

## Introduction

In March 2004 the conference “Nordic Theatre, Then and Now. Theatre as an Expression of Cultural Change” was organized by the Department of Scandinavian Studies at the University of Groningen.

The transformation of a one-act French afterpiece into a Swedish mainpiece in three acts was taken as a splendid example of how a play can function as a vehicle of cultural change. The original French play, from 1669, by Noël le Breton d’Hauteroche, was imitated in London in 1697 by Peter Anthony Motteux and in 1741 expanded into two acts there by David Garrick. In 1757 and, independently, in 1783, Garrick’s version was translated into French. The latter version was imitated in Stockholm in 1788 by Olof Kexél. The play, now expanded into a three-act mainpiece, was called *Michel Wingler eller, Bättre vara brödlös än rådlös* [Michel Wingler or, Better Breadless than Witless] and turned out to be a reasonable hit. In the course of 120 years, more than just the nationality of the play changed, for each version adopted not only a new language, but social attitudes, as well. For instance, the hearty, rapid banter and hard-nosed reality of Motteux’s imitation was sentimentalised in Garrick’s version, reflecting a new preference in theatrical outcomes, for Garrick’s play is about an idealised, genteel, bourgeois morality instead of about saving the hero’s financial skin in Motteux’s version. Kexél’s play, on the other hand, while still modelling this new sensibility also harks back to the spirit of comedy that moved the original. He introduces several nuances into the story, but also takes time to display some of his parodies of court pomposity, in which the only purpose is comic pleasure.

The same text in various shapes and languages, and played in different countries was the starting point for the Groningen colloquium. Issues such as how language, time and culture affect the meaning of a play were dealt with by speakers from Scandinavia.

Two plays were performed during the conference. One was an imitation of Kexél's play. Parts of the text were translated into Dutch and adapted to today's student life by three students and performed by students of the Department of Scandinavian Studies of the University of Groningen as *Fredrick, of Diner met stijl* [Fredrick, or Diner with Class]. Thus, the original play has survived for more than 200 years. The second play, *Først bli'r man jo født* [First you are born] from 1994, written by the Danish playwright Line Knutzon, was played by students of the Department of Scandinavian Studies at the University of Freiburg (Germany).

In this volume of *Tijdschrift voor Skandinavistiek* the contributions of Hilda Hellwig (Stockholm), Birgitte Hessela (Copenhagen) and Alan Swanson (Groningen) are collected, while Veronica Jacobsen (Freiburg), together with Morten Egholm (Groningen), adapted her introduction to the play of Knutzon which she gave at the conference, into a larger article on the works of modern Danish playwrights.

The main focus of the contributions is how modern theatre has developed in Scandinavia, questions as "what is new" and "how is it done" are dealt with. The contributors are also reflecting on how the historical context has to be taken into account. In a more practical way, the question was also raised of how a director should adapt a classical play to present day public.

In her essay "Lögnens och änglarnas språk. Regissören och texten" [The Language of Lies and of Angels. The Director and the Script], Hilda Hellwig, who is a director herself, tells the story of how one becomes a boy (man) and a girl (woman) by internalizing expectations of parents, friends and society on the whole. By

remembering her own childhood, she shows the conflict between the one she was and the one she ought to be, and how storytelling could help her to deal with the expectations from the others. This conflict plays a leading role in theatre as well. Here the story is the basic thing and it does not matter if the events that took place are real or not, in order to tell the truth about relations and the processes which take place between human beings. And here the conflict comes in again, for it is always a kind of dysfunction that is the basic material in the art of theatre. What is happening in theatre is twofold: the play creates and examines the relations between those who act, and at the same time it creates and examines a relationship with the audience.

Hellwig explains how a director functions in this context and which steps she takes. The direction of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* serves here as an example. First of all the plot and the actions have to be made clear in order to create coherence. Next, she puts the plot in a historical context, and then she tries to match the expectations of the present public with the historical frame of reference. In this the director has to act as a mediator. And after leaving the lies of childhood, Hellwig is searching for traces of angels; that is to reveal the patterns in the behaviour of human beings which go beyond the cultural relativity of "then" and "now". There is a paradox in the work of a director: to show on stage what is lying behind stage, and to try to cross thresholds. In Hellwig's view this is what modern theatre is all about.

In "Words Onstage. On the Language of the Theatre" Alan Swanson elaborates on the use and function of words in theatre. In a historical survey he shows the development of the theatre from Aristotle until today, how scripts ("stage words") became plays ("stage language"), how words written became words acted. He explains the "classic" view, in which words are in service of the plot, and a "romantic" view, that manifests a change, a focus on the character, where words serve the development of the character in

the play. Swanson does not regard this development as a teleological one, the use of words in the “classical” and “romantic” way can exist in the same play. In order to illustrate the different ways of using words, Swanson analyses two plays: *Når vi døde vågner* (When We Dead Awaken, 1899) by Henrik Ibsen and *Till Damaskus I* (To Damascus I, 1898) by August Strindberg. One of his conclusions is that Ibsen’s plays reflect his concern with the exact word and that Strindberg’s concern, throwing his words at paper, is with the play as a whole. Ibsen disguises his poetry as prose and each word is in service of plot and character. Swanson regards Strindberg as a playwright and stage director who was aware of the process of transferring “stage words” (scripts) into “stage language” (plays).

However, words are still the basic material for theatre, despite experiments in the twentieth-century. Swanson suggests that we should include ‘words to be seen’ in our thinking about ‘words to be read’ and ‘words to be played’ and that this means another role for the writer.

Two of the contributions in this volume (by Birgitte Hesselaa and by Veronica Jacobsen and Morten Egholm) discuss modern Danish drama, which is distinguished by its innovativity and artistic productivity. The contributors seem to have different views as to how this new drama should be characterized. Hesselaa refers to modern drama as the *post-dramatic drama*. According to Hesselaa, it does not follow the traditional criteria of the classical drama but has its own completely new style and form. It uses its own language, rules and dramaturgy. With examples from Per Fly and Robert Altman, she shows the conflict between the modern mimetic expression of reality and the traditional notions of destiny, action and character. Also other playwrights from the 90’s, such as Astrid Saalbach and Claus Beck-Nielsen, have difficulty combining the changed modern reality with these notions in a kind of drama where modern everyday life plays a central role.

In their article, Egholm and Jacobsen also ask the question of

how the renewal of modern Danish drama can be characterized and how it is expressed thematically and linguistically. They take their point of departure in two modern plays which they regard as representative for Danish drama written in the 90's, Knutzon's *Først bli'r man jo født* (1994) and *Ulvetimen* [Hour of the wolf] (1998) by Morti Vizki. The style and themes of both Knutzon's and Vizki's plays seem to be inspired by different dramatic movements from the past such as classical absurdism and Scandinavian naturalism but also comedy as found in Holberg's plays. The plays are mixtures of absurd comedies and realistic everyday stories with an element of social criticism and morality. According to Egholm and Jacobsen the renewal can be found in the new ways of combining the different thematic and linguistic elements which results in a very Danish drama rather than in a completely new kind of theater.

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