

## A Cruel Theatricality: An Essay on Kjersti Horn's Staging of the *Kaos er Nabo Til Gud* (Chaos Is the Neighbor of God)

Heddadagene is a brand-new theatre festival in Oslo where twenty-nine theatres joined together to present a new theatre experience from all over Norway, during June of 2017. Thanks to the festival director Åslaug Løseth Magnusson and three leading Norwegian Theatres (Det Norske Teatre, National Theatre, and Den Norske Opera and Ballet) kindly inviting me to the plays, I got a chance to see and become more knowledgeable about current Norwegian theatre. In fact, at the beginning my intention was to write a festival report. But after I began to think on it, I realized a difficulty arising from the festival 's language; it was a national festival, and thus in Norwegian without any English subtitles. I became concerned that writing about the plays when one was not acquainted with its language carries some clear risks. So I chose one of them, the first play I saw at the festival, and also one of the most impressive for me. This was the National Theatre 's production *Kaos er Nabo Til Gud* (Chaos Is the Neighbor of God), written by Swedish playwright Lars Norén in 1982 as a part of a hotel trilogy, and directed by Kjersti Horn.

What I hope to do in this essay is to overcome something that seems to me always difficult. When one writes a theatre review or a report it is expected to be generally objective, yet this always creates a paradox. If the report is completely objective, it will probably be open to criticism as devoid of creativity and feelings—in short, prosaic. On the other hand, if it is more subjective, it risks being criticized as too personal. Is there a better way of blending these? Not to solve this problem, but to acknowledge it, I will attempt to think about both the stage experience, and also my own experience as a spectator through a description of theatricality produced in the performance. Before talking about the performance, let me spend a few sentences explaining my approach. I call this not a review, but an “essay.” In Turkish, the words essay (*deneme*) and experience (*deneyim*) spring from the same root. This is why I think a writing that concentrates both on the stage and the spectating experience can be best expressed in an essay, rather than a review or a report. And this is also why I prefer to write the word *essay* in italics.

*Kaos er Nabo Til Gud* (Chaos Is the Neighbor of God) is a story about a family whose members came together on a cold Christmas evening at the family 's lonely hotel near an abandoned train station. The action takes place in the hotel 's waiting room, where all the family members are trapped in this space, filled to overflowing with necessary and unnecessary things. The room appears less as a stage setting than as a well-constructed film set, as you can see in the photos of play. On the left side is a reception desk; in the middle is a sitting area, and many potted plants, drink cabinets, and floor lamps. Other rooms can be seen: a kitchen and a living room. All are filled with large and small objects. The playing time is equal to the real time, or performance time, which takes three hours without intermission. There is a continuous conversation, and the density of words echoes the density of objects.

The family consists of an alcoholic father, who is the hotel director Ernst (Terje Strømdahl), a cancerous mother Helen (Ellen Horn), a troublesome son Frank (Glenn Andre Kaada), a pathetic, schizophrenic, gay son Rick (Emil Johnsen), and an old woman Rex (Frøydis Armand) who is the last guest, living in the hotel nearly five years without paying for it. Both within its

dramatic structure and its staging techniques, the play *Chaos Is the Neighbor of God* not only refers to different theatrical traditions or conventions such as realism, symbolism, comedy and expressionist theatre, but mixes them in a destructive, uncanny, tragic, comic and pathetic way—in short, in a chaotic theatrical universe, as its title implies.

The play begins with a conversation between Ernst and Rex in the reception area. All the guests staying there have already gone somewhere else. Ernst is worried about the hotel's bad condition and also angry with Rex's unbearable jokes. Then his wife Helen comes in, wearing a mink coat, and seems very happy and cheerful. Ironically, we learn she is dying of cancer. Next, her two sons, Frank and Rick, arrive.



*Chaos is the Neighbor of God*, written by Lars Noren, directed by Kjersti Horn at the National Theatre in Oslo, 2017. Photo: Øyvind Eide.

The play is less about sharing happy moments together than unceasingly drinking alcohol, smoking, arguing and fighting each other, with everlasting speeches, repeated conversations, crying jags, temper tantrums, an attempted suicide, swearing, and a suggestion of Oedipal relationships. At first they seem like normal people with normal lives and dreams, but soon it becomes clear that they are not. Still, this doesn't mean that this is a story about the life of an abnormal or a pathetic family; rather they all portray the darkness of modern family life with a particular emphasis on the complexity of the modern, psychological individual. Here the classic

family of fateful tragedies is recreated as a modern, psychological one. We know that late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century theatre and cinema are full of family dramas. They show the interior of the home, making visible the innermost elements of the intimacy of private life. For this reason they are all designed as material for spectacle. Kjersti Horn's staging seems to look even more closely into this tendency of the early modern drama. This is not a good family. They are used to lying. They are relentless, cruel, and pathetic. Here, realist representation depicts a cruel story about the fall of the modern family. What falls is not only the hotel, but the family who owns it. The father is alcoholic and cannot do anything to address his family's serious problems. The only thing he can do is escape from or ignore them. The older son, Frank, is a criminal, while the other son, Rick, is a paranoid schizophrenic. The mother is dying. They don't gather in a real home, but in an exaggerated hotel reception area. Gathering all these problem-ridden characters in a 'waiting room' leads to the destructive consequences seen during the play. But in this essay I will not keep a tally of what is happening during the plot, instead I will attempt to explain with what theatrical means the director Kjersti Horn developed the disturbing story of this family, and how she transforms this pathetic story into a new stage language.



Chaos is the Neighbor of God, directed by Kjersti Horn at the National Theatre in Oslo, 2017.  
Photo: Øyvind Eide.

When the performance begins, the audience cannot see everything happening on the stage because of an obstacle between stage and audience: two adjoining video projections on huge



plastic screens covering the entire front of the stage, making you feel as if you are watching a movie. Is everything happening behind this curtain, or are we watching a film? These are the inescapable questions for the audience unable to see and hear the stage directly. Thus, showing the performance via the projection on that plastic curtain which is recorded by a cameraman, sometimes more than one, following the actors on the stage, scenographer Sven Harraaldsson makes a cleavage between stage and audience utilizing the famous fourth wall of the so-called naturalist-realist theatre. In other words, with this projection-curtain the play makes visible the invisible fourth wall of the realist theatre. So the actors play “ really ” as if “ the curtain had never risen, ” if we may borrow the famous phrase from Diderot. Or to put this in terms of art historian Michael Fried ’ s absorption and theatricality, one can say director Horn created a doubly absorptive theatricality. This will become a kind of cruelty, especially at the end of the performance, for two reasons.



Chaos is the Neighbor of God, left to right; son Rick (Emil Johnsen) and mother Helen (Ellen Horn), Photo: Øyvind Eide.

First, the dominant acting and staging aesthetics of the performance works according to the guidelines of the realist-naturalist theatre. That is to say, everything on the stage, from the stage props, dialogues and stage design to the acting style, is realistic, in the style of dramatists such as Strindberg and O ’ Neill. The audience is able to see details via the video and its zooming effects on the hotel ’ s waiting room scene, even the inside of the other rooms beyond the

reception space, and also offstage places such as a toilet where we see mother Helen and old woman Rex cleaning, and the bathroom where we see the gay son, Rick, taking a shower, and finally out of the hotel, onto the streets where the troubled son, Frank, slams the door and drives away. In addition, the actors play both as if “ the curtain had never risen ” and as if no cameraman had recorded them as if no one were watching them on the stage. In this sense, the performance space is, undoubtedly, an air-tight, absorbed universe just as Fried described it.

The second reason is about a pleasure in looking. The performance offers us a pleasure in looking, or a more accurately a pleasure in not being able to look directly. Needless to say, there is an obvious interest in our obsession with the realist representation. In exactly the same way that realist theatre focuses on private space, the performance is trying to display both the family ' s private, intimate and innermost life, even sometimes evocatively using the extreme style of supernatural horror films. Or to put it in other words, director Horn seems to want to create both a difference and a similarity between the world all-seeing and that of displaying. In this way, Horn actually creates a distance that leads to a more intense theatrical experience even a traumatic one for both the actors and the audience. However, staging the play as if the actor isn ' t aware of being watched by the audience does not break the bond between actor and audience; on the contrary this approach enhances the tightness of the bond. Because the act of looking desires to annihilate the obstacle between stage and audience, during the performance we in the audience desire this. Finally, Rick achieves this both for himself and for us. If we unite these interpretations with the aesthetic function of that plastic material and also with the movie showing each scene in detail, we can see easily how the play reinforces the techniques of absorption. In this way, the director blends the absorptive staging techniques of realist-naturalist theatre into the rhetoric of the performance itself. It means we in the audience are absorbed along two dimensions, because what is seen on the projection is both in a narrow sense a fragmented view of the stage (sometimes it doesn ' t focus on the main scene, not showing the actor talking just then, but another actor who is silent) and in a wider sense, a revelation of the entire stage, including offstage spaces which a human eye cannot see at a glance. In any case it shows the actions on- and off-stage, in micro and macro views, that a human eye is unable to do. Beyond this, the staging, namely the whole technological apparatus, not only plays the role of a beholder who is like a voyeur, and not only illustrates the absorptive feature of realist staging, but in addition reveals the cruelty of both the family relationships. This is realistic staging that is based on a desire to exacerbate the gaze. This is why I argue the performance is based on a doubly absorptive theatricality.



The last scene of *Chaos* is the Neighbor of God, after Rick ' s tearing down the curtain.

To make this argument clearer, let me make an analogy between the character Rick and the performance. Rick is the embodiment of the performance, and of the absorptive theatricality which is produced through it. He is the central character. He suffers from his sexual identity and wants to gain recognition within it. The members of the family appear to love him but in fact no one understands his feelings, ideas and his inner world. The father cannot accept his homosexuality; his brother Frank ridicules his interest in art and literature. Rick is cowed, since cannot be express his feelings clearly. He is obstructed by having unrealized dreams. He uses a proud stance as a reply to others who are indifferent to him. In my view, his ambivalent position (both being a coward and a projecting a proud image) can be explained in terms of absorption and theatricality. Throughout the performance Rick is the character who most allures and absorbs the spectator ' s gaze. During most of the performance, he appears hysterical, aware of being watched by the others on stage and wanting to draw attention to his desire, which means both that he is a theatrical character and that he illustrates theatricality itself. He apparently desires his mother Helen, and fondles her breast, while both are sitting around the table and looking at the photo album. This scene is emphasized by visual zooming-in of the camera. As soon as he feels he cannot express himself toward the end of the play, he begins to go around naked in the hotel and attempts to cut off his own penis with a razor blade while screaming " daddy, I am a homosexual. " In this blood-curdling scene, the camera continuously follows him, zooming in on his sexual organ. When he is acting most theatrically or hysterically, the camera ' s

zooming and its projection on the huge plastic curtain absorb our gaze. Rick wants to be “ seen ” in the sense of being accepted. For this reason, the camera focuses on what Rick wants to show to others. Needless to say, it zooms in on all acts revealing the character ’ s inner conflicts. It is really a traumatic experience, demanding that the audience witness his dreadful pain, and see his own “ drama ” in the drama that occurs behind the curtain, but yet be powerless to help him. They are forced to open their eyes wide and be mere spectators.

On the other hand, Rick exposes himself as a meek, self-enclosed person in his “ natural ” behavior, which means he is an absorbed character, even the absorption itself. When considered from this point of view, it can be said that performance has more than one dimension, or has different faces, just as Rick has. After all, he is a schizoid. If I might take it a step further, I would like to say that Rick is not the only schizophrenic, but so are the portrait of his family and perhaps all the modern family life and also the performance itself. What leads to this conclusion is the fact that the performance, in employing the different visual projections, produces a very theatrical and absorptive experience. Suddenly, with the arrival of the final scene, something else happens. I have tried to show how the actions of Rick correspond to the performance itself, and particularly to the meaning of the movements of the camera projected on the curtain. In the last scene Rick does something new which we in the audience were longing for during the performance. First, he destroys everything onstage. Then he finally tears down the huge plastic curtain before his final tirade. Now everything onstage seems clearly visible, even if they are all in pieces, shattered, and destroyed. If we still desire to see the stage directly, the only thing we can see is a mixed up, smashed stage, just like the family ’ s life. As the father Ernst said, “ all is ruined, all is broken. ” If the life in a theatre play or in a performance goes on after its end, then it has to turn back to our lives, and the lives in our minds. We begin to feel the connection and the rupture between the life and fiction, between us and stage. Then, despite its uneasiness and cruelty within both form and content, a spectator, at least one like me, can take a real pleasure in watching a performance like this, almost without batting an eyelid during the three hours, without a break. I hope I have been able to explain why this is so.

Still, I must end by noting that in my experience as an audience member, there was a real cruelty on the stage in this production. Thus, a final question must be considered: Who is the perpetrator of this cruelty? Is it Rick, who destroyed everything, or is it simply a product of this family who are unable to understand each other? Or is it we, the audience, who desire to destroy the obstacle between the stage and ourselves, for the sake of passion or obsession for seeing everything in its most cruel detail? Or more generally, is this a result of realist representation itself, trying to show and display our most intimate and inner world by using it as almost pornographic material?

In lieu of a conclusion, it can be said that director Horn managed to create a successful staging through depicting some very unsuccessful lives, that she staged a powerful production in which was depicted some of the worst experiences of life.

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