

REVIEWS

Bent Holm

Holberg på tværs: Fra forskning til forestilling

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Theatre researcher and dramaturge, Bent Holm, is the author of the book *Crossings About Holberg: From Research to Production (Holberg på tværs: Fra forskning til forestilling)*, which works on several layers. First, he comments on the director's theatre and classical productions in-between the later modern and post-modern period. Then, he presents some historical material and contextualizes a series of Holberg-comedies. Finally, he speaks about "Holberg alongside" (*Holberg på langs*), presenting more historical material and discussing the values of the Holberg-heritage.

Ludvig Holberg (1684-1754) is a Danish-Norwegian dramatist, originating from Bergen, Norway, who lived most of his life in Copenhagen during the period when Denmark and Norway were politically united. He was a philosopher as well as historian of the enlightenment, but is probably best remembered for being the first dramatist of Nordic significance. He was performed at the first Danish language professional theatre, Den danske skueplads (The Danish Stage, Copenhagen 1722-28), with a repertoire of comedies in the years 1722-27.

In the introduction to his book, Holm presents the background for his cooperation with stage director Asger Bonfils at the Aarhus Teater (Municipal Theatre of Arhus, Jutland) between 1991 and 2006. Then, in part I, "Contesting Holberg" (*Holberg på tværs*), Holm examines positions with regard to new tendencies in stage directing and new dramaturgical tendencies. He speaks about use and misuse in the implementation of the scenic means of expression and the dramaturgical re-working of classical drama (*greb og overgreb*).

Holm states that misusing the classical drama in the new director's theatre (indirectly referring to German *Regie-Theater*, I suppose) has become mainstream. He accuses theatre (postmodern theatre or the post-dramatic, I suppose) for turning the image into something sacred and the text into being evil (*tekst ond og billedet godt*). In my mind, by making this accusation, he is taking the conservative position that there is no respect for the dramatic text in the modern theatre nor, supposedly, the devised theatre either. A state of affairs that has to be sorted out in the case of Holberg.

There are many references to Bertolt Brecht as the ideal point of departure for finding a more balanced way of performing Holberg than, supposedly, de-construction. Securing the logic of action is more important than misusing the text with eclectic and trendy 'hits' or *påfund*, as they say in Danish. Holm advocates balanced and analytical concepts, not transgresses or eclectic textual deconstructions of the devised kind. The solutions that Brecht proposed in his way of re-working classical drama, as expressed in an essay dealing with the classics from 1954 (cf. p. 38 in Holm) had nothing to do with sacrilege (*helligbrøde*). Giorgio Strehler and his way of directing classical drama is, to Holm, apparently the correct way of dealing with the Brechtian heritage. Indeed, Strehler seems to serve as the ideal source of inspiration for how to stage Holberg-today. This is very understandable, taking into consideration that Strehler has been a specialist in how to stage classical drama as well as seventeenth century comedy like Goldoni. I agree with Holm on this after having seen several Strehler-productions in the 1980s and on.

In Holm's dramaturgical preparations for *Jeppe on the Mountain (Jeppe på Bjerget)* in 1993, he has a very concrete reference to Strehler when speaking about *myte-lager* (the layer of the mythical dimension in the play text), which was exposed in a clear Strehler-like way (p. 117). The level of the fable then was in an inter-action with individual-psychology as well as with the layer of history, which in itself was the introduction to the cultural and structural codes. But let me return to the structure itself of the book.

In Part II, "Holberg at stake" (*Holberg på spil*), Holm presents the reader with a huge amount of material to assist in the understanding of the historical context of Holberg's comedies; accompanied with many commentaries on the creation of a Danish language theatre in the eighteenth century and the theatrical culture previous to it. This way, the book gives the premise for Holm's role as a dramaturge in the Aarhus Teater's productions of Holberg's comedies between 1991 and 2006, including one production with Asger Bonfils in Bergen in 1995, *Jean de France* at Den Nationale Scene. This is the point of the book, or the punch line so to say, corresponding to what the subtitle says, from research to production (*fra forskning til forestilling*). Bent Holm reveals how he grew into the role of the dramaturge, taking care of much of the historical layer of the dramaturgical process. As a theatre historian and researcher, he goes into depth with the materials so that the stage director Asger Bonfils and his scenographer Anette Hansen can see ways of re-actualizing Ludvig Holberg's comedies. Thus, breaking away from the cozy traditions of classical romantic scenic staging in the traditions of commedia as was case with the Danish and Norwegian Holberg-traditions.

A large part of the book is the panoramic overview or compilation of the historical, literary as well as theatre historical context that Holberg has to be seen in relation to and the general reception of Holberg-drama. The reader of Holm's book learns about the discussions of witch craft and superstition in late seventeenth century and

early eighteenth century Copenhagen, which is necessary to know in order to gain an understanding of *Witchcraft or Blind Alarm (Hexeri eller blind alarm)*, which was the first production in the production series Holm refers to. The aims of the book clearly seem to be documentation of the modernization of Holberg-reception and consequently staging, to break away from previous traditions of Holberg's own time and the following Holberg-traditions. This, I would say, is an important thing to do. However, one question that arises in relation to the historical research undertaken by Bent Holm is the following: how can contextual knowledge and material spurn new readings and consequently scenic productions when the time backdrop is seventeenth and eighteenth centuries Europe, especially Denmark's relationship to the Holy German-Roman Reich and the provinces of Schleswig and Holstein? The fact is, the German language had a very strong position in the administration of Denmark-Norway at the time. Is it possible to find an example of a more modern Danish-German relationship? Yes, in the case of *The Political Tinker (Den politiske kandestøber)* it is. This Holberg-comedy has its action based in Hamburg politics around 1700. So, how can this historical knowledge contribute to the staging of this comedy at the Aarhus Teater in Aarhus in 1997? The answer is by transferring the comedy to a more modern historical context, giving the setting a touch of Nazi Germany and using Wagner's music. The scenography is a kind of playing machine showing a kind of barn or dark hall. It seems to have a touch of new expressionism working very much on spot lightening and *tableaux vivant*-like images. In that sense there is something classical about it, but more reminiscent of French and German staging styles of the 1980s. That is exactly the time of Giorgio Strehler and his productions in France as a director of Théâtre d'Europe in Paris.

I accept this approach in spite of all the complaints about how contemporary theatre misuses the classics. There is some balance in this material, especially given that Brecht was also influenced by

seventeenth century German didactic theatre and moralities.

Bent Holm has, and this is now well documented, contributed to modernizing Holberg in contemporary theatre, and for this purpose Bent Holm reads the fable in a Brechtian way tempered by a Strehlerian way of understanding the relationship between myth and fable. The image effect, as such, is not the goal, but to give an interpretation which suits the material and the historical understanding of it. He seeks a timeless theatrical imagination, at the same time combatting the tyranny of the text, and not giving in to misunderstandings of the text in a way marked by sacrilege. Holm gives the interaction with the audience his full attention as a premise for the staging. The text should be understood as an integral part of theatre and not kept at a distance.

Text comes from improvisation and playfulness and Holm tries to tell us that text is not necessarily literature. In a theatrical context, the text is a carrier of messages and implications to be perceived of as a verbal component – a texture or weave, which corresponds very much to Eugenio Barba's perception of dramaturgy as a weave. Well, it makes sense. Aarhus is not far away from Holstebro, but not comparable otherwise. The complexity of a production does not minimize the entertainment value, and this way we can consider Bent Holm and his co-operation with Asger Bonfils at the Aarhus Teater a Brechtian approach leaning slightly towards the Post-Brechtian, but with distance to a spectacular image in the postmodern sense. Late modernist positions are expressed in this book.

Another aspect Holm raises is the question of Holberg and Danish-ness. Regardless of whether or not Holberg is Danish or Nordic (read: Norwegian), he has been constitutive in the understanding of what it means to be Danish and of the Danish heritage. That, I think, is true! Therefore, in a broad perspective, I respect this book for raising questions about directing and its cultural context. It raises many questions and is very rich in its ma-

terial and, thus, should be seen as relevant to how to approach a dramatic writer whom many directors have given up on as being too old fashioned. I agree with Holm, Holberg has a large potential to be re-read and placed into new and, I would say, postmodern scenic receptions.

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