

The 2018 Ingmar Bergman International Theater Festival



Ingmar Bergman, the late, great Swedish film and theater director, was born on July 14, 1918, and film and theater enthusiasts alike are celebrating this Centennial year with festivals and film retrospectives world-wide. Sweden's Royal Dramatic Theater (Dramaten), where Bergman spent nearly a half century staging plays, is obviously no exception, and for this year's Ingmar Bergman International Theater Festival (its 4th iteration), festival organizers went all out, with over a dozen performances and numerous talks and panels. As I wrote in these pages at the time, the first Bergman Festival in 2009 featured several stage adaptations of Bergman films, an aesthetic project I have always felt to be problematic. Put simply, film language (especially as masterfully employed by Bergman in his best work) is separate and distinct from theater language, and successfully translating one into the other is virtually impossible. It's an academic exercise at best and a potential disaster at worst. But not surprisingly, this year's Centennial edition of the Festival featured even more Bergman film adaptations than in 2009. Luckily, such productions do not necessarily preclude the possibility of seeing some great acting from great actors, and that was happily the case here in some instances. But is that really enough for a truly complete and satisfying evening of theater? But I am getting ahead of myself. Here is a sampling of the plentiful offerings.

Opening night got off to a predictably politically correct start with Safe, well-known German director Falk Richter's take on current political and social turbulence in contemporary Europe. Working with Dramaten actors and international dancers and musicians, Richter created a dense, spirited and noisy collage of spoken dialogue, dance and video projected against a sometimes-revolving set, while its mostly young cast voiced ad nauseam their discontent with what they perceived to be the sorry state of their

lives. I say "predictably politically correct" because it is well known how much Swedish culture and politics have recently evolved (some might say "devolved") into far-Left political correctness and identity politics. Given the current zeitgeist, Safe was an astute and successful choice for opening night: immediately upon the final blackout, audience members sprang to their feet cheering. I myself had a headache. Mind you, the actors' commitment was positively 3000 percent, and the dancing was superb. The high energy was palpable and everyone on stage was understandably exhausted at the evening's end. But ah, the text. Immigration matters were inevitably touched on, and Stockholm's infamous "no-go" zones were referred to euphemistically as "areas of vulnerability" -- a very strange and some might argue offensive Orwellian rewrite of language. But in fact, the main focus of the piece was far more general: youth's unhappiness. There was a definitive and odd emphasis on the characters' supreme dissatisfaction specifically with their sex lives, which they clearly distinguished from their dissatisfaction with the love lives -- a curious and telling distinction. And amidst all of the complaining and arguing, it was made very clear who the bad guy was: technology and social media. Thank you, Captain Obvious, er, Falk Richter. Bizarrely, anti-Netflix jokes were in abundance, a veritable leitmotif, as if the media giant was the solely responsible for all the world's problems, and someone was holding a gun to the heads of these characters, forcing them against their will to binge watch yet another 10-hour mediocre TV series. These folks seemed incapable of the least bit of true self-reflection, not to mention the slightest ability nor willingness to turn off their cell phones for a few hours, despite their endless whining. Now this may indeed be an accurate portrait of youth today, but I saw little if any critique of that unfortunate phenomenon. We were clearly meant to feel sorry for these insufferable narcissists. But like I said, it worked, given the rapturous standing ovation.

A few days later came *Topographies of Paradise*, devised by the internationally-acclaimed performance artist Madame Nielsen, which took on the theme of Nationalism. After meeting and talking with ordinary people in Sweden, Germany, Denmark, Serbia and Catalan Spain, and in collaboration with theaters from those countries, Madame Nielsen fashioned a series of interwoven skits using two actors from each country, each directed by someone from that country. (Madame Nielsen herself directed the Danish bits.) Asking difficult and important questions about national identity, the piece argued that the notion of nationalism in its original and purest sense is not necessarily a bad thing -- after all, what is wrong with being proud of one's country, language and culture? And it is only in recent polarized times that the concept has been perverted to become nearly synonymous with fascism or Neo-Nazism. The production was beautifully conceived and executed, simple and direct, and often quite moving, and all of the actors were first-rate. And perhaps most importantly, it was very brave, and a much welcome antidote to opening night.

Suzanne Osten's production of Ann-Sofie B ar any's play *Fenix* (Phoenix) was an excellent example of how an ordinary play may be transformed into a positively dazzling evening of theater thanks to sensational staging and equally sensational actors. Osten is, of course, a household name in Sweden, and one of the country's most gifted directors. Decades ago, she revolutionized the notion of Children's Theater and several of her productions count as some of the greatest evenings of theater of my life, despite the fact that they were, ironically, fundamentally intended for children. (I should add for the uninitiated that Sweden's conception of children's theater is very different from America's -- it is extremely sophisticated, can be very dark, and absolutely avoids -- at its best -- Disney cuteness. In Sweden, top playwrights, directors and actors happily work in children's theater in addition to adult theater, without the slightest negative connotation attached.)



Fenix (Phoenix). Photo: Sara P. Borgstrom.

In any case, *Phoenix* was, conversely, a strictly adult affair, but no less remarkable for that reason. Bárány's play tells the story of the real-life early 20th-century Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva, already well-known for her poetry, but desperate to make the lateral move into the world of theater. She has written a play called *Phoenix*, a strange and surreal contemplation on the figure of Casanova. The piece details Tsvetaeva's attempt to get her play staged by the much-lauded Russian theater director Yevgeny Vakhtangov, all the while, the Russian Revolution rages around them. Osten uses her characteristic mix of naturalism, stylized spectacle and puppet and clown work to achieve a vibrant and colorful cascade of stage pictures, movement and sound that was magical and exhilarating. It certainly didn't hurt that every one of her actors was utterly fantastic. It is somewhat unfair, but one must give special praise to Siri Hamari as Tsvetaeva's young daughter and Simon Norrthon as Casanova in the play-within-the-play. Alas, it is only several hours later, over a glass of wine, that one suddenly feels a subtle but gnawing doubt about the shortcomings in Bárány's text. The play is an utterly admirable first draft that gets down all the basics just fine. But in possible subsequent drafts, one would have hoped for a further clarification of just why Tsvetaeva was so obsessed with the figure of Casanova. Despite Osten's dazzling stage craft and the wonderful actors, I still wanted to know more.

Hotel Strindberg was epic (4 and a half hours) and ferocious, in the best sense of the word. And how could it not be, being about the great mad Swede, August Strindberg, or more precisely, Strindberg's psyche? From the Burgtheater in Vienna (in collaboration with Theater Basel), the piece was directed by

Simon Stone. The director (born in Switzerland but growing up in Australia) has quickly risen to international prominence in recent years, and his Young Vic production of Lorca's *Yerma* recently visited New York City to much acclaim. Stone's work here was no less striking. Upon entering the theater, one was immediately struck by the set design -- a giant cross-section of a building -- a hotel -- reminiscent of a giant tic-tac-toe grid (with more than 3 rows and columns, however). In these brightly lit and furnished rectangles, a large cast of superb actors played out various scenes -- many times over-lapping -- which detailed the -- how shall I put it? -- fraught relations between men and women. The intersection of love and hate was the over-riding theme, and said points of intersection were numerous indeed. It soon became clear that the scenes themselves were either inspired by Strindberg or actually taken directly from specific plays (*The Father*, *The Pelican* and *To Damascus*, for example). It should go without saying that all manner of yelling and other bits of psychic violence were on prominent display. Despite the technical brilliance of all involved, a few hours in, mid-Act 2, I must confess to feeling a little impatient with where it was all heading. But this was clearly what we call a slow burn, and the Act 3 revelation was stunning and hair-raising. (spoiler alert) In the final act, the evening's central metaphor suddenly came into razor-sharp focus as the scenes became increasingly incoherent and confused, the rectangles of playing areas became bare and blindingly white, reminiscent of a mental hospital, and the protagonist (a searing Martin Wuttke, whom you may recall as Hitler in in Quentin Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds*) was revealed to be Strindberg himself, seemingly experiencing his notorious psychotic attacks of the 1890s which resulted in his hospitalization -- and his novel *The Inferno*. Hence, *Hotel Strindberg* turned out to be the playwright's increasingly disintegrating psyche. And Wuttke's final desperate cry at the play's blackout left me breathless.

Eirik Stubø is the current Artistic Director of Dramaten, after spending many years at the helm of Norway's National Theater, with many first-rate productions to his credit. Hence, his contribution to this year's Bergman Festival was most anxiously awaited. It was Erland Josephson's play *A Night in the Swedish Summer*, and happily, it did not disappoint. Josephson died in 2012, and was, of course, Bergman's best friend, alter-ego and leading man in such classics as *Cries and Whispers*, *Fanny and Alexander* and *Scenes from a Marriage*. His play concerns his own experience shooting *The Sacrifice*, the final film of the Russian film director Andrei Tarkovsky. Tarkovsky is one of the giant figures in world cinema, and although *The Sacrifice* may not be his greatest film, second-tier Tarkovsky is still superior to most all other films out there. Josephson's performance in it is superb (no surprise, that), and the film is lovely, haunting, and visually stunning (naturally). Shot by Bergman's regular DP, Sven Nykvist, one might call it Tarkovsky's "Bergman" film, given that it was shot in Sweden by Nykvist, in Swedish with Swedish actors and using many crew members who worked for Bergman. As for Josephson's play, it is quiet, gentle and simple -- mostly consisting of actors and crew members sitting around chatting, while waiting (endlessly, it seems!) for Tarkovsky (or, as the play simply calls him, "The Russian") to make up his mind about a shot. Usually, the excuse is that he is waiting for just the right light (yes, the finished film makes it quite clear the waiting was worth it). There is shop talk and gossip, with occasional more serious digressions into the nature of creativity. Somewhat frustrated with Tarkovsky's eccentric methods, the characters still go along with everything since *The Russian* is, after all, a so-called genius.



A Night in the Swedish Summer. Photo: Soren Vilks.

Josephson himself was a very Chekhovian sort of actor, and even off-stage, his real-life demeanor was tinged with a typically Chekhovian mix of gentle humor and melancholy. Not surprisingly, these traits find their way into his play, and Stubø beautifully underscores this. Using Dramaten's experimental space Elverket, an immense warehouse-type space, Stubø deliberately uses the playing area's spectacular depth, keeping the actors mostly far downstage near the audience, leaving behind them a cavernous, gaping open space which finally ends in a back wall far upstage on which poetic images are projected (in addition to occasional snippets from *The Sacrifice*). Occasionally, actors not in a scene sit far upstage at the back wall, and even more occasionally, an actor far upstage converses with another actor far downstage (everyone is miked). I imagine the scheme is a metaphorical nod to Tarkovsky's infamous use of super-long shots, and those long shots actually come up in conversation in the play. All of the Dramaten actors were excellent, but particularly outstanding were the ever-luminous Lena Endre (a Bergman regular for years) and Erik Ehn as Tarkovsky, a character of very few words, but an intense and soulful stare that speaks volumes about the ultimate loneliness of the creative process. You probably shouldn't look for deep, complex meanings in Josephson's play, but under Stubø's expert direction, it is a lovely, simple and sad love poem to Josephson and Tarkovsky in equal measure. And if you are a Tarkovsky fan, which I most certainly am, that's just fine.

And now on to the so-called Bergman adaptations. Most successful of the plays I saw in this category was tg STAN's production of *Infidèles* (Faithless), Bergman's script made into the 2000 film by Liv Ullmann,

featuring, amongst others, Erland Josephson and Lena Endre. Tg STAN (the “STAN” is an acronym for “Stop Thinking About Names”) is a Belgian theater collective who works under the principle that all aspects of theater production should be democratically shared by all members. Bergman fans will recall that the original film recounts the disastrous consequences of an affair between a well-known actress and a well-known theater director. (Years ago in an interview with Liv Ullmann about her film, Ullmann looked at me with a twinkle in her eyes and said “Do you think it's autobiographical?”) In 2018, the story is hardly revelatory, although Bergman imbues it with his characteristically keen eye and ear for the anxieties of such characters who clearly belong to the privileged and cultural elite. This production (performed in French) was a stand out for one reason alone: the actors. Their simplicity and straightforward honesty was utterly disarming and had the effect of lending to the proceedings an intense urgency that the text probably doesn't quite deserve in 2018.

Less successful was Dramaten's own production of Bergman's 1969 TV play, *Riten* (The Rite), an eerie and Kafka-esque tale about a troupe of 3 actors brought in for questioning by a mysterious Judge on charges of obscenity. Lots of mind-games and sexual humiliation ensue, culminating in a private performance before the Judge of the contested act in question. Although the material might have been shocking and new in 1969, today it is pointless and silly. The actors did the best they could, but they were hampered by seriously wrong direction by Emil Graffman, who made the very strange choice of playing the proceedings naturalistically with a very down-to-Earth vibe. In fact, Bergman's film functions as a heightened, Kafka-esque dream, and at the very least, the final performance of the so-called act should be spooky, weird and highly, well, ritualistic -- after all, the piece is called *The Rite* (sometimes translated as *The Ritual*). Despite its datedness, Bergman's original film did at least palpably capture those qualities. In this production, the final “performance” was so banal as to be laughable.

Which brings us to the (arguably) highest-profile show in the Festival: famed Belgian director Ivo van Hove's 2-act pairing of *After the Rehearsal* and *Persona*. By this point, van Hove is unquestionably an international superstar of the highest order, but I am not a fan. I do not understand the worshipful accolades he generally enjoys worldwide -- well, I do up to a point. He is without doubt a master showman and theater craftsman. I confess to have only seen his productions of classic films -- an ongoing obsession of his, making stage plays of films -- and have not seen his productions of actual plays. But judging from what I have seen, the formidable stage craft clearly on view is not backed by intellectual rigor nor compelling subtext. I hasten to point out that the evening's opener, *After the Rehearsal*, was perfectly acceptable. Bergman's 1984 TV play, starring (again) Erland Josephson and a young and lovely Lena Olin, was, ostensibly, a piece of theater in its own right, so the leap to making it a stage play is completely reasonable. Van Hove's direction here was simple and straightforward, and the actors were just fine. There was, however, a problem with sight-lines. Van Hove has occasion to use non-traditional and large warehouse-like spaces, and in this case, Dramaten's solution for a suitable venue was something called Subtopia, a 45-minute bus ride to the suburbs, which in this instance happened to be near a so-called no-go zone (or should I say “area of vulnerability”? One colleague politely called it a “rough area.”) In any case, the space did not allow for a sufficiently steep angle in the audience's rake, and by bad luck, there happened to be a lot of action far downstage and even on the floor, which was pretty much impossible to see if you were more than 5 or 6 rows back (which I was). I am fairly sure that the master craftsman part of van Hove would never allow for this kind of thing in his original production at his own theater, but out in the wild world of international theater festivals, such matters are presumably out of his hands. Still, the performance was engaging enough even if the subject matter -- involving an aging and famous theater director and a young actress (hmmm, sound familiar?) -- does not seem terribly Earth-

shattering today.

But sight-line problems were a mere trifle compared to the folly of nearly cosmic proportions in taking on *Persona*, in the evening's second half. The dubious artistic efficacy of making plays of film masterpieces has already been discussed, but what I would suggest is the arrogance and idiocy of taking on Bergman's 1965 masterpiece propels the argument into the stratosphere. *Persona* is usually considered in the top 5 or 10 films in cinema history -- I personally put it at number two after Fellini's *8½* (and since we were talking about Tarkovsky, a few of his films would definitely go in the top 15). It is usually described as a searing psychological study of the strange and intersecting relationship between an actress who has decided to go mute and her young, naive and very talkative nurse. Liv Ullmann and Bibi Andersson created the original roles, which at this point are legendary. But the film is oh so much more than just that. It is a brilliant and complex, deeply disturbing and visually hypnotic meditation on the metaphysics of cinema language (and if that's not enough, its dialectical relationship to theater language, hardly surprising for someone like Bergman who loved and worked in both mediums). These supremely ambitious themes are spectacularly and unforgettably articulated in the film's famous and daring opening and closing framework, as well as in its shocking film melt-down halfway through. To paraphrase Susan Sontag in her superb 1967 essay on the film, anyone who doesn't address the film's extraordinary opening and ending (and I would add the mid-film melt-down) simply isn't talking about Bergman's film. Van Hove does not address these aspects at all, but one can't really blame him for that, for the simple reason that no one could, when transforming *Persona* into a play. Yes, it's a conundrum, and one that underscores the absolute conceptual folly of the entire undertaking in the first place. The director has said he paired *Persona* with *Rehearsal* at least partly because of their shared themes of an actress's difficulty in balancing an acting career with motherhood. And indeed, such matters are present in both pieces. But to reduce *Persona* in its infinite, prismatic and magical self-reflective complexities to such mundane matters is a stunning case of *reductio ad absurdum* of outrageous proportions. As for the actors, they tried valiantly, but it was a no-win situation from the get-go; there was no way they could make any reasonable impression given their unfortunate circumstances. And let's not even mention their efforts in the same breath as Ullmann and Andersson in the original film. Over the course of the 10-day Festival, the genius of Bergman's art was obviously and profusely extolled in endless speeches and pronouncements. But if the Master had seen this *Persona*, I dare say he would be turning in his grave.

Fear not, I am going to end on a positive note. My favorite and most successful overall production – and when I say overall, I mean all elements – writing, acting, design, everything – were all equally excellent and perfectly fused into one superlative and sensual experience – was Erik Holmström's production of Jörgen Dahlqvist's *The Last Child*, from Unga Dramaten, the theater's children's division. Rakel Benér Gajdusek was positively effervescent in this hour-long mostly manic monologue (suggested for children 13 years old and up) about a child's anxieties over having to grow up. Using mostly just her voice, her super-charged physicality, a few props and some bits of video, the actress easily took us with total credulity in to the heart and mind of this young girl. By turns hilarious, surreal, melancholic, extremely sophisticated in a wild and whacky sort of way, and ultimately unbelievably moving, the production had me in tears by the final fade-out. Particularly ingenious was the sudden appearance towards the end of a perfectly detailed miniature model of the theater space – stage and audience – allowing for a truly unexpected and delirious plunge into all matters meta. Normally, I would find such tactics annoyingly trendy, but here it was handled so originally, poetically and hilariously that the effect was quite simply joyous. At one point a few days later, a Swedish colleague quipped that lately, children's theater in Sweden has been much better than adult theater. If this production was any indication, he was right.

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