

Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker. *A history of Scandinavian Theatre*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. Illus. Pp. 384. £45.00. ISBN: 0 521 39237 3.

Authors of books such as this one are not to be envied. An effort to avoid a magisterial unreadability risks subsiding into a pedestrian superficiality, a need for generalization risks the loss of telling detail. The Markers are no strangers to this problem. With respect to their previous book on this subject (1975), they describe this one as “an entirely new book, one that is substantively different from the earlier study in many respects” (p. xiv). Though containing an important hedge, such a remark does invite a comparison. In doing so, one can see that apart from the many sentences and paragraphs that are all but identical—the opening of “Renaissance Festivals” (1975), renamed “Theatre at court” (1996), for instance—there is often a curious game being played, as in:

[1975:32] A delight in dramatized spectacle and emblematic representation permeated the sixteenth century and clearly underlies the significant public events of Frederik II's reign in Denmark (1559-88).

[1996:29] A delight in emblematic spectacle and dramatized representation characterized the sixteenth-century mind and this delight found its full expression in the treatment accorded significant public events in the reign of Frederik II of Denmark (1559-88).

Such silly tinkering with their earlier formulations is habitual throughout this book and suggests that it has only been a matter of bloating or of accomodating new information into an essentially satisfactory text. Indeed, between the two editions there is an astonishing interchangeability of adjectives, as above, which suggests that it does not, in the end, really matter *how* something is characterised, as long as it *is* characterised. A variation of this is that a simple remark in the earlier version is descriptively expanded. For instance:

[1975:52] Bollhuset was ready for them the following year, having been converted from a lawn-tennis court—painted black to permit the players to see the balls and surrounded by a spectator gallery—to a modern theatre auditorium.

[1996:47] The converted tennis court was ready for them in February of the following year, having become a smart modern theatre furnished with blue-upholstered benches to seat 800 spectators.

Apart from the necessary correction about the kind of tennis played in Bollhuset, there are other nagging problems. How on earth can one assert that the new space was “smart”? And, as neither is relevant, does the color of the seats make a greater difference to our understanding of the history of Scandinavian theatre than the probable color of the walls in the building’s incarnation as a tennis court? Another example:

[1975:76] The staging at the same time of Voltaire’s *L’Enfant prodigue* and *Nanine*, his version of Richardson’s sentimental novel *Pamela*, further strengthened the trend toward sensibility, which in the 1760s took on an added impetus with a rash of Goldoni and Diderot productions and a series of native Danish counterparts by Charlotte Dorothea Biehl.

[1996:69] Productions during the same season of Voltaire’s *L’Enfant prodigue* and *Nanine*, his adaptation of Richardson’s sentimental novel *Pamela*, lent added impetus to the tide of sensibility. The short but intense popularity of this vogue gave rise in the 1760s to the rather turgid moral comedies of Charlotte Dorothea Biehl, the first woman dramatist of note in Scandinavia.

At least the second edition mentions further on that Biehl was also a translator of plays, but the conjunction of “turgid moral comedies” with “first woman dramatist of note” does leave a somewhat dry taste in the mouth. In general, the new version is more colorful than the old one and this may be one of the sources of the problem between the texts: the need to spice up what had been fairly plain and neutral.

Further, modern publishers' apparent distaste for annotation of any kind has severely hampered the book's usefulness as a reference work. We must take such judgements as "smart" and "turgid" on faith. After some work, I finally found the "blue upholstery".

On the whole, the instability of adjectives between the two editions is a problem only for those who have the two editions. Yet, one is struck by the radical change in emphasis that can be made by a relatively simple shift in modifiers, as in:

[1975:260] ...Jens Bjørneboe's Brechtian dissection of German tourism, *Fugleelskerne/The Bird Lovers* (1966)...

[1996:310] When Odin Theatre actually did perform a version of Jens Bjørneboe's *Fugleelskerne (The Bird Lovers)*...the production...left the Norwegian dramatist rather shaken. His Brechtian indictment of ex-Nazis who revisit Italy as affluent, bird-loving, German tourists was subjected to a dissection so extreme that, he admits, "not even the torso of the text remained..."

While we are now given a provocative anecdote about a specific production of the play, the dissecting knife has wondrously changed hands and radically altered the previous understanding. Alas, what is still missing is the fact that, far from leaving him "rather shaken", Bjørneboe actually approved of the dramatic result of the Odin Theatre's production. Besides, the play is not, in the end, about Nazism but about the all-conquering power of money.

The generally inflationary approach taken in this revision is in danger of obscuring what really *is* new here, and that is the interest in performance and production itself. There are half again as many pictures as in the previous version, almost all the new ones showing recent productions of plays, and they are well-chosen to illustrate the text (though, to my knowledge, no-one has yet published the full photograph of the seashore scene from *Till Damaskus I*, which would show that the otherwise so open-looking set we infer from the photograph we usually see was, in fact, closed in with an arch.) The discussion of production as an element in theatre study is given a new importance in this book (though acting styles are generally ignored).

This is tribute to the prominent place it now occupies in modern theatre studies, a place the Markers, to their credit, have themselves helped to create. It has also enlivened the book generally and the modern sections especially—a history of the theatre becomes a history of its productions. That this increases yet more the amount of space devoted to Ingmar Bergman is, I suppose, inevitable, and the attention to the directorial work of Peter Langdal and Lars Norén is, therefore, to be welcomed. However, though non-national stages are mentioned, there is very little in this book about the active theatre life outside the capitals. Further, the more populist and non-traditional theatres of the sixties and seventies, though mentioned, are treated essentially as passing phenomena. But one misses, for instance, anything at all about the provocative role Michael Meschke's Marionetteater has played, and continues to play, in Stockholm in the breaking of new performance ground at the conjunction of live actors and puppets. Of popular theatre, there is nary a whisper, nor is there anything about the persistent liveliness of radio theatre.

Is this, then, an “entirely new book”? No, not really. Most of the judgements expressed in the earlier study are left intact, some are sharpened. There is more information on the years since the Markers' last study and that is to be expected and welcomed. The important question, however, is: does the newness of the book matter?

For the general reader, to whom this study is putatively addressed, probably not. The discussion of the serious formal theatre is informed, lively, and, on the whole, judicious. Its bibliography is up to date and offers a reasonable selection of book-length studies for someone wishing to begin an exploration of the subject (articles are mentioned only in the sparse notes). It is also, as the dust-jacket points out, “the only work of its kind in English.”

*Alan Swanson*, University of Groningen