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Bergman's *Vintersagan*
at the Royal Dramatic Theatre

A dramatic text is always transformed in a production according to the changing realities of the stage, the particular interpretation and intention of the director, and the expectations of the audience. A Shakespeare text, produced in a Swedish context in 1994 by a director like Ingmar Bergman will of necessity be colored by these circumstances.

Bergman's production was performed in Swedish translation. In fact, apart from a new Swedish translation of *The Winter's Tale* that appeared in 1993 and was commissioned by Bergman, there was a reworking of that text for the production at Dramaten a year later. Translating Shakespeare from one language to another, and from page to stage means of course inducing an element of difference into his text. But Bergman's production of *The Winter's Tale* rested on an unusually complex series of transformations. Yet, given a good translator and a talented director, Shakespeare's excellence remains somehow embodied in any production and enters into the consciousness of all concerned, including audiences seeing the production, whether or not they have previously read or seen any of Shakespeare's plays, in English or in translation.

Shakespeare's steady reputation forces a director to transmit his excellence. As Peter Brook once remarked, "so long as one thinks that Shakespeare is just Ionesco but better, Beckett but richer, Brecht but

more human, Chechov with crowds, and so on, one is not touching what it's all about."¹ In fact, what it is all about is defining and redefining whatever we think are the timeless qualities of excellence in Shakespeare. Stephen Orgel concluded in his essay "The authentic Shakespeare" (1988), that *true* and *original* Shakespeare is beyond our reach, therefore all new productions of his plays "both amplify and edit the work they represent".² "Shakespeare" is always what we want him to be, he is whatever we think quality is right here, right now. That is to say, the lasting qualities of Shakespeare are extracted by the eye of his beholders.

Shakespeare's plays have often been used to confront or make visible new and old definitions of quality in art and theatre. Critics normally approve of or dismiss these definitions with reference to the concepts of 'fidelity' and 'creativity'. Even though the general ideas of how to be true to Shakespeare, and how to express creativity through Shakespeare, may vary at different times and in different cultural and social contexts, these concepts are always overtly or covertly present and palpable. Most often 'creativity' is associated with formal ingenuity. But what does 'fidelity' really mean? Fidelity to the theatrical conventions of the Elizabethan stage, to the Shakespearean spirit, to the historical context, the language or the acting? Is it possible to be at once creative and true to the text as well as to one's own vision of the text?

According to Charles Marowitz the "only fidelity that cuts any ice in the theatre is a director's fidelity to his personal perceptions about a classic; how well and how truly he can put on stage the visions the play has evoked in his imagination."³ It is obvious that Bergman was, in his production of *The Winter's Tale*, faithful to the visions and thoughts that the text evoked in his imagination. The main problem for Bergman seems to have been locating his personal perceptions of Shakespeare's play within the text and communicate his vision of *Vintersagan* to the

¹ Berry, 1977, p. 114.

² Orgel, 1988, p. 15.

³ Marowitz, 1991, p. 7.

audience.

Bergman explained in what was probably a fictitious interview why he decided to stage this particular play at this particular time. He claimed that the first time he tried to “produce” *Vintersagan* he was only fourteen years old (1932). Shakespeare’s play was scheduled for his puppet theatre at home. Even that early, he claims, he understood what the play was about: This “mixtum compositum of incompatible contradictions” was about the death of Love, the survival of Love, and the resurrection of Love.⁴ The successful expression of such a theme was dependent on a successful staging of Hermione’s resurrection in the last scene. Hermione is the forgiving, loving and (to begin with) defenceless part in this play. According to the interview, Bergman was overcome with compassion for this generous woman. He could not emotionally endure her resurrection and the première was cancelled.

For Bergman the theme of the play was the same in the 1930s and the 1990s. The problem was finding a form that would control the emotions and elevate the somewhat melodramatic action. Bergman finally realized that the solution would be staging Shakespeare’s play within the fictional frame of the hunting castle that the Swedish 19th century author Carl Jonas Love Almqvist (1793-1866) invented for his own “mixtum compositum” of tales and adventures. Almqvist was a very apt choice because he gave the production a Romantic context, and the Romantic movement was the first to embrace Shakespeare in Sweden. Throughout the performance the Dramaten actors slipped back and forth between their roles in Almqvist’s 19th century Löwenstierna family and their Shakespearean roles in Leontes’ Sicily and Polixenes’ Bohemia. The programme informed the audience that Shakespeare’s play was performed by the Löwenstierna family to celebrate a birthday.

The newspaper reviewers unanimously praised Bergman for his play-within-the-play approach which helped to mediate between the first three tragic acts and the festive, pastoral episodes of the fourth act and the symbolism of the last act. Bergman used the different fictional mi-

⁴ Salander, 1994, pp. 36-39. See also Egil Törnqvist, 1995, pp. 81-92.

lieus in his production to place *Vintersagan* in a heavily theatrical and metaphysical context. As a spectator one was constantly reminded of watching a play being performed. Bergman exercised great inventive skill and visual imagination in using Almqvist to solve the formal problem of the play, and to inscribe Shakespeare and *Vintersagan* in a Swedish context. A Christmas tree (in wintry Sicily), Midsummer celebration (instead of sheep-shearing feast) and Shakespeare's Bohemia populated by men from Dalarna further increased the Swedishness of the production. Bergman's *Vintersagan* communicated not only with Shakespeare's text but also with a Swedish cultural heritage, including references to Dramaten, Sweden's art nouveau national stage. In fact Bergman and his designer Lennart Mörk made Dramaten a natural part of the fiction. The stage displayed many of the familiar details of the theatre building's actual facade as well as its Jugend-styled foyer from the turn of the century (Dramaten was completed in 1908). In using the 19th (Almqvist) and 20th (Dramaten) century references as a backdrop to Shakespeare's play, Bergman was obviously not trying to be historically consistent. But he was poetically consistent. Both the Romantic Almqvist frame and the art nouveau details in the decor seemed to most critics a brilliant way of presenting Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*.

According to Roger Warren, a majority of recent stagings of Shakespeare's last plays have tended to stress the sense that their central characters are going on spiritual journeys, voyages of discovery and self-discovery.⁵ Bergman's production was no exception in that respect. *Vintersagan* was above all a rendering of the spiritual journeys of Leontes and Hermione. When the Löwenstierna family took on their parts in Shakespeare's play the attention was immediately directed towards Leontes, Hermione and Polixenes. The nervous tension between them was there right from the start. In Bergman's production there was no clear line between what actually happened and Leontes' interpretation of the events. Leontes saw what he wanted to see and his jealousy affected all

⁵ Warren, 1990, p. 239. Warren refers here to productions of *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, *The Tempest* and *Pericles* in Great Britain and Canada.

the arrangements on stage. Leontes was blinded by his jealousy. As soon as he had convinced himself that Hermione had been unfaithful to him he was unable to survey the situation. Loyalty looked like deceitfulness to him, honesty like villainy, and he acted desperately and irrationally. Moving at a deliberately slow and careful pace he was brought to a point of no hope, only resignation. The production was charged with desire and sexual frustration. But in the end faithful women and self-sacrificing heroines found a possible way to reconcile the sexes and the generations.

Violent action (when Mamillius is torn away from his mother, or when Polixenes tries to part his son Florizel from Perdita), cruelty (when Leontes commands his servant to take his newly born child to a "remote and desert place [...] Where chance may nurse or end it". (2.3)), humiliation (the scene where Hermione is sentenced to death "standing / To prate and talk for life and honour fore / Who please to come and hear" (3.2)), and 16 years of loneliness were all situations that revealed the characters' innermost nature to themselves. There seemed to be redemption and salvation in life in the end: family and old friends were reunited, the long lost daughter returned home, Hermione "returned" to life. The resurrection scene was a vision of pure and simple love and faith. As Paulina says: "It is required / You do awake your faith." (5.3) But the very last moments of *Vintersagan* were filled with sadness and resignation. In Bergman's production Time was played by an old, beautiful woman. She entered the stage when everyone else had disappeared, faced the audience and smiled. She walked away leaving an alarm clock on the empty stage and the sound of time ticking away.

Apart from the Almqvist-frame, Bergman's perhaps most obvious contribution to the play was his emblematic and personal use of the figure of Mamillius bringing to mind a number of neglected and innocent children in Bergman's own films. This time the neglected and innocent child's name was Mamillius. It might as well have been Alexander, Minus, Johan... This connection was stressed when the actress playing Mamillius, before entering Shakespeare's original tale, placed a puppet theatre up front, close to the footlights, facing all the other actors, and in doing so marked the transition from one fiction to another while

echoing Bergman's childhood staging of Shakespeare's play. In fact, *Vintersagan* echoed with several themes immediately identifiable as Bergman themes. The amazing thing was that Shakespeare's play so beautifully adapted itself to Bergman's "mixtum compositum of incompatible contradictions", his autobiographical and intertextual references.

Bergman has been very modest in describing his work in the theatre. He pictures himself as a craftsman whose task it is to be true to the dramatic text and the dramatist. Bergman's abilities deserve a lot more attention, but so does his manoeuvres in the ideological terrains of memory, history and tradition. Bergman has inscribed himself in a Swedish tradition of great directors, including Alf Sjöberg and Olof Molander. Sjöberg rediscovered Almqvist's plays in the 50s, but to Bergman, Sjöberg was above all our most important Shakespeare interpreter at the time. Molander was correspondingly the most important Strindberg interpreter. Today Bergman can lay claim to both these titles. Apparently Bergman believes that there was some sort of spiritual affinity between Sjöberg-Shakespeare and Molander-Strindberg. And he seems to believe that he has now inherited or acquired this affinity, even though he has only produced Shakespeare seven times in his entire career, out of a total of some eighty stagings⁶. But Sjöberg-Shakespeare and Molander-Strindberg are all Bergman's kindred spirits, part of a tradition he has absorbed since an early age, and this may have given Bergman an inroad, other than the personal one, into Shakespeare's play and Shakespeare's greatness. Bergman's life-long experience of the text and his understanding of life and tradition through the text seemed to guarantee that he would be able to make Shakespeare's impact occur on stage.

Naturally Bergman emphasized what he considered the essential elements in Shakespeare's play. But from another angle Bergman emphasized the themes and characters in the text that would enable the

⁶ *Macbeth* 1944 (Helsingborg) and 1948 (Gothenburg), *Twelfth Night* 1975 (Dramaten), *King Lear* 1984 (Dramaten), *Hamlet* 1986 (Dramaten). The first planned production of *The Winter's Tale* was abandoned in 1989.

audience to see how much Bergman and Shakespeare really had in common. Thus Bergman's *Vintersagan* stated that in his late plays Shakespeare wrote about the things that have engaged Bergman during his entire career.

The salient feature of Bergman's *Vintersagan* was an extraordinary inclusiveness and complexity. The production simultaneously brought out Shakespeare's exuberant imagination and the latent potentialities of a rarely staged play, but also Bergman's own capacity as a director. It was obvious to everyone that Bergman had translated Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* into his own text. As one critic wrote: "föreställningen bär Ingmar Bergmans omisskännliga signatur". Bergman's "Shakespeare" was also what W.B.Worthen calls "dominant Shakespeare", i.e. "Shakespeare not marked as contestatory, or resistant, or experimental, or political, Shakespeare played (with all this implies) 'straight'".⁷ "Dominant Shakespeare" is just straight under certain conditions. As Graham Holderness points out "the theatre of the status quo can imply political meanings unself-consciously, precisely because the political perspective on which it rests is the dominant one."⁸ Bergman has on several occasions in his career made a stand against status quo.⁹ *Vintersagan* was ho-

⁷ W.B.Worthen, 1997, p. 42.

⁸ Holderness, 1992, p. 14.

⁹ See e.g. Birgitta Steene, 1998, pp. 12-33.

wever, a “straight” production, neither experimental nor resistant. Nobody accused Bergman of violating Shakespeare’s text. *Vintersagan* was a highly original and novel interpretation of Shakespeare’s play, but not so original and novel that one could say that Bergman was not true to Shakespeare.

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