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Words Onstage*

There is no point in asking whether the theatre needs words. Clearly, it does not, as ballet and mime amply demonstrate. One might go further and argue that, given that they are frequently nowadays in a language unknown to the audience, even performances of opera today (despite supertitles) do not really need words, except to help the singers remember their music, as a soprano once assured me.¹

In Aristotle's analysis of how the best plays of his own day worked, words (*lexis*) came third in his list of six requisites, after "plot" (*mythos*, sometimes translated as "action" but better, perhaps, as "story") and "character" (*etbe*).² As he saw it, playwrights chose characters to manifest the plot and words were given to those characters to express what such characters would say in the situation demanded by that plot. In Aristotle's understanding of what

* I would like to thank Alasdair MacDonald and Joan Templeton for their efforts to rid this piece of its faults. Those which remain belong to the author. Unless otherwise credited, all translations are my own.

¹ This makes opera little more than a concert in funny clothes, of course, which is probably how most of the audience take it.

² *Poetics*, Chap. 6, around 1450a,9, 12ff. Aristotle is talking here about tragedy, but there is no reason to think his order would differ with respect to comedy. For completeness, the remaining three elements are "thought" (*dianoia*), "spectacle" (*opsis*) and "song" (*melopoiia*, sometimes translated as "music").

went on onstage, everything in a play aimed at exposing the plot and though that plot was often a story that was well-known, the art consisted in its articulation by or through characters, words and gestures within a given space and moment.

Yet, for most people, the word “theatre” brings words first to mind, perhaps draped in curtains. We even talk of “spoken theatre,” usually contrasting it with “sung” or “musical” theatre. This may have something to do with our modern educational methods which (perhaps until recently) required an encounter with play-texts as part of the curriculum.³ That these plays were rarely enlivened by performance assured that they remained “literature” rather than “theatre,” words rather than action. This sense was reinforced by the fact that with rare exceptions, such as Shakespeare’s *Flourishes* and *Tuckets without*, and the direction *exit*, play-texts before the nineteenth century tended not to have many indications of what the people onstage actually did. After all, that was a central part of an actor’s training—learning what certain types of characters did in certain situations on the stage. In a theatre of plot, this could be a clear advantage to audience and actor alike, allowing both to concentrate on the expression of the events. In a theatre without stage directors, it was a necessity that the actors already knew what to do onstage. Indeed, in 1786, an anonymous Dutch critic complained of the introduction of stage directions into play-texts as something that “must offend and irritate the great actor” by leaving him too little to do.⁴

Play-texts tend to be seen by most people, therefore, as “literature,” something read, rather than as “scripts,” something performed. This distinction may also be reinforced by the general lack

³ For students in English-speaking countries, this always meant at least one or two plays by Shakespeare and perhaps something more modern, as well.

⁴ Cited from *German and Dutch theatre, 1600-1848*, ed. George W. Brandt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 458. Text translated by Wiebe Hogendoorn.

and high cost—and, thereby, high ticket prices—of modern play production. This inhibits the physical experience of a play for most people, for which movies and television are but a pale substitute. Furthermore, the tangible history of the theatre most people encounter begins with words, those brilliant choruses which paint for us the inner movement of classical Greek plays, the liturgy of human action, bereft of breath, gesture and space. And we have, too, Aristophanes' scathing contempt for words abused, as we can hear in the brittle dialogues of *Clouds*.

Words, then, strike most people today as the central material of theatre, upon which the rest hangs, even as we pay lip-service to the equally central fact that they are but one part of a larger construction called "the play." When Hamlet says, "The play's the thing/Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the King" (II:2, 633-34), he does not refer to the play's words but to its story. After instructing the players, he tells Horatio, "There is a play tonight before the King./One scene of it comes near the circumstance/Which I have told thee of my father's death./.../Observe my uncle" (III:2, 80-82, 85). What is important for Hamlet is to see how his uncle reacts to what is represented, a representation in which, as it happens, words play no part, for, at what is for Hamlet the crucial moment in the players' performance, we are actually treated to a "dumb show." For Hamlet, "the play" is a series of movements, gestures if you will, that make the particular story he has in mind evident. *Hamlet* is a play of many plays: indeed, it is a play about playing, about representation. It is an irony, then, that in this most word-filled play, the pivot of narrative evidence comes without any words at all, and we are returned thereby to the matter of the place of words in the theatre.

It is clear that, in the theatre, "words" *may* be the same thing as "language." But it is clear, too, that we can speak of "the language *in* the theatre" and "the language *of* the theatre," for which I shall use the terms *stage words* and *stage language* respectively. The first de-

notes what we may refer to as the “script,” while the second places those words into the larger context of everything that happens on the stage, which we may refer to as the “play.” We are talking about words “written” and words “acted.” That these are not necessarily the same thing is easy to see if one considers how many meanings one can give even a simple word such as “yes” or “no” through intonation and gesture alone. It is no secret either that we “speak” with more than words, or that we can “speak” (or at least make our meaning clear) without any words at all, that the unsaid need not be the unexpressed. To understand how *stage words* become *stage language* is to come close to the core of how script becomes play. Looking at some *stage words* can help us do this.

It is obvious that some words are directly connected to action: “Go!” “Stop!” “Wait!” Some stage words address the audience directly and set the scene, as at the opening of *Richard III*: “Now is the winter of our discontent/Made glorious summer by this sun of York,...” (I:1,1-2). Others do this indirectly, as in soliloquies: “To be, or not to be—that is the question. ...” (III:1, 56).⁵ Some words,

⁵ With respect to Shakespeare’s words, there has been disagreement about which are his ever since their first publication. The above reading of Hamlet’s line (and all others quoted here) is that of G.B. Harrison in his edition of the *Complete Works* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1948). For comparison we may look at the version in Quarto 1 (1603), the first printing of the play: “To be, or not to be, I [=Aye] there’s the point,...”. Quarto 2 (1604) gives the line as: “To be, or not to be, that is the question,...”. The “First Folio” (1623) gives the line thus: “To be, or not to be, that is the Question:...” (F1 3:265). All modern editions agree on the words but differ wildly on matters of punctuation. Twentieth-century scholars have generally taken the view that Shakespeare’s plays (and, *mutatis mutandis*, most printed play-texts) were “scripts” for performance and, thus, aurally we have little to choose from, except for Q1. After years of insisting on this, we now seem to have come back to the plays in their printed form, as “literature.” The argument for the (printed) “play as literature” has been recently revisited by Lukas Erne, in his *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

such as questions, invite a verbal response, as when Lear asks his daughters, "...Which of you shall we say doth love us most?" (I:1,52). Some words elucidate the action undertaken, as when Othello, discovering Desdemona's faithfulness and Iago's treachery, says, "...And say besides that in Aleppo once,/.../I took by the throat the circumcised dog/And smote him, thus" and suits the action to the words (V:2, 352, 355-56). And some invite their hearers to consider an action intellectually, as when Hamlet, coming upon his uncle apparently praying, says, "Now might I do it pat,..." (III:3,73) and then argues himself out of slaying him then and there. Such discriminations can easily be extended and this list does not pretend to be exhaustive. At the same time, the working of each of these words is determined by the larger theatrical language that is the play, because all of these words are embodied and given breath and gesture in an agreed-upon space and time.

If we may call the use of words in the service of plot sketched above the "Classic" view, ignoring the often-drastic rereading of Aristotle's *Poetics* that dominated theatrical theory long after that book's rediscovery in the sixteenth century, we can see that another usage began to gain ground, coming prominently to the fore in the later eighteenth century. In this view, character became more of the central point of dramatic interest and words and action now served to open that character to us. August von Kotzebue (1761-1819) was by no means the first to exploit the power of character on the stage, but the enormous national and international success of his *Menschenhass und Reue* (Misanthropy and Regret, 1789), through its strong effect upon audiences, achieved in part by putting recognizable figures on the stage, set a pattern of expectations that was hardly overcome in the nineteenth century.⁶ That these figures

⁶ Outside the German-speaking world, the play began its long Copenhagen run in 1790 and its Stockholm triumph in 1791, arriving in London in 1798 and Paris in 1799.

were largely middle-class, as were probably most of those in the audience, certainly helped draw spectators to them.

Though stage-speech frequently reflects the person speaking, it seems reasonable to expect that, in this new theatrical pattern, the relationship of words to character would now be more intimate, revelatory on more than a lexical level. In late eighteenth-century Stockholm, for instance, we can see this operative in two ways in the popular comedies of Olof Kexél (1748-96). On the one hand, he introduced figures who were entirely characterised by their speech—such as Håf-Rådet [the court councillor] in *Michel Wingler* (1788), whose Swedish liberally sprinkled with bad French is a clear parody of a type associated with court *parvenus*. On the other hand, he gave us figures, such as Ehrenschöld [=Honourshield] in the same play, whose conversation, and name, revealed for us his inner worthiness and, thus, that he was not to be understood as a mere gold-digger out after the heroine's considerable cash.⁷ In this comedy, it is the truth of Ehrenschöld's character that is tested by his actions and his words. Though Kexél had his roots in the comedy of action, that action often served a play centered on character. We may call this use of words "Romantic" and signal thereby the transfer of dramatic interest from story to character, specifically to the development of character.

At the same time, some words remain neutral, so to speak, until pushed in one direction or another. For instance, the words "*My father is dead*" offer of themselves no clue to their use or meaning. Bereft of gesture (including intonation), context and space, they remain merely informative.

The above—admittedly fairly rough—distinction is useful in helping us see the general direction in which theatrical words operate, though, clearly, this division cannot be absolute, for even in

⁷ It is interesting that Kexél picked up the English habit of tag-names for many of his characters, names that reveal to us something about them.

“Classical” plays, words can characterise their speaker, just as in “Romantic” plays, words can move the action. Furthermore, it seems obvious that both kinds of words can exist in the same play, and that some words move both the action and the character.

Let us now see if we can put these distinctions to use in some Scandinavian plays. Ibsen’s *Når vi døde vågner* (When We Dead Awaken, 1899) and Strindberg’s *Till Damaskus I* (To Damascus I, 1898) were written at about the same time and can show us differing ways of using words onstage.

It is easily argued that Ibsen’s last play (which he himself called a “dramatic epilogue”) seems to be reaching for something different from what his audiences could normally expect. Of his dozen later plays, it is the only one to take place entirely out of doors, for instance.⁸ Then, too, its oddly ambiguous ending leaves room for much critical discussion.⁹ Its language, however, has a sharply realistic shape to it.

Ibsen’s last plays often begin with entrances. In *Gengangere* (Ghosts, 1881), for instance, a rain-drenched Engstrand enters Mrs. Alving’s house and is promptly, and rudely, rebuked by his “daughter,” Regine, for daring to do so. Tesman’s aunt, in *Hedda Gabler* (1890), comes quietly into the room and observes that her nephew and Hedda are apparently still asleep after their journey. The doorbell at the beginning of *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896) causes Mrs. Borkman’s face to light up and she utters the name of her son, whose arrival she anticipates. These are the kinds of events that one expects at the beginning of many plays, of course, and Ibsen,

⁸ That said, most of *Fruen fra havet* (The Lady From the Sea, 1888) also takes place outside.

⁹ Avalanches seem to call for ambiguity in Ibsen, the most notorious example being the ending of *Brand* (1866).

by referring to information unknown to the audience at that moment, projects us quickly into the mental environment within which the play will operate and suggests that we have come in in the middle of some ongoing experience.

The opening of *Når vi døde vågner* seems, at first sight, different. In the garden of a resort hotel we discover Maja, the young, elegantly dressed wife of the older sculptor, Prof. Rubek, glancing at a newspaper, “waiting for the professor to say something,” Ibsen’s stage directions tell us. Putting the newspaper aside, she sighs, “*Uh, nei, nei—!*” (Uh, no, no—!) Her husband asks her what is wrong and she remarks upon the quiet of the place.

This does not, on paper, do much to get us going into the story and it suggests nothing beforehand. It is obvious, however, that a great deal of the realism of this opening moment depends upon non-verbal acting, upon *stage language* rather than *stage words*. How, after all, is the audience to know that she is “waiting for the professor to say something”? Indeed, how is the audience to know that he is, to her, “the professor” instead of her husband or a friend or, simply, another guest? Timing and physical gesture are at least as important here as the few words uttered, perhaps even more so, since the words themselves *say* nothing. In a sense, it is the very ordinariness of Maja’s utterance that strikes us, something that could be heard in passing anywhere. The first exchange in the play goes in itself nowhere and tells us little more than that nothing is happening. Indeed, given the tumult with which the play will end, this drawn-out, almost silent beginning can be seen as the first of the play’s many often visually- or acoustically-expressed ironies, devices of which Ibsen was fond.¹⁰ It is their very ordinariness, even their

¹⁰ The light from the burning orphanage and the sun, on the one hand, and the falling chair and locking door, on the other, in *Gengangere* come easiest to mind. On Ibsen’s use of sound-effects, see my “[Noises off] The Acoustical Ibsen,” in *Strindberg, Ibsen & Bergman*, ed. Harry Perridon (Maastricht: Shaker, 1998), pp. 205-12.

emptiness, that Ibsen uses to establish the starting point for the remarkable events that will follow. Indeed, our understanding of that ordinariness is essential if we are to be struck by the bizarre physical journeys of the four principal characters during the play. In fact, by emphasizing the normality of the scene, Ibsen can be said thereby to co-opt us into also accepting the irrational climb of Rubek and Irene up the mountain, just as Maja and Ulfheim descend it, as equally normal.

By contrast, many of Strindberg's plays often emphasize their unreality, of location, of characters, of time; *Ett drömspel* (A Dream-play, 1901), for instance, or *Spöksönan* (The Ghost Sonata, 1907). The very artificiality of their form—the chiasmic structures of *Fröken Julie* (Miss Julie, 1888) and *Till Damaskus I*, for example, or the cyclical structure of *Ett drömspel* or the progressive structure of *Spöksönan*—is meant to dislocate us from any world outside the stage itself. One may argue that they force the spectator either to enter the world they predicate or risk being completely detached from the experience offered.

This breach of the dominant principle of realism extends to the language the characters use, as well. Just as the characters in *Till Damaskus I* have no names, there is also a certain anonymity in their language, as well. Where Ibsen's instructions to the actors include matters of what they are thinking, Strindberg's here are straightforward descriptions of setting, sound-effects and gesture.¹¹ We learn that The Stranger (who is literally “unknown” in Swedish) is standing at a corner and that he is not sure of which way he should go. We begin somewhere in the middle of a story that seems to have come to a halt, and we are propelled into the events of the play by its words:

¹¹ Egil Törnqvist has recently shown how the ample stage directions in Strindberg's *Drottning Kristina* (1903) deviated greatly from his normal practice. See Törnqvist, “The ‘new technique’ in Strindberg's *Kristina*,” *Tijdschrift voor Scandinavistiek*, 25(2004):3-18.

Den Okände: Se der är Ni. Jag visste nästan Ni skulle komma.

Damen: Ni kallade alltså på mig; ja, jag kände det. —Men hvarför står Ni här i gathörnet?

The Stranger: Ah, there you are. I was almost sure you would come.

The Lady: But you called me; yes, I felt it. —But why are you standing here on the corner?

The dialogue tells us where The Stranger is and, by extension, what it is important for us to know about the setting, that is, that it is at a corner, something that was perhaps difficult to infer from the original set itself. Indeed, this fact of standing at a crossroads is the visual representation of the central intellectual issue of the play, whose opening words make clear to us the stage directions we cannot read.

But more is happening in these words than the explanation of the setting or, even, the creation of an emotional/physical sense—of stasis, for instance, as is important at the opening of *När vi døde vågner*. In Strindberg's opening, a relationship, if even an unclear one, is expressed at once between the two characters; they have, or have had, some awareness of each other, even though neither can exactly say in what that awareness consists. That relationship is not intimate, however, as both address each other formally [as *Ni* rather than as *du*], something difficult to manage in English. At the same time, a dialectical relationship is established between the actors and the spectators.

From its apparently ordinary and static beginning, Ibsen's play comes to use accelerating contrasting movement—up or down the mountain—to express the internal movements and self-discoveries within his characters—exemplified as well in the names of his female principals—as they progress through a series of events intended to get them finally together with their correct partners.

Strindberg's two principals also undertake a journey up and down a mountain but, here, the ascending and descending are part

of one movement, a movement set in motion for us who watch by The Lady's opening question. In both plays, the internal movement within the characters is objectified by the external movements they make. This is not news, nor is it of particular interest here that the words work in differing ways: this, after all, is what makes Ibsen different from Strindberg. What is of interest is how these *stage words* fit into the *stage language* of each writer. Ibsen's opening is aimed at setting the mood—we might almost say the “volume-level”—of his play while Strindberg's is intended to introduce symbolically the problem the play will deal with—which direction to take. This raises, then, the matter of the æsthetic functioning of *stage words*.

There is a sense in which all *stage words* are poetry disguised as prose. That is, their diction must be efficient, by which I mean that each word must earn its place in the service of the plot and the character. Ibsen's lifelong habit of meticulous rewriting, as evidenced by drafts of his plays, bears out his particular concern with the exact word. Strindberg, on the other hand, gives the impression of having almost thrown words at paper. Yet, a play such as *Fröken Julie*, for instance, is carefully crafted. It is clear, too, that Strindberg had a deep and long-standing interest in the larger, symbolic, structure of a play as a whole, something we can also see in Ibsen's last play. But what perhaps most strikes one about Strindberg's later plays is his use of time.

We can see time manipulated in an obvious way in *Fröken Julie*. The musical interlude exactly half-way through presses the passage of time upon us. In *Till Damaskus I* we seem to go out of time as we ascend the mountain, but we are reminded of time's inexorability by the wood-bin, first seen apparently full in I:2, as the Lady and the Stranger begin their ascent, and then half-full in V:1, when they return. This is a part of the *stage language*, but in both cases, we are aware of a powerful rhythm to the larger structure.

This rhythm affects *stage words*, too, as we can see, for instance,

in Strindberg's *Moderskärlek* (Mother's Love, 1892), whose words on paper are almost banal. What becomes clear in the performance of these words is the central importance of the spaces between utterances: if the spaces are too short, the words leave no emotional deposit, if they are too long, we get soap opera. These words inevitably take place in real time and, therefore, moderate stage-time. A play takes as long as its words and the spaces between them allow, and this is another function of words onstage.

This view of words and time is not universal in our day, however, and its opposite was most forcefully articulated by the playwright Antonin Artaud in the mid-1930s, who argued, "*En doit en finir avec cette superstition des textes et de la poésie écrite.... Sous la poésie des textes, il y a la poésie tout court, sans forme et sans texte.*" (We need to get rid of this superstition about texts and *written* poetry.... Beneath the poetry of texts, there is poetry pure and simple, without form and without text.)¹² In *Le Théâtre et son Double* (1938), Artaud argued passionately for a theatre all of whose elements worked equally to bring the spectator directly, indeed, almost physically, into the theatrical experience, even defining theatre as "*science du corps et de ses possibles.*" (the science of the body and *its* possibilities.)¹³ The intense physicality Artaud demands, directed at the spectator as much as at the actor, articulates the dialecticality of the relationship. This approach to theatre came prominently to the fore in the 1960s in the improvisational "happening" and, to some extent, in the "group theatre" movement, exemplified, for example, in the work of Peter Brook, on the one hand or, in Stockholm, of Pistolteatern and Teater 9, on the other.¹⁴

¹² Antonin Artaud, "En finir avec les chefs-d'œuvre," *Le Théâtre et son Double* in *Œuvres complètes IV* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964), pp. 93-94.

¹³ Artaud, "Fragment IV," *Théâtre, Œuvres complètes IV*, p. 279.

¹⁴ Brook's most well-known statement of his technique came in *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin, 1968) and was carried forward in *There Are No Secrets* (London: Methuen Drama, 1993). For a contemporary presentation of

Such a position raises an immediate æsthetic difficulty. *Stage words* are, *by that fact*, mimetic and not phatic; that is, they are representative (of character, situation, feeling, and so on), and not accidental or casual, even when improvised, and have, thereby, an authority not necessary to everyday speech. The very content of *stage words* is governed by the fact that they are uttered in a mimetic context; that is, their working is not between the characters who utter them, but between those characters and the audience. It follows, therefore, that if *stage words* are altered, the relationship between the context in which they are found and their audience will also change.¹⁵

In this way, we come, then, to the most difficult practical aspect of the *stage words* themselves, their inevitable function as controlling elements in any play. It is this that Artaud and his epigones most dislike about words in the theatre, their determination of the shape, the content, even the duration of a theatrical event. The common response to this perceived problem has been to cut words. Robert Wilson's production of Strindberg's *Ett drömspel* at Stockholms stadsteater in the 1990s, for example, seemed more choreographed than spoken. The emphasis on the "dream" part of the play was certainly well-served: whether it was Strindberg's dream or Robert Wilson's is another matter. What is of interest here, however, is that Wilson did not know Swedish, and it was apparently not thought necessary that he do so in order to make, in Swedish, the play by August Strindberg known as *Ett drömspel*. A Swedish colleague close to the production reported to me that Wilson thought

Swedish group theatre, see Stefan Johansson and Gösta Kjellin, "Théâtre de groupe en Suède/Group Theatre in Sweden," published as a separate number of *Swedish Theatre Suedois*, no. 11 (June, 1970).

¹⁵ A necessary corollary observation, of course, is that the audience itself also changes, in principal with every performance, but most theatrical productions rely on the essentially stable character of that audience from performance to performance.

Swedish “*låt bra*” (sounded nice). If we ask, then, what role the *stage words* played in Wilson’s conception of this play, it was obvious to the spectator that they—and the spaces between them—came fairly far behind other aspects of the *stage language* of this production, possibly even functioning mostly on the level of “music.”

Despite the evident twentieth-century split between what we may call the traditionalists and the progressives, traditional, word-based, theatre continues to be written and to flourish, indeed, to be the norm. Most theatre performances, subventioned or private, operate out of traditional theatrical assumptions about the nature of theatre and its languages. We even say that one “writes” a play and, yet, in English we call those who do so “playwrights.” Ibsen understood his words to be the bedrock of the performance. Though we rely on Strindberg’s words, he found it necessary to develop a new theatre ensemble—*Intima teatern* (1907-10)—which could place those words before an audience in the way he understood they needed to be taken. From time to time, progressivists, from Strindberg, through Artaud, Brecht and Peter Brook, to Robert Wilson and yet others, have managed to give a jolt to this word-based theatre without ever quite succeeding in dislodging it.

What arises out of this disjunction is the notion of the “theatre-piece,” which often radically destabilizes, even subordinates, the language *in* the theatre for the language *of* the theatre. In one sense, then, we can say that we have thereby returned to “script.” But, at the same time, it is clear that what drives this shift in our day is the rise of the “director” as the *primus motor* of any theatre production. Strindberg understood this and referred to himself in his later years as *regissören* (the stage director), setting his *stage words*, thereby, into the larger context of *stage language* even though he did little of the practical directing.¹⁶ Regardless of whether this shift is a good idea

¹⁶ Thus, the title of Strindberg’s *Memorandum till medlemmarne af Intima Teatern från Regissören* (Stockholm: Björk och Börjesson, 1908). For the practical matters,

or not, we speak rightly of Ingmar Bergman's *Hedda Gabler*, Robert Wilson's *Ett drömspel* and Hilda Hellwig's *Gengångere*. Perhaps we should take our original problem of words to be read and words to be heard and reformulate it now into words to be seen. Such a condition suggests that the role of the writer and his words is now only participatory rather than rather than inventive. But the curious thing is that, despite all the marvels of mechanical recollection, it is the words which remain.

see Arvid Falck, *Fem år med Strindberg* (Stockholm: Wahlström och Widstrand, 1935), especially pp. 190-217, which discuss in detail Strindberg's direction of *Fadren* (1887, *The Father*).