

Mind out of time

On the eve of a major season of adaptations, *Erica Wagner* goes to Norway to discover how Ibsen captured the beginning of the modern world

The dining-room table at Venstøp, Henrik Ibsen's childhood home, could easily seat at least a dozen; there are silver candlesticks, and ornate chandeliers hang from a white-painted ceiling. In the sitting room, oil paintings adorn the walls and a beautiful wooden armoire graces the well-proportioned space. This home – with a separate wing for servants – seems a picture of bourgeois opulence. Yet the standard line is that the Ibsens' time here was defined by hardship. Their move to Venstøp from the nearby city of Skien, when Henrik was seven, was triggered by the bankruptcy of his father, Knud, and their descent into what *Encyclopaedia Britannica* calls "querulous penury", echoing the widely held notion of poverty. Jørgen Haave, who runs Venstøp as a museum, is keen to contradict it.

"For people who have studied Ibsen, and read his biographies, this is the place where they landed when they lost their money," he tells me, as we sit outside in the sunshine drinking good Norwegian coffee. "But you can see they had servants here when they were 'poor', they had parties and such. That is the most important thing for people to take away from a visit here, to break with the idea of extreme poverty." In fact, the Ibsens had been the "absolute richest people in the region", which was one of the richest in Norway. Skien, where Ibsen was born, was a thriving place, a centre for shipping and timber. Iron had been mined and smelted here since the 16th century. "It's normal in biographies to say his family came from Bergen, but on his mother's side his family came from this region and had been here since the 15th century; one of his ancestors made the first sawmill from the water power here,

and that was the foundation of their wealth." Ibsen's fame comes from the nature of his social drama: social drama – the complexities of class and status – was what he knew from his earliest youth. The Ibsens had been rich; then they became not poor, but much less wealthy; and yet they were keen to keep up appearances. This conflict between reality and appearance is what still draws audiences to Ibsen's work: it is a depiction of the beginning of the modern world.

It is hard to overstate the importance of Henrik Ibsen's work to Norway's cultural heritage; but then, as an Ibsen-filled autumn

His great innovation was the contemporary middle-class tragedy

reminds us, his status is just as high on the world stage. His oeuvre, which ranges from early poetic and near-mythological verse dramas to the precise, closely observed plays such as *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *The Wild Duck* and *Hedda Gabler* into the more metaphysical late work, exemplified by his final play, *When We Dead Awaken*, seems to be at the foundation of modern sensibility. "Ibsen has been the greatest influence on the present generation; in fact you could say that he formed it to a great extent," wrote (a very young) James Joyce in 1900.

Despite those humble (or not-quite-so-humble) beginnings, Ibsen the playwright found success early. He left Skien, never to return, at 15, to work as an apothecary's apprentice; he had written his first play, *Catiline*, by the age of 21. At 23 he was running

the new theatre in Bergen, for which he went on to write and produce one new play every year; in 1866, after he had left Norway for Rome – he would not return permanently to Norway until 1891 – the verse drama *Brand* was his big breakthrough, selling out three print runs by the end of that year. Edmund Gosse (now best known for his memoir, *Father and Son*) "discovered" him for English-speaking audiences after a trip to Trondheim in 1871, when he picked up a slim volume of Ibsen's poems. The 12 volumes of William Archer's translations began appearing in 1906, the year of Ibsen's death; by the early 1920s Ibsen had assumed "the dignity of an ancient" – as Dr Johnson said of Shakespeare. And the literary and feminist scholar Toril Moi, who was born in Norway but now teaches at Duke University in North Carolina, says plainly in her wonderful book *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* that he is "the most important playwright writing after Shakespeare".

Following recent acclaimed West End productions of *Hedda Gabler*, *Ghosts* and *A Doll's House*, an International Ibsen Season begins later this month at the Barbican in London. From the Schaubühne in Berlin comes *An Enemy of the People*, directed by Thomas Ostermeier, Ibsen's 1882 play cast firmly as "a mirror for our times set against a world of environmental and financial crises". From the Théâtre National de Nice comes a version of *Peer Gynt*, his early, picaresque dramatic poem, directed by Irina Brook (daughter of Peter Brook) – complete with music by Iggy Pop and poetry from the Pulitzer Prize-winning Sam Shepard. Finally, Belvoir Sydney presents a reworking of *The Wild Duck* (1884).



Social dramatist: Ibsen's portrayal of the conflicted middle-class family is perfectly recognisable to us today

At the same time Penguin Classics begins the publication of a new series of Ibsen translations: *The Master Builder and Other Plays* (the other plays being *Little Eyolf*, *John Gabriel Borkman* and *When We Dead Awaken*) will be the first volume, to be published on 2 October. This marks the start of a comprehensive revamp of the Penguin Classics translations of the Norwegian master, which have been the standard versions in English since the publisher admitted Ibsen into the canon as early as 1950 – just four years after Penguin Classics was launched with E V Rieu's translation of Homer's *Odyssey*. But unavoidably those first versions, by Una Ellis-Fermor, have dated: in her introduction to the volume containing *Hedda Gabler*, she writes that her work "attempts the impossible task of pretending that Ibsen

wrote his plays in the English of 1950" – different from the English of 2014, with the best will in the world.

What is remarkable about Ibsen's work is that it seems both to reflect the specific, Scandinavian bourgeois milieu that formed the author and to have a universal appeal that allows endless reinterpretation. In Oslo, I spend a couple of hours in the company of Tore Rem, professor of British literature at the University of Oslo and the general editor of the Penguin series. Ibsen's great innovation was the contemporary middle-class tragedy: the families he creates, with their conflicts, silences and secrets, are perfectly recognisable to us today, as Rem notes, though they amazed some of his contemporary critics. Henry James called him "the provincial of provincials"; it

was astonishing to the cosmopolitan American that such a vision had emerged from what he described as "the bareness and bleakness of his little northern democracy".

That "little northern democracy" was, in Ibsen's lifetime, in the process of liberating itself, finally becoming fully independent in 1905. Before that, Norway had been in a union with Sweden, essentially having been handed over to Sweden by the Danes in the Napoleonic wars; culturally, the Norwegians remained closer to Denmark than to Sweden and shared the same written language. "Ibsen fundamentally wrote in Danish with Norwegianisms," Rem says – a reminder that, even for Norwegians, Ibsen in the modern day is never not mediated: his language for the stage is always modernised from his own usual Dano-Norwegian. ►

► We in the 21st century flatter ourselves that the notion of standing up to a hypocritical, convention-bound society is terribly modern: but it's a theme that runs through much of Ibsen's work, which examines, as Rem notes, "the creation of the bourgeoisie, which is something George Bernard Shaw picks up on. Suddenly there is this international class, and that's what Ibsen taps in to – and you can then leap into China today, where the individual is becoming more important. And so lots of academics are working on Ibsen." Not long ago, Rem tells me, he was in Tromsø, at the International Ibsen Conference – where fully one-third of the participants were Chinese. And that's not just thanks to the actress Jiang Qing, Mao's wife, having played Nora in *A Doll's House*: the issues of social mobility raised by Ibsen clearly resonate with 21st-century Chinese men and women.

At the Ibsen Museum in Oslo – the centrepiece of which is the apartment where Ibsen spent the last years of his life with his wife, Suzannah – the director, Erik Henning Edvardsen, talks of productions he has seen from India, from China, from Africa. (Tore Rem notes that in 2006, the centenary year of Ibsen's death, he knew of at least 250 productions of Ibsen's plays being staged around the world.) As we walk through the elegant rooms of the apartment, which is just steps from the National Theatre – Ibsen would rise punctually from his desk at 11.30am every day for a coffee at the nearby Grand Café, even if he was in the middle of writing a sentence – Edvardsen speaks, too, of Suzannah's powerful role in the playwright's life; their partnership was not

always easy, but it was an essential one for Ibsen. She had been raised in a house full of books, with a stepmother who was passionate about the theatre; although she was not educated as her brothers were, Henrik Ibsen married a cultured young woman in 1858. His interest in strong female characters goes back to his earliest writings. The very first dramas he wrote, such as *Lady Inger of Östråt* (1857), put women at the centre of the action; Edvardsen remarks that there are two sisters trying to get the same man in *The Vikings at Helgeland* (first performed in 1858) "and you could argue that if you modernise that you have something equal to *Hedda Gabler*".

Ibsen's theme of social mobility resonates in today's China

And those links move forward into the future – in a way that can surprise even Ibsen scholars. Edvardsen's other passion is the work of the Beatles; he tells me he is planning an exhibition next year that sets Ibsen's work against the work of John Lennon – both of them boundary-breakers, in Edvardsen's view – and he describes showing both Yoko Ono and Sean Lennon around the museum just a few years ago.

When I tell Toril Moi of this notion she is startled – and delighted. "But then I just heard from the Miami Theatre Centre, who wanted me to come down there because next year they're doing *Hedda Gabler* alongside a theatrical production of *The*

Seven Year Itch – they see all these parallels that I never would have thought of."

Ibsen's prescience can be startling. On 25 September, Simon McBurney, the founder and artistic director of Complicite, will host a talk with Thomas Ostermeier and members of the Schaubühne company after their performance of *An Enemy of the People* at the Barbican. The play, seen in its plot and setting, deals with what seems like a very contemporary issue: a man, Dr Stockmann, speaks up when he knows that a town's water supply, on which its prosperity depends, is contaminated.

McBurney describes watching this production at the Avignon Festival in the south of France not long ago: "At the moment in the play when Dr Stockmann makes his address about the water, and the townspeople react, they brought microphones out in the audience." The audience reaction had more than just an ecological resonance. "Suddenly someone stood up and said, 'Who are you, the Germans, who occupied us, to come here and lecture us about social and moral issues?' It became absolutely electric; and then the audience began to shout at each other. It became a live debate."

As McBurney says, the issues that Ibsen deals with, of class, of status, of who may speak and who may not, "are timeless, especially as we are now moving back to the conditions of the 19th century, with a very, very small, wealthy and powerful elite, and everyone else sinking down further and further behind them. We have a government that would seem to like to recall the 19th century, and people in it, such as Boris Johnson, who say we should be more for the upper per cent who are really privileged, and who have no shame about saying that." The idea of translation – across languages, borders, eras – applies not just to the text, but "to the whole conceit of the play".

Tore Rem reminds me of the remark made by Ibsen's first major translator into English, William Archer, that: "In respect of language, Ibsen stands at a unique disadvantage. Never before has a poet of worldwide fame appealed to his worldwide audience so exclusively in translations."

And yet it is this need for translation – the literal translation of language, and the metamorphosis that takes place on the stage – which has always served Ibsen well, and has allowed him to be transformed and reborn over and over again. ●

The International Ibsen Season begins at the Barbican, London EC2, on 24 September "The Master Builder and Other Plays" will be published on 2 October by Penguin Classics (£11.99)

With thanks to the Norwegian embassy in London for travel to Norway

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Grayson Perry in conversation with Miranda Sawyer

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