

Dark Times as Long Nights Fade: Theatre in Iceland, Winter 2020

By Steve Earnest

The theatre community in Iceland is most active during the cold winter months but Winter 2020 presented many challenges. Iceland's thriving cultural and theatre scene was heavily affected by the COVID-19 virus as the National School of Theatre, the Icelandic Academy of the Arts, were all closed on February 27, 2020. This unprecedented action halted Iceland's thriving theatre scene during its high season as theatre in Iceland tends to rise to its height during the "long dark hours of the winter nights." The closing of the theatres was abrupt but several shows are included in this review. The timing was fortunate and several were able to be seen during February 2020 during my short teaching stint at the Icelandic Academy of the Arts. However, the damage to the theatre system and to Iceland's thriving Spring tourism scene was devastating according to national reports. Tours to Icelandic cultural site were down a minimum of 50% according the representatives at Reykjavik Excursions, one of Iceland's largest tour booking companies, with whom I spoke.

There were many changes in Icelandic Theatre since my last trip there in 2009. Artistic directors for both major theatres in Reykjavik had changed and many arts organizations had come and gone. However, Iceland's strong commitment to arts funding had not changed so many of the major organizations had been able to survive. Those included the Icelandic National Theatre, Reykjavik City Theatre, The National Opera of Iceland, Iceland's Dance Theatre, the National Theatre in Akureyri and many private theatre companies like Vesturport Theatre that are funded each year by the Icelandic Ministry of Culture. Funding for Icelandic Culture had remained in the one hundred million Euro range for many years and, prior to theatre shutdowns in March 2020 due to the COVID19, the outlook for the upcoming season had been nothing short of brilliant. However, as of May 2020, there was a spectre of doubt placed over the entire world and especially smaller nations like Iceland where mechanisms of defense against world pandemics are extremely limited.



Student fashion design project. Photo: Icelandic Academy of the Arts

Having been returned by the U.S. Department of State from a Fulbright in Nanjing, China in February, I had been able to secure a short-term guest teaching position at the Icelandic Academy of the Arts. The Academy had grown significantly since I last visited there as a guest teacher/researcher in 2009. With a new state of the art facility on the northeastern coast of the Reykjavik harbor, the Academy also boasted a new M.F.A. degree in Performance with a specialization in Devised Performance. The Academy regularly features faculty from across the globe with specialists in the area of physical theatre, devised theatre, musical theatre and other areas. Work at the Academy has also generally blended many fields of study – therefore the study of performance was very often blended with visual arts, costume design and other artistic fields. Images of this work are included. The work at the Academy was progressing at a very high level according to Dean Steinunn Knutsdottir and it was believed that the program had reached a strong new plateau of artistic success. However, funding for the Academy had typically been challenging

throughout the early 21st Century, and strong international ties and exchange programs had been a source of financial relief for the school. The Icelandic Academy of the Arts is a critical component of the Icelandic Theatre system as it is the only world institution that teaches Icelandic language theatre. Admission to the Academy has always been difficult - less than 5% of all applicants are accepted but graduate placement in Icelandic theatre companies and film approaches 100% annually. The reason is simple; the Icelandic Academy of the Arts is the only acting school in the world that produces actors who speak Icelandic and are trained specifically to perform the works of the Icelandic stage. The Icelandic Academy includes numerous fields of art including Architecture, Fashion Design, Product Design, Visual Communication as well as programs in Acting, Film Production and many other areas of artistic inquiry. During the 2019 the Academy presented a series of performances including final MFA Thesis performances such as *Svithslistadeild*, directed by Brynhildur Kardensdottir as well as Icelandic Fashion Design projects such as those by the graduate students displayed in this article.

The Icelandic Ministry of Culture maintains a number of major priorities with regard to the type of works that are presented in the state funded Icelandic houses. Two of the primary objectives are that state theatres will present about 38% of their yearly works from Icelandic playwrights (statistic is from 2011 but still approximately the same in 2020) and that a strong portion of programming would be geared toward programming geared toward work for children and/or work involving children. International works of great importance and timeliness were also on the list so the few productions listed in this essay will easily attest to the goals of the Ministry. As was the case throughout Europe the Icelandic Theatre season was cut short therefore it was not possible to see many productions in March 2020. However, the tight knit nature of the Icelandic theatre community made it possible to learn a great deal about various aspects of the Icelandic Theatre scene; elements were discussed that included new appointments, strong performances of the year, scandals and other noteworthy happenings. Additionally, many new productions were cut short and/or cancelled due to the COVID virus.

The National Theatre of Iceland turned a major corner in late 2019 as it hired the extraordinary Icelandic Theatre producer Magnús Geir Þórðarson, formerly the Artistic Director of the Reykjavik City Theatre for many successful years before moving into a career as a television producer. Magnús Geir, as he is known, is among the most respected theatre figures in Iceland and has proven himself across the nation as an accomplished producer and director. Prior to his appointed to the Reykjavik City Theatre in 2004 he had been Artistic Director at Iceland's only major theatre company outside of Reykjavik the State Theatre of Akureyri in northern Iceland. The few individuals with whom I was able to speak within the Icelandic Theatre community felt that the hiring of Magnús Geir as director of the National Theatre of Iceland would certainly lead to a virtual renaissance in the Icelandic theatre world. The repertoire at the National Theatre was severely limited by January 2020 but one production was notable.

The Great Dictator referenced the famous film in its performance style and was adapted for the stage and directed by Nikolaj Cederholm, a Danish theatre artist. *The Great Dictator (Einræðisherrann)* was based wholly on the Charlie Chaplin movie of 1935. Alternating between a black and white and color world, the highly stylized performance made strong references to the movement styles of Chaplin and included an onstage live band of musicians and musical numbers related to the musical and to the world of Chaplin's life but also included references to other dictators like Hitler, Mussolini and finally (in the adaptor's view) Trump. The movement and performance style were extremely stylized to include many gestures of Hitler, as well as video projections from both the actual movie but also accompanied by video from Hitler's speeches as well as other crazy black and white scenes that included clips from the Three

Stooges as well as clips from the Marx Brothers. The inclusion of onstage musicians and many rousing works of European nationalism (many German works) established the necessary outline for the political message of the work. *The Great Dictator* was a brilliant work of physical and visual theatre that framed the world discussion on dictatorship and rule by force.

Reykjavik City Theatre has remained in a position of prominence as far as productions with high popular appeal are concerned. Artistic Director Kristian Eyesteinsdottir has managed the company since 2015 and national funding for the theatre has remained in the 10 million Euro range annually. The house allows outside producing companies, such as Vesturport and the Icelandic Dance Theatre, to use the space for minimal or no cost. There are normally 9 to 12 shows in the repertory at any given time that include new Icelandic plays, devised physical works, dance performances and productions of international plays and musicals. Large scale musicals such as *Billy Elliot* and *Mary Poppins* had been produced in the latter years of the first decade of the 21st Century. Recent previous seasons have seen Shakespeare's *Richard III*, McDonagh's *The Lonesome West*, as well as Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*. The theatre complex is comprised of 3 theatre spaces – the large theatre (550 seats) the small theatre (350 seats) and the studio theatre (150 seats).



Halldora Geirharthsdottiir as the Mother in Bubbi Morthens and Olafur Egill Egilsson's *Nine Lives*, directed by Egilsson with choreography by Lee Proud. Photo: Reykjavik City Theatre.

Nine Lives considered the career of the legendary Icelandic musician Bubbi Morthens, a pop musician

from Iceland whose life and music are profiled in the musical. Having suffered from alcohol and drug addiction in addition to sexual abuse as a child, Morthens changed his life in the early 2000s and became an advocate for sobriety and the prevention of addiction and sexual abuse. Following the highly successful documentary about his life in 2004 entitled *Blindsker*, Morthens and writer/director Olafur Egill Egilsson created *Nine Lives* utilizing Morthens music as the score and his life as the story. The work was directed by Egilsson and choreographed by Lee Proud. Given the fact that Morthens was still living as of 2020, one of the highlights of the musical was the fact that he actually appeared onstage during the musical and especially near the musical's end. The rousing medley of his playing and singing the many works included during the musical the work was presented in a quasi "rock concert style" that included a 6-piece rock band upstage and featured highly physical choreography that also included a great deal of gymnastic feats. The 10-year-old Morthens is central to the story as his younger life was central to the story. The settings alternated between his home and school life. Musical numbers also featured the factory in which his mom (played by Halldora Geirharthsdotir) that engaged in the skinning and preparation of fish, a huge industry in Iceland. The musical and dance scenes also featured the incredible technical capabilities of the large stage that include automated scenery, moving lights and the ability to rotate the audience's actual location in a circular pattern.



Bubbi Morthens and Olafur Egill Egilsson's *Nine Lives*, directed by Egilsson with choreography by Lee Proud. Photo: Reykjavik City Theatre.

Utilizing these tremendous capabilities, the musical evolved into numerous spectacular scenes in the

second act. Apparently, there was an incident in Morthen's life that prompted him to work on a Viking movie and there were scenes that detailed that unsuccessful period of time as well as various scenes that took the audience through Morthen's world of alcoholics anonymous, mental health evaluations and other life issues. The entire work was performed in an entirely Brechtian fashion as characters took care of all the scenic changes while video sequences of Morthens childhood and later life occupied the large projection screens involved in the production. Eventually the work involved into a television show type atmosphere to acknowledge the fact that Morthen's work was eventually presented on Icelandic television and even into the world of movies.



Maria Reyndal's *Er Eg Mamma Min?* Directed by Egill Igbergsson. Reykjavik City Theatre.

Er Eg Mamma Min (Am I My Own Mother?) demonstrated a primary aspect of the theatre's mission as it presented the work of contemporary Icelandic playwright Maria Reyndal. The work was directed by Egill Igbergsson and was presented in the small stage of RCT. The work alternated between a realistic world that consisted of a mother, father and their daughter and included other ancillary figures such as a grandmother and a few friends. The performance style alternated between realism and direct address to the audience in the style of a television program with a live audience. The characters would shift from their realistic world into a dialogue with the recognized "on set" audience. Many issues were discussed including several ideas about the role of the patriarchy in the family and ideas that would elevate the hierarchy of the mother (Mamma) and grandmother (Ella) above that of the father (Pabbi). The presence of the grandmother created a growing tension throughout the play and began to also involve the minor

role of the son (Matthias). As a family drama there were many jokes and physical lazzi that dealt with the behavior of older family members. For example, at one point Paddi moved to Mamma to attempt to kiss her and she moved away at the last moment. The timing and articulation of this moment resonated greatly with the audience on the night that I saw the production. The production was an excellent example of contemporary new Icelandic realistic drama.



Pinocchio, directed by Agusta Skuladottir. Photo: Reykjavik City Theatre.

Pinocchio further demonstrated the theatre's commitment to performances that are geared toward and also feature younger actors and themes. Directed by Agusta Skuladottir, this version of Carlo Collodi's 1883 story included a cast of actors and musicians who presented this short (45 minute) version of the famous story of Gepetto and his puppet "son" who is created from his marionette shop. Unable to escape his father's wishes for financial gain, Pinocchio's deeds lead to the classic nose growth that made for great hilarity in the performance. While adults in the audience may have sneered and ignored the ideas of lying and the growing of the nose, the children in the audience were amazed and genuinely laughed at the incompetence of the justification for Pinocchio's lies. It was a hilarious display of the theatre's ability to produce non-human characters; the major characters encountered by Pinocchio included the Fox, a talking cricket, a scheming cat and a blue haired fairy that finally helped Pinocchio reach his personal goal. The incredible costuming and puppetry (Cricket) underscored the theatre's ability to include multiple theatrical elements into their overall outlay of dramatic work. The youth acting company in conjunction with numerous on-stage musicians made this short production a strong highlight of the

theatre season.

Winter theatre in Iceland 2020 was a very limited, yet highly indicative repertoire that accurately reflected the basic outline of the types of work that are produced in Iceland. It is inspiring that the mission of the state theatre companies includes the advancement of new Icelandic plays in every season as well as works by and for young people. Additionally, the theatre community of Iceland has seen fit to engage incredible individuals in key positions that advance the country's strong artistic community. Considering the overall health of the world theatre community it seemed that the Icelandic Theatre system would move into the summer and fall seasons with a great deal of success.

Steve Earnest is a Professor of Theatre at Coastal Carolina University, having received a PhD in Theatre from the University of Colorado, Boulder and an M.F.A. in Musical Theatre from the University of Miami, Florida. Dr. Earnest has published articles, reviews and interviews in *Theatre Journal*, *Western European Stages*, *Backstage West*, *Ecumenica*, *The Journal of Beckett Studies*, *Theatre Symposium*, *New Theatre Quarterly*, and *Theatre Studies*, among others. In 1999 he published a book entitled *The State Acting Academy of East Berlin* and is currently working on projects dealing with the theatre system of Iceland.



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