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Bergman's *Vintersagan* in New York¹

It is no exaggeration to say that between 1988 and 1995 the Ingmar Bergman-Dramaten productions at BAM—the Brooklyn Academy of Music—were received by New York critics and audiences alike in a manner best described as “royal.” I remember after one of the matinee performances seeing someone staring thoughtfully at posters outside the theatre. Curious after recognizing him as long-time professional actor, I couldn't resist asking what he thought about the production. After a moment, he said quietly: “I would have given anything to work for a time with a director like Bergman and a company of this quality.”

It was my privilege and pleasure to serve as one of the simultaneous translators for three Dramaten guest productions at BAM: *Long Day's Journey Into Night* (1991), *Peer Gynt* (1993) and *The Winter's Tale* (1995). The subjects of this paper are American responses to the productions² (mostly to Bergman's *Winter's Tale*) and problems the translators faced in attempting to make stage productions in Swedish as accessible as possible to an English-speaking American audience.

First, some words about the larger cultural context for these visits.

¹ A portion of this paper appeared originally in a play review in the Fall 1994 issue of the publication of the Doctoral Program in Theatre at the City University of New York—*Western European Stages*—and is reprinted with permission.

² The New York newspaper critics cited during this essay were: Vincent Canby, in *The New York Times*, Friday, June 2, 1995; Margo Jefferson, also in *The New York Times*, Sunday, June 18, 1995; Clive Barnes, in *The New York Post*, Friday, June 2, 1995; Michael Feingold, in *The Village Voice*, June 13, 1995; and Linda Winer, in *Newsday*, Friday, June 2, 1995.

Those not familiar with American theatre have to know that the United States has no tradition of generous subsidies for the arts. In fact, a political battle is usually staged every year in the nation's capitol about whether to do away with the modest funds now available. One critic, Laura Winer of *Newsday*, said in her review of *Winter's Tale* that

if we need a major blow to the head to demonstrate the significance of a country's stable support of its cultural life, Sweden's ravishing 200-year-old Royal Dramatic Theater has brought another couple of Ingmar Bergman productions to [BAM][...] Considering what's happening to the arts in this country right now, the visit could not be more poignant.

In the same mode, Margo Jefferson in *The New York Times* greeted the arrival of Dramaten this way: "we are ready to take up our weapons once more and fight to the death for theater's and literature's right to live and thrive, now and forever."

The enthusiastic response to Bergman's *Winter's Tale* was all the more surprising in light of the fact that Shakespeare's late tragic-comedy is a notoriously difficult play to stage successfully. Winer described it this way: "a fascinating curiosity—profoundly moving and beautiful at times, a train wreck of low-comic absurdities at others." She also noted that Bergman himself found it necessary to mix metaphors from the worlds of music and painting to describe the play, saying that "the first half [...] has the severity (and the bellicosity) of a Beethoven symphony, while the second part [...] is a kind of peasant mural." If one prefers metaphors drawn from the world of Shakespearean drama, one might also say that the first half, with its often savage theme of marital jealousy, is a replay of *Othello*, while the second half, with its disguises and mistaken identities, its sunny young hero and his true love, its low comedy clowns and its recognition scene is akin to *As You Like It*. To complicate the situation, that final recognition scene asks us to believe—if we extend the *Othello* parallel—that Desdemona did not die and that she and Othello are eventually reconciled. Little wonder that one critic described the problems with the original text as "unsolvable."

Vincent Canby in *The New York Times* observed that in many productions Leontes's mad jealousy scenes are deliberately toned down

with a kind of dutiful obedience to the greater good of the entire play. That is, without the emotional conviction that could dangerously undermine the gaiety of all that comes later [...]

In this production, there is a furious, typically Bergman honesty when Leontes makes his accusations against Hermione [...]. In fact, there's so much honesty that the rest of the performance, which comes after intermission, seems to be marking time until the great, final recognition scene.

The "dutiful obedience" Canby referred to was a term that could have been applied to a production of the play by the Royal Shakespeare Company at BAM only two years before the Dramaten production. Michael Weingold in *The Village Voice*, said that if one compared Bergman's version "to the craggy, undercast version the RSC brought here in 1993 [...] you might decide that Shakespeare was Swedish; why else would he seem so much more understandable in that language?"

By playing the tragic portions of the play so believably, with so much of the "emotional conviction," Canby wrote about, Bergman actually pulled off a major stylistic coup. There were three keys to this success. First, there was his masterful handling of the actors. Whenever Bergman has used Borje Ahlstedt (who played Leontes), for example, whether in *Fanny and Alexander* or *Peer Gynt* or *Winter's Tale*, he has known how to exploit to best advantage the actor's natural, pungent, palpable physicality. Having watched Ahlstedt's violent rages in *Winter's Tale* as a spectator, and listened closely to him as his translator over a number of performances, I can attest to the powerful persuasiveness he brought to his acting and the excitement that that persuasiveness created in audiences.

A second reason that Bergman succeeded was that he kept Ahlstedt's outbursts in proper perspective in the production by turning to a stylized approach he had used earlier. As Ahlstedt raged and stormed about the stage, the rest of the cast around him was almost frozen, re-

acting only with measured horror in movements that were carefully choreographed. Choreographer Donya Feuer was Bergman's able partner in creating this effect.

The final reason for the stylistic coup was that Bergman set up a play-within-a-play frame for the action, which created a distancing effect. The violence, so to speak, was one dimension removed. The actors were playing a group of well-to-do people at a party, and it was these partyers who then performed the roles in *Winter's Tale*. Michael Feingold described well the advantage gained by such an approach:

The party-charade spirit [...] frees the dark story from both probability and pretension; it's a romp in which anything may happen: When the somber first half ends, with the clang of a dinner bell, the partyers thronging to the feast include the bear that has just dined on Antigonus, still in furry costume, but now carrying his bear head, with a little girl who has danced earlier in the evening riding on his shoulders.

Together, these elements—the powerful acting, the choreographed movements and the play-within-a-play framework—served to mitigate whatever violence was taking place by transforming the action into a ritual that blended dark and light. Feingold described it as “Shakespeare seen through the prism of Strindberg, which would seem odd if it weren't also utterly, perfectly, Shakespearean.”

The theatricality of the production was not restricted to the device of a play-within-a-play. Canby, who was skeptical about Bergman's mixing of diverse stylistic elements, was nevertheless enthusiastic about the theatricality. He noted that

When Mr. Bergman goes all out, as in the storm on the seacoast of Bohemia, he uses a few khaki-colored backdrops, a model of a tempest-tossed sailing ship, four people dressed to look like kelp-laden waves, and a man onstage who earnestly works a wind machine by hand. As Mr. Bergman rediscovers the dramatic heft in “The Winter's Tale,” he also reminds us of the sat-

isfactions of theatrical artifice when it's kept small. In this way, too, he allows the imagination to soar.

Most Americans knowledgeable about theatre and film thought of Bergman before the Dramaten visits as primarily a film director. By 1995, the visits had altered perceptions. After opportunities to judge a substantial set of his stage productions—including, in addition to those already mentioned, *Madame de Sade*, *Miss Julie* and *A Doll House*—there was a new appreciation for Bergman's theatrical achievements. Michael Feingold probably spoke for many New York theatregoers when after *Winter's Tale* he pronounced Bergman “the Western world's greatest living stage director, and the Royal Dramatic Theatre of Sweden a company of unexampled quality.”

Some critics, however, continued to interpret and evaluate the work of the theatre director through a filter of his work in film. For example, Margo Jefferson of *The New York Times* posed a thematic question clearly related to the films: “Who reveals dreams and images or gives palpable dramatic life to psychic crimes and punishments better than Ingmar Bergman?” And Vincent Canby, for many years the *Times's* main film critic, also took a thematic point of departure from his knowledge of Bergman's films. He talked about how the play fit “gracefully into the Bergman canon,” but also suggested that that canon's primarily tragic view meant that “devastating marital discord, the theme of so many of his films, tends to be far more convincing than the accommodations that lead to reconciliation.”

Clive Barnes of *The New York Post* was another critic who detected the influence of the film director on the theatre director, but he took his comparison several steps further. He said that “the domestic and theatrical feel” of the production was “reminiscent of Bergman's movie *Fanny and Alexander*.” Then he added that “as the action unfolded, I found myself wondering what I would imagine I was watching, had I not been told it was *Winter's Tale*... Sooner or later I would have caught on to the Shakespeare, but for the first half hour or so I would have guessed I was watching some obscure work by Strindberg, or a follower.”

Implicit in Barnes's remark about Bergman and Strindberg is an American tendency to think of all Scandinavian theatre artists as virtually interchangeable. I remember watching a New York actor auditioning for *The Father*, which Dramaten's Göran Graffman was directing for a 1982 Broadway production at the theatre Circle in the Square. When Graffman tried to explain to the man what he was looking for in the role of the Doctor, the actor waved aside the advice with the retort: "Not necessary, I played an Ibsen doctor last season."

The only really strong negative reactions to Bergman's *Winter's Tale* were for the comic scenes in the second half of the play. Jefferson noted that while scenes of crude, "lowlife revelry didn't always bring out the best in Shakespeare..., it certainly didn't bring out the best in Mr. Bergman." Among some of the offending attempts at comic lines cited were: "What's up?" said the man as he sat on a sword", "How much is that doggie in the window?" and "Let's twist again!" Clive Barnes said bluntly: "in the later pastoral scenes Bergman's attempts at humor are about as funny as cold and congealed Swedish meatballs on a grubby plate."

By way of explanation, I must mention that the lines Barnes cited were right from the text prepared in Sweden to be used in New York. We translators made some changes in New York, but the offending lines were not cut. And some of the negative reactions to the comedy were not just on target, but exposed a basic problem in translation. Jefferson talked about the audience "being hounded by clowns on Rollerblades and rogues who spouted dated American slang and pop song references," and Canby referred to "attempts at up-dated rube humor." Whoever was responsible for the dated humor was probably too far removed from everyday contacts with American English, and it is always risky to attempt to devise colloquial equivalents in a language that is not one's own. A story that illustrates the risk concerns a Swedish advertising agency that was supposedly trying to invent a slogan for the most famous of all Swedish vacuum cleaners. What they came up with was: "Nothing sucks like an Electrolux."

The Dramaten actor whose job it was to say some of the comic lines in question in *Winter's Tale* soon discovered that his American audience

found them decidedly unfunny. The translators tried in haste to find better choices, but although the actor managed eventually to get some laughs with them where there were none before, the resulting mix of groans and laughter was hardly gratifying. The New York audience was obviously less willing to accept outdated base humor from Bergman than from Shakespeare.

But occasionally over the three years I worked with BAM-Dramaten productions, improvised comic solutions worked well. Let me cite one example from *Peer Gynt*. Toward the very end of the play Peer meets for the second time with “Dovregubben”—the Troll King, as he is usually called in English translations. When they are about to part, Peer asks him where is going. Here is the King’s response, first, in Ibsen’s original: “Jeg vil gå til komedien. De søker i bladet nasjonale.” Then, from Lars Forssell’s marvelous Swedish translation: “Ska gå in vid teatern. Dom söker inhemsk dramatik.” Next, the first solution in English: “The National Theatre. Character work.” It drew only silence from the audience. Finally, there was the response hit upon by the New York translators. The Troll King announced that he was going into the theatre because “They’re looking for regional types.” When the line drew laughter, the actor playing the Troll King decided that the moment might occasion even more response. He volunteered his own improvisation, offering not only to say it aloud, but in English, not Swedish! Understandably, Borje Ahlstedt, as Peer, objected to what he probably felt was an outrageous attempt to steal the scene. Only Bergman could decide such momentous decision. He was contacted by fax back in Sweden and agreed, in a terse, witty reply by fax, to permit it. The extra line was: “There must be a role for an old troll,” and it brought down the house.

Comic timing also posed special problems for the simultaneous translators. This requires some explanation of the physical conditions within which they worked. For each of the productions I worked on at BAM there were three, and sometimes four translators, and we sat in front of microphones in a small, tightly-packed, closed-in booth at the rear of the auditorium. Our words could be heard only by those audience members who had rented special earphones for the purpose. We worked from English texts prepared and edited ahead of time by the

Dramaten dramaturgs, ably led by Ulla Åberg. Every line we read from those texts had to be timed to coincide as closely as possible with the time it took for the actors to perform them in Swedish on the stage below, except that each of our lines had to be shorter, more compact, than the lines in the original. This was so that we could begin a speech *after* the actor began speaking, and still be able to complete it *before* the actor completed his. To do this properly meant rehearsing our texts ahead of time while listening to tapes of live performances, making adjustments in tempo or even in the text for the sake of brevity and clarity.

What was quickly discovered at the first performance of each production was that none of our preparations quite prepared us for BAM audience reactions, and some of the results proved embarrassing for actors and translators alike. The actors were used to the reactions of Swedish audiences, which are generally more reserved than their U.S. counterparts. Americans tend to laugh louder and more often at jokes than Swedes, and when the BAM audience reacted in unexpected places, it surprised us all. Instead of the laughter exploding at the actor's rendering of a line in Swedish, they responded to the translator's reading in English, which of course came a second or two before the actor's reading, because that was the way the translator rehearsed it. Not surprisingly, the actor involved was not amused. Indeed, after one first performance, he came storming backstage, looking to tear the head off the translator responsible. When everything was explained, peace and order were restored. By the second performance, the timing was corrected, and the actor made a point of returning backstage to thank all the translators for their cooperation.

One reviewer was not critical of the comedy in *Winter's Tale* was Michael Feingold, because he interpreted Bergman's approach to low humor as not substantially different from Shakespeare's. Feingold described the clown scenes in the play

as peripheral as any in Shakespeare, and Bergman treats them high-handedly, throwing in new jokes and weaving the old ones into blatant slapstick [...] While the main plot's costumes slip forward from the 1830s to Perdita's 1910 traveling suit, the sub-

plot's are nakedly today's trash: The Clown rides in on roller-blades, swinging a hockey stick; Reine Brynolfsson's Autolykus, half goofball and half slimeball, roars into the country fete on a motorcycle, clad in the women's clothes he peddles, including a pink satin corset. It's a directorial tribute to the loose-jointed cheer built into the play's view of life.

What finally restored the proper balance between tragedy and comedy was the powerful recognition scene, which returned to the mood of seriousness that dominated the first half of the play. Leontes, sixteen years after hounding his wife Hermione with irrational accusations of infidelity and apparently driving her to her death, deeply repents the tragedy he has made of his life. Led by Paulina, Hermione's former confidante, he makes a pilgrimage to her tomb to mourn at his wife's statue. But of course this is a fairy tale play, akin to *Sleeping Beauty*. She had not really been dead, only in hiding all these years, and now, when her statue stirs, apparently suddenly coming to life, Leontes, although subdued, is overjoyed.

In The Royal Shakespeare Company production of the play the recognition scene fit Canby's description of the way it is usually performed. Hermione's statue was seen standing center stage, facing the audience, and the actress's job was to hold still as long as possible. The atmosphere was cool and objective. Bergman, however, added an air of mystery with his staging. He chose to have Pernilla August, who played Hermione, recumbent on a couch, with a long veil thrown over her body. The veil, as I recall, partially obscured her. As Paulina, played by Bibi Andersson, recited an incantation-like speech, summoning the statue back to life, there was a long moment of almost unbearable suspense before Hermione moved. In the meantime, the silence in the theatre seemed almost endless. Theatre magic at its best.