

Focus on Ibsen

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When activity started at the Centre for Advanced Study, there had not been very much time beforehand for the planning of the research groups that were going to make use of the new premises. In such a situation the Board chose to look around in the Norwegian research landscape for subject areas in which Norway had already distinguished itself, and in which there was at the same time a highly qualified international network of researchers that could be built on when the first groups were being composed.

Within humanistic research there was immediately one area that stood out, namely the literary production of Henrik Ibsen. Ibsen, whom it must be reasonable to reckon as one of Norway's most important exports, has for one and a half centuries put his stamp on world literature and on the theatre all over the world. Within Norwegian literary research there has also been a strong research tradition with Ibsen as its subject, a tradition that had, however, been weakened in the course of the 1970s and 1980s, when for some time it was considered less relevant to explore the classics and the canonical literary texts. At that time Ibsen, together with colleagues like Wergeland, Hamsun, Undset and others, had undeservedly been overshadowed by topics such as regional literature, workers' literature, women's literature and so forth.

This was something the Board of the Centre for Advanced Study took seriously. The choice that was made to go in for Ibsen research as part of the very first activity at the CAS was connected with the fact that there was a desire to strengthen and resurrect Norwegian efforts in this field, at the same time as there was a wish to contribute to enabling Ibsen researchers abroad to get into closer contact with the sources, i.e. with Ibsen's texts in their original linguistic form, and with the Norwegian society and the literary and theatrical history that constitute an important context for Ibsen's production.

What was called the Ibsen Group came to acquire a strongly international stamp. It brought together researchers from four continents and from countries like Japan, Kenya/Zimbabwe, England, Germany, the USA and Norway. Their areas of interest covered a wide spectrum, from societal analyses to Bible language. But common to them all was a powerful interest in what happens to a literary text (and a national or European theatre tradition) when it is translated and adapted to new cultural contexts. What is it about Ibsen's texts that makes it possible for them to communicate with people all over the world, and that makes them just as relevant today as they were at the time they were written?

Translation problems and reception studies came to be central for a number of the researchers and were the subject of constant discussions and seminars. Professor Fritz Paul (University of Göttingen) is one of Germany's central Scandinavian scholars and an internationally famous Ibsen researcher. He worked on a survey of which directions Ibsen texts took when they went out into the world, often through as many as three or four languages, before they reached their destination. It is obvious that in such cases we may have moved pretty far from the original meaning of the original texts. One of the Nestors in European Ibsen research, the British Professor John Northam, also worked on translation problems, and devoted much of his time at the Centre to translations of Ibsen's poems and of his dramas in verse *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*. Through discussion with his colleagues at the Centre, John Northam arrived at translations that better than any earlier ones also take account of the *formal* characteristics

(versification and rhyme system) of the original texts, at the same time as the content of Ibsen's original choice of words is better preserved than ever before.

Ibsen's influence on the modern theatre was first felt in the countries of the west, where his realistic living-room drama is considered to be epoch-making in the history of drama and the theatre. But this influence extends much farther, and has also reached African and Asian countries with completely different theatrical traditions from our own. In Africa Ibsen became very popular and after the colonial period largely took over the role Shakespeare had earlier played within the universities and other educational institutions. Plays like *An Enemy of the People* and *Hedda Gabler* have furthermore been of crucial importance in former colonial states, inter alia through being on the programme for travelling theatre groups who have performed Ibsen at festivals, through performances by independent theatre groups, through student productions and in other ways. The researcher Kimani Gechau (originally from Kenya) was particularly interested in the role Ibsen's dramatic works had played in his home country as a demonstration of the content and consequences of what is called modernity: a new form of society, marked by a new perception of the state, new relations between individuals, the market and communication between actors. New ideas and values have replaced the old ones, and Ibsen's drama shows itself as being particularly well suited to presenting such transitions, and what they mean for the people affected.

Kimani Gechau worked closely with Helge Rønning, who was studying the Ibsenian view of society in relation to Norwegian and European conditions in Ibsen's time.

The Japanese researcher Mitsui Mori was also working with related problems. His interest particularly concerned the important role played by law and the understanding of justice in Ibsen's dramatic works, compared with what is, and what was, the case in the Japanese society that received these texts from the beginning of the 20th century onwards. The differences between varying views of justice constitute an important field of study for all who are interested in what causes Ibsen, in spite of all these differences, nevertheless to become a classic and also popular in societies that are remote from his own. Mitsui Mori was also concerned with general problems of translation, both theoretical and practical, and he has incidentally himself translated all of Ibsen's contemporary plays into Japanese, at the same time as he is a much used stage director in his home country, with many Ibsen productions to his credit.

The translation aspect was in addition actualised by the Norwegian researcher Arnbjørn Jakobsen's studies of Ibsen's allusions to the Bible and his biblically marked forms of expression, a field that is as a rule overlooked when the texts of Ibsen's plays are translated into other languages. Arnbjørn Jakobsen revealed in his studies that such elements in Ibsen are far more numerous than anybody had imagined, also in the realistic living-room dramas and in the late symbolist plays. This insight ought to have consequences for all subsequent publicising of Ibsen, both in Norway and internationally.

The female researchers at the Centre, Inga Stina Ewbank from England, Sandra Saari from the USA, and Vigdis Ystad from Norway, dealt with questions linked to Ibsen's female characters. Sandra Saari worked most consistently with this topic and related it to the development of society in Ibsen's own time. During her stay Inga Stine Ewbank worked mostly on the concept of intertextuality in connection with Ibsen's literary production, and pointed to many textual elements where this is important for our understanding, while Vigdis Ystad linked her studies of female main characters to a background in the history of ideas,

where an attempt was made to trace notions of femininity back to more general frames of reference.

What is it then about Ibsen that is the specifically “Ibsenian”. This question may be said to have been paramount for all the participants in the Ibsen Group. During his stay Professor Asbjørn Aarseth laid the foundation for his new book on Ibsen’s contemporary plays, where he was particularly interested in the dramaturgical characteristics of the plays and arrived at a “glass-cupboard dramaturgy” as being crucial. Professor Thomas Van Laan from the USA worked on an investigation of Ibsen’s relationship to the classical genres – in particular tragedy. In the course of his stay at the Centre, Professor Van Laan wrote a comprehensive thesis on Ibsen as a writer of tragedy, and argued that it could be stated that this genre feature is one of Ibsen’s strongest characteristics.

Asbjørn Aarseth’s dramaturgic studies, Professor Van Laan’s genre studies, Kimani Gechau’s studies of modernity, Mitsui Mori’s investigations of views of justice and Sandra Saari’s studies of the female roles all formed part of discussions on Ibsen’s anchorage in terms of ideas, a field that evoked interest among researchers such as Per Thomas Andersen, Rune Engebretsen and Vigdis Ystad. The connection between philosophy and literary production was central to their works, at the same time as they could benefit from the other researchers’ study of reception problems.

The work in the Ibsen Group was experienced as exceptionally fruitful by all the participants and it has resulted in a number of books and articles. One of the central aspects of the group’s work, linked to understanding and reception, brought us perhaps some steps further towards an understanding of what lies hidden in the depths of Ibsen’s texts – plays that are felt to be just as relevant, no matter where in the world they are performed and read. Another important result was the strong network that was thereby established within international Ibsen research. Here lasting contacts were forged between researchers, and the foundation was laid for further co-operation within numerous fields. All those who were members of the Ibsen Group are deeply grateful to the Centre. When one of them was due to leave the place at the end of his stay, he wrote a farewell letter containing the pregnant words that he would hereafter feel himself “cut off from Paradise”. They could have been said on behalf of us all.



*Nemzeti Színház, Budapest 1958
“Peer Gynt”, Troll
Directed by Endre Gellért*