woman’s liberation, but as a play about a mother who abandons her children. Maybe *A Doll’s House* could also be considered as a play about female irrational and destructive despair? Maybe the Mediterranean relatives of the Norwegian trolls and spirits of the water are present also in this play?

The Italian actress (and ”icon”) Elonora Duse interpreted six Ibsen characters during her Nordic phase 1891–1909. In ”Eleonora Duse’s Idealistic Ibsen” Perrelli quotes extensive passages from the critics who saw her perform on stage when he describes her acting style. According to writer Laura Marholm (1854-1912), for example, Duse ”brought consistency back to the character” of Nora (39). Marholm was fascinated by Duse’s ”intense, quivering sorrowful ardour” (39-40) and by how Nora is ”marked with morbid weariness and desperate regret” (40). Especially interesting is Perrelli’ s description of Duse’s second Scandinavian tour in January and February 1906. In Copenhagen her performances were cancelled due to the unexpected death of Christian IX. In

Christiania she performed in *Rosmersholm* and *Hedda Gabler* (and Dumas' *La Dame aux Camélias*, which she loathed). Perrelli quotes critics Kristofer Randers, Bifar, Lars Holst, Vilhelm Krag, and Sigurd Bødtker, all of whom are enthusiastic. Randers praises Duse's Hedda: ”a poor, bleeding, hungry female soul, who aspires to a world of splendid beauty” (44); Vilhelm Krag admires her ”marvellous voice” (46). In Stockholm *Hedda Gabler* was replaced with a play by Hermann Sudermann and Duse was obviously in bad form. Nevertheless, the playwright Tor Hedberg stressed ”the absolute wonder” (49) of Duse's voice and her ”spiritual interpretation” (48) of Rebecka in *Rosmersholm*.

In ”The Strange Case of Dr Ibsen and Mr Strindberg” Perrelli maintains that we can only understand Strindberg through Ibsen, and understand Ibsen fully through Strindberg. Ingmar Bergman seemed to be close to this thesis when he incorporated Strindberg quotations in his stage production of *Ghosts* in Stockholm in 2002. Perrelli quotes Strindberg's letters and his 1884 collection of short stories, *Getting Married*, before searching for Ibsenian elements in Strindberg's play *The Father*. Especially interesting is Perrelli's discussion of the triangle Hjørdis-Siri-Laura. He emphasizes the strong erotic element in *The Vikings at Helgeland* and that Strindberg's first wife, Siri von Essen, had performed as Hjørdis in 1876; Siri is, as all biographically oriented scholars maintain, the model for Laura in *The Father*. We all know that Ibsen wrote in front of Christian Krogh's enormous Strindberg portrait, but how important was Strindberg to Ibsen? Perrelli does not answer the question, and it would definitely be difficult to find Strindberg's metaphysical eroticism with its motherly traits in Ibsen's work.

In ”Strindberg in the Italian Ninteenth-Century Theatrical Canon” Perrelli emphasizes the importance of director Ermete Zacconi for Strindberg's Italian breakthrough in the 1890s and studies Zacconi's script for the staging of *The Father*. Small cuts are made, the dialogue is quicker and the text seems more agile, clarified and coherent. Some psychological complications have disappeared and – as one can expect – some provocative lines were mitigated. According to Perrelli, the advent of D'Annunzio interrupted this first phase of Strindberg's success in Italy.

In ”Strindberg and Greek tragedy” Perrelli examines two copies of Herman A. Ring's 1892 theatre manual, *Teaterns historia. Från* äldsta *till nyaste tid*, in Strindberg's library. Looking for Strindberg's red, blue and grey pencil marks, Perrelli considers how the manual had a great influence on Strindberg's thinking of scenic space. The Greek tragedians, especially Euripides, were of certain relevance to Strindberg because of their metaphysical doubts concerning ”man's struggle against destiny and gods” (79). Perrelli seems to be careful not to draw his conclusion too far concerning parallels between Euripides and Strindberg, and he concludes by noticing an interference between Greek ideas about *hubris* and *nemesis* and Judaic/Christian elements (humanity and resignation) in the prologue that Strindberg wrote for the Intimate Theatre at Norra Bantorget in Stockholm.

In ”August Strindberg and Georg Fuchs” Perrelli looks for references to Georg Fuchs, author of *The Theatre of the Future* (1905), and Edward Gordon

Craig in Strindberg's *Open Letters to the Intimate Theatre*. Perrelli analyzes Strindberg's copy of Fuchs's essay (Strindberg has underlined lines important to him) and concludes that a certain kind of alliance can be seen between the Fuchsian idea of the elevated reformed stage set, where hearing and seeing are of equal importance, and Strindberg's "exaltation of the acted dramaturgical Word" (96). They both want to grasp "the soul of the festivity" (94).

In his last chapter, "Ibsen in Anti-Ibsenian Theatre," Perrelli scrutinizes the theatre of Julian Beck, Judith Malina (The Living Theatre), Jerzy Grotowski, Eugenio Barba (Odin Teatret), and their tradition of looking for Ibsen reminiscences. Their practices of observation, their ideas about the presence of the actor and their emphasis on physical action might seem to leave little room for Ibsenian themes and ideas. For example, when The Living Theatre presented a stage interpretation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in Venice in 1965, fifteen short simplified Ibsen scenes were included. This could be understood as an iconoclastic murder of the theatre of character. Perrelli wants to reverse this opinion, but I am sorry to say that his method is questionable. In 2005, he wrote to both Malina and Barba and asked them about Ibsen's relevance for them and both of them gave positive answers; Malina even declared that she included Ibsen not in order to criticize him, but to see him as a critic of the bourgeoisie. But how could they answer otherwise? Does not everybody want to be polite concerning our second world dramatist? Perrelli is more interesting when he analyzes avantgarde *productions*, notably Theatre Kimbri's production of *Peer Gynt* at Aarhus in 1987–88 and the Barba scholar Else Marie Laukvik's adaptation of the same play at Bergamo in 1996 and 1997. He notices significant technical details and explains how the improvisational work is developed before the audience's eyes. Perrelli's conclusion is that "the theatre which should have been *anti-Ibsenian* par excellence shows instead that it cherishes the greatest respect for the Norwegian master" (107).

Franco Perrelli's *On Ibsen and Strindberg. The Reversed Telescope* provides international Ibsen and Strindberg scholarship with many new aspects. Perrelli translates little known texts by Scandinavian critics into English and analyzes Italian and Scandinavian performances in detail. Especially important is his presentation of new arguments for the critics of *A Doll's House*. Many of his essays could be further developed and he is one of the scholars who convinces us that now, when the digitization of Ibsen's collected writings has finished, the time has come to turn to the stage interpretations of Ibsen and Strindberg. Perrelli quotes a line written by Fuchs and underlined by Strindberg: "the poetic work is simply the score" of the monumental drama (94).