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JON FOSSE

AND THE NEW THEATRE

Foreword by
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E I K O N

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JON FOSSE

This section presents Jon Fosse and offers the reader a short introduction of who Fosse is and what are some of his important themes, which he explores in his dramatic works. He has received various awards for his contribution to the cultural and literary scene, which also secure his place in the literary and dramatic arena.

Jon Olav Fosse was born in 1959 in a small Norwegian town called Haugesund in the West, but grew up in Strandebarne, south of Bergen, so that after finishing his studies in Bergen, he decided to remain in this rainy and windy city. Nynorsk was spoken both in his family and the town where he grew up⁸, an aspect which later remained an important feature of the literature Fosse writes. In a context where Bokmål is spoken by the majority, the fact that he is a world-renowned author is a great achievement, but most importantly, it is a big part of his identity, which he shares with the world. His first attempt to write about his Nynorsk identity, with regard to his roots on the West Coast of Norway, was in 1979 in a newspaper called *Gula Tidend* (*The Golden Times*), which used a rather rigorous language structure. In 1980 he started collaborating with another newspaper, *Norsk Målungdom* (*New Norwegian Language Youth*), for two years – and he was only 21 years old then. Cecilie Seiness mentions in her book *Jon Fosse. Poet på Guds jord* (*Jon Fosse. Poet on God's Earth*) that “The newspaper wrote about the case of Nynorsk, about dialects, dialect actions, Nynorsk educational resources, goals and minutes from the

⁸ New Norwegian, in the English translation, is one of the two official forms of written Norwegian, Bokmål being the other one.

congresses [...] where he [Jon Fosse] defended linguistic diversity in Nynorsk: << We will both begin* and begin>>”⁹ (55).

From 1993 to 1996, Jon Fosse together with Jan Kjærstad published a literary journal called *Bøk*, a word between *bok* (book) and *bøker* (books). From the newspaper *Dag og tid* (no. 47, 2003) we learn that in the first issue of this journal Jon Fosse wrote:

Good literature is neither one's private language nor the common language of many, two languages that often confusingly resemble each other, however, literature exists somewhere in-between singular and plural, a place that does not exist, yet in a way exists. What place is this? It is at any rate literature's place. And maybe this place between singular and plural is also the place where you can best search for the deepest insight of what one calls the big questions of life.¹⁰ (Seiness, “Jon, Jan og Bøk” 8)

Therefore, it is not only that Fosse enriches Nynorsk literature and creates educational resources, but he also proposes a way of thinking and approaching the linguistic situation in Norway. Moreover, Nynorsk culture is privileged to have Fosse as the most famous Norwegian author in Europe and overseas. Hence, he does not only honour his linguistic and cultural roots, but his country as well. However, the language in his literary works is something else because he created a new language through his dramatic world, new for New Norwegian as well, for he was able to communicate to a variety of communities, cultures and languages all over the world. The human being depicted in his texts is faced with big questions and each figure is unique in its experience, but at the same time they relate to each other's experience. He is

⁹ “Avisa skreiv om nynorsksaka, om dialektar, dialektaksjonar, nynorske læremiddel, målsigrar og referat frå landsmøte [...] der forsvarar han eit språkleg mangfald i nynorsken: << Vi vil både byrje og begynne.>>” (my translation)

*the first “begin” is the form in Nynorsk and the second in Bokmål.

¹⁰ “Den gode litteraturen er verken den eines private språk eller dei mange felles språk, to språk som ofte til forveksling liknar kvarandre, litteraturen finst derimot ein stad immelom eintal og fleirtal, ein stad som ikkje finst, men som likevel på ein måte finst. Kva stad er dette? Det er i alle høve litteraturens stad. Og kanskje er staden mellom eintalog felirtal også staden der ein best kan søkje etter dei djupaste innsiktene i det ein kallar for livsens store spørsmål?” (my translation)

considered to be the new Ibsen, or as *Le Monde* called him “the 21st century Beckett” (qtd. in Sunde 57). In spite of his great prestige, Jon Fosse is a very private person, according to Cecilie Seiness’s biography of the author, the fact that he became a writer forced him to be more sociable than he would have been. He is shy, he likes to be left alone and he does not like talking about his personal life. As he says: “I want to live in peace.”¹¹ (*Jon Fosse. Poet på Guds jord* 17)

He debuted with a novel, *Raudt, svart* (1983), a story about teenage depression and suicide. He also published poems, essays, children’s books, short stories, novels and theatre. Fosse became a dramatist in 1993 and his first play to be published was *Og aldri skal vi skiljast* (*And We’ll Never Be Parted*, translated into English in 2005), in 1994, and in 1996, his first play *Someone Is Going To Come* (*Nokon kjem til å komme*, translated into English in 2002) was staged, (although this play was written sometime around 1992-1993, it was previously unpublished). He has published a large number of plays since then, and in most of his plays communication (more precisely the ability to transmit and understand an idea or a feeling, even in silence) is an issue, i.e. how difficult it is for couples to be married. The plays are characterized by a lack of emphasis on plot and the limitations of **language** (the characters/ figures rarely manage to express what they feel or think). The same problems are explored in *The Name* (*Namnet* written in 1995, translated into English in 2002), in which a couple are expecting a child, and it highlights again their difficulties in communication.

In 1997, Fosse publishes three plays, *The Child* (*Barnet*, translated into English in 2002), *Mother and Child* (*Mor og barn*, translated into English in 2004), and *The Son* (*Sonen*, translated into English in 2005), in which he explores the impact that children, present or absent, can have on a marriage.

The same issues of love triangles and conflicts involving children are explored in *Nightsongs* (*Natta syng sine songar* in 1998; translated into English in 2002), in which the father of a baby is also trying to become a writer and there is also a failure to communicate and the mother of the baby leaves for another man. In *A Summer’s Day* (*Ein sommars dag* 1998, translated into English

¹¹ “Eg vil vera i fred.” (my translation)

in 2004), again we encounter the failure of a man and a woman to communicate effectively and we travel on two temporal levels, as it is filtered through the memories of the woman after she has grown old. *Dream of Autumn* (*Draum om hausten* 1999, translated into English in 2004) again juxtaposes the past and the present, neither of which is stable in the memory and experience of the figures.

The following plays *Visit* (*Besøk* 2000, translated into English in 2005), *Winter* (*Vinter* 2000, translated into English in 2004), and *Afternoon* (*Ettermiddag* 2000, translated into English in 2004) continue a long line of themes like jealousy, the uncanny, isolation, and failure of communication. In the play *Beautiful* (*Vakkert*, 2001), the context is a bit different, as a love triangle from the past reemerges.

Loneliness and suffering are the themes of his next plays *Death Variations* (*Dødsvariasjonar*, 2002, translated into English in 2004), where the daughter, in a family of three: father, mother, and daughter, regards death as a good friend, but hesitates when the time comes to commit suicide. *The Girl on the Sofa* (*Jenta i sofaen*, 2003, translated into English in 2002) puts a woman alongside her juvenile self and explores her struggle to heal the wounds she bears from her teens. He has also written different types of plays, such as *Lilla* (2004) that deals with teen sexuality and power and the play *Suzannah* (2004, translated into English in 2011), which is a dramatic presentation of Ibsen's wife, Suzannah Thoresen (Seiness, *Jon Fosse. Poet på Guds jord* 202).

In 2007 Jon Fosse published two plays that explore death differently than in his previous dramas. In *Skuggar* (*Shadows*, the play has not been translated yet), six shadows gradually become aware of the presence of each other, while they try to understand where they are and what they are doing 'there'. *Rambuku* presents a couple at the border between life and death and their choice to adventure into the unknown, a land called Rambuku. Fosse's last play, *Hav* (*Sea*, translated into English in 2014) was written a few years back, but he only decided to share it in 2014. Just after the book came out, the author announced that this would be the last dramatic text he would write, because the idea of writing another play does not give him pleasure (Dickson "Jon Fosse: 'The idea of writing another play doesn't give me pleasure'").

Among other things, Fosse published two essay collections, where he explains his method and way of writing. He also gives arguments and explanation with regard to his work, *From Telling via Showing to Writing* (*Fra telling via showing til writing* 1989) and *Gnostic Essays* (*Gnostiske essay* 1999), acknowledging the importance of certain philosophers such as Theodor Adorno, Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida for contributing to his view and understanding.

Being translated into over forty languages, and his dramatic works quickly conquering the European stage, Fosse himself became one of the most frequently performed playwrights of his generation, especially in Germany. Fosse is Norway's most performed dramatist after Henrik Ibsen and he is Norway's best-known writer at a global level. He has received numerous literary prizes, over 30, among which I shall name just a few: Nynorsk Literature Prize (1992 and 2003) and Nynorsk Children's Literature (1989 and 1993), Ibsen Prize (1996) and the International Ibsen Prize (2010), Samlag's Prize (1994), Aschehoug's Prize (1997) and Gyldendal's Prize (1999), Scandinavian National Theatre Prize (2002), Hedda Honorary Prize (2003), UBU¹² Prize (2004) and Målprisen¹³ (2012).

In 2007, he was also ranked on the list of the Top 100 living geniuses by The Daily Telegraph, number 83 ("Top 100 living geniuses"). He received 3 distinctions Commander of the *Royal Norwegian Order of St. Olav* (in 2005), Chevalier of the *Ordre national du Mérite of France* (in 2007) and Medal awarded by Benedict XVI for his participation in the meeting with artists in the Sistine Chapel on 21 November 2009. In 2011, Fosse was granted

¹² Italian Theatre Award established in 1979 on the initiative of journalist and critic F. Quadri, the name is a tribute to the pièce *King Ubu* (*Ubu roi* from 1896,) of A. Jarry. Each year, the award recognizes the excellence of directors, designers, actors and costume designers in Italy, but since the twenty-first century is regularly assigned also to the best foreign show presented in Italy. See the link below. Accessed 11 June 2013.

<<http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/premio-ubu/>>.

¹³ Målprisen is a language prize given since 2000 by Norway's Language Organization (Noregs Mållag), organization that is mostly concentrated on Nynorsk (New-Norwegian).

the *Grotten* (Staude and Skille "Jon Fosse flytter inn i «Grotten»"), the Norwegian state's honorary residence, as a permanent residence. The reason why this is an honour is because it is an act of appreciation for contributors to Norwegian arts and culture, bestowed by the King of Norway.

Jon Fosse's drama has been described as minimalistic, because he uses few figures, very few words and short sentences, lots of pauses and repetitions, but I would rather not yet classify his theatre. Leif Zern in his *The Luminous Darkness* used the terms "language economy", which I find more appropriate for Fosse's drama. Also Leif Zern elaborates this problem of fitting Jon Fosse in a typology by calling him a minimalist, which he finds faulty:

Fosse's minimalism is not a matter of style. The fact that so many persist in seeing it as such says more about our confusion when it comes to interpreting his plays than about the actual happenings on stage. I like to think that his light shines into the darkness: into our lack of certainty and orientation, not unlike the sentiments expressed by his characters. (52)

The nameless characters represent a distinguishing feature of his dramas. The atmosphere in the plays is most often expressed by the key elements: the sea or the wind or both, an atmosphere which emphasizes a certain state: "the fragile balance between emptiness and meaning" (Zern 8), a discomfort. The people Fosse is interested in are the weak, while his target is not a particular weak person, but the weakness of the human being in general, which makes them more figures than characters. In spite of this, the playwright builds a 'community' for his figures, where they meet and share their experiences, thus they realise that they are never alone and their loneliness is essentially populated. Most often, there is always someone else there too and his figures search for this other one. The act of listening is fundamental in the dynamic of the relationships in his plays, and furthermore silence is another strong form of expression for his figures. His dialogue is like a musical score in which he seeks a balance between sound, silence and repetition. Suggestion and ambiguity characterize his work.

Fosse writes in a minimalist way, yet nevertheless in a way in which his Nynorsk¹⁴ is a lyrical Nynorsk, but in the context of everyday occurrences, which gives a rather simplistic form to his work. Most of his books have a common ground in what the protagonists are concerned, they are usually confused, a confusion that is reflected in the disjointed **language** combined with lots of pauses and repetitions (we could call them de-centered). Jon Fosse explains that when he started to write drama, he built his drama writing skills by taking from his method of writing novels and from writing poems (Seiness, *Jon Fosse. Poet på Guds jord* 139). The form of the plays enables a contact with a different genre, yet a universe similar to our inward experiences.

The following section tackles Jon Fosse's dramatic works, with regard to the perception of time in experienced life and quantum theory, as the dichotomy spirit/matter and inner/outer no longer describes the new reality observed by science, but predicts the subjective perception as presented in literature and philosophy. For this reason, the next pages explore the options and what these options can offer us, as a solution in reading and studying Fosse's dramatic works. I will introduce several concepts, such as time, entanglement, spacetime, nearness and Bakhtin's Chronotope, which influenced the forthcoming in-depth analysis of the plays.

¹⁴ New-Norwegian; from now on, whenever I make references to New-Norwegian, I shall use the consecrated term, Nynorsk for the New Norwegian.

THEORETICAL PRELIMINARIES

A REVOLUTION IN SCIENCE

My target in this section is to give a short incursion into the theory of Quantum Physics, which gathers several contemporary scientific discoveries without which our modern life would not be as we know it. This will help to set a background for the future discussion of Fosse's plays, where terms like spacetime or entanglement are used to describe the time and space in the plays, as well as the links between the figures. The two terms will be connected to the concept of nearness that also plays an important role in depicting the specificity of the Fosse'an universe.

With the discoveries in Quantum Physics, the revolutions everyone expected (like flying cars, time travelling) did not happen, instead we got a revolution in information. Communication has never been easier. On top of that what makes Quantum Physics so attractive to other areas/ fields of study or even to a curious average individual is that it touches on the entire world's metaphysical questions: Who am I? Where am I? What is the Self? Heisenberg's *uncertainty* principle, which stipulates that, if one knows the momentum of a particle (that is the result of mass and velocity), one cannot know the particle's position and vice-versa; or in other words, the precision of the momentum makes the position of that particle less precise. Momentum is equivalent to impulse, which is the result of force and time, so now if we think about it, nothing is more real than that instant moment of interaction, which at that moment changes/ influences The Other. This is a metaphorical interpretation of a physical reality. Furthermore, in this context, the two-slit experiment (Hawking *A Brief History of Time*, 62), demonstrates that the world at its smallest exists simultaneously both as particles (i.e. a small

amount of matter, which occupies space and possesses mass) and as waves. This is shown by the phenomenon of interference between entities normally understood to be particles, and it expresses the duality of the world.¹⁵ This brings me to the uncertainty connected to the very state of a particle, when it behaves as a particle and when as a wave. There is also no time or space symmetry (in classical understanding, meaning a uniformity of time and space) and we are part of the existence/universe as the universe/existence is part of us. Past, present and future have forsaken our naïve perceptions. Time is now regarded as a fourth dimension, along with the three dimensions of space. It is interesting to note that this subject, the reality of existence, has been occupying philosophers' time since forever; from Pindar, Euripides, Sophocles, Berkeley to great philosophers like Heidegger, Kant, Nietzsche, and not least authors like Proust, Virginia Woolf, Beckett and Jon Fosse, just the same as it has scientists. The quest for an answer to the question mark around this phenomenon of existence has not stopped either in the scientific domain, through equations and experiments, nor in the artistic domain through language and ideas that are supposed to reflect or recreate experiences. Thus, as far apart as the two domains may seem, there is a common ground and complementarity, even though unplanned, where the same reality (what is out there) is described, although arguably these might be considered different realities described with roughly the same set of words.

¹⁵ Another explanation regarding the duality of the world was given by Erwin Schrödinger in his famous paradox of Schrödinger's cat: "Schrödinger suggested that we should imagine a box that contains a radioactive source, a detector that records the presence of radioactive particles (a Geiger counter, perhaps), a glass bottle containing a poison such as cyanide, and a live cat. The apparatus in the box is arranged so that the detector is switched on for just long enough so that there is a fifty-fifty chance that one of the atoms in the radioactive material will decay and that the detector will record a particle. If the detector does record such an event, then the glass container is crushed and the cat dies; if not, the cat lives". But until we open the chamber and look in it to see what happened, the cat and all are in a superposition states, or another way of saying it, the cat is both dead and alive. The very act of observation is what collapses the superposition into one of the states. See John Gribbin. *In Search of Schrödinger's Cat. Quantum Physics and Reality*. Black Swan, 1995, p. 203.

Anyhow, the revolution in science brings Jon Fosse's importance, in my opinion, even more centre-stage in the universal literary canon. Fosse's plays explore the instability and non-equilibrium of the inner world of their figures. These characteristics are associated with the physical world as well as with the world inside our mind. This does not have to mean that physics should be applied to the texts, but it is fascinating that a literary text can allow you even to be able to identify such principles at the level of interpretation. Even before the breakthrough in science, Bergson, the French philosopher anticipated that life is time. If we understand time, we understand life. "Although in our minds time seems to flow at a fidgety rate, we know that there are timekeeping devices outside of our bodies, ticking off seconds at regular intervals". (Lightman *Great Ideas in Physics*, 119) According to the New Physics, absolute time does not exist. Time only exists relative to an observer, a subject. For our everyday experience this might not be easy to observe, because the effect only becomes significant where distances and relative velocities are large, but it can be recorded by apparatus. Hence, the concept that revolutionised the view of time and space more than a hundred years ago, was spacetime, when the three dimensional world became a four-dimensional world, as proposed by Herman Minkowski (Vesselin Petkov, "Minkowski Spacetime: A Hundred Years Later", vi). This spacetime has no evolution and no time, it just is, everything already exists. Hence, all these have philosophical implications, Gabe Perez-Giz, a NSF Astronomy and Astrophysics Postdoctoral Fellow PhD, at Columbia University explains that the fact that there are disagreements regarding the sequence of events, implies that there is no absolute time with which all observers can agree. Minkowski's model implies that the passage of time through past, present and future is merely a matter of our subjective perception. Past, present and future events have "already" happened and each individual travels through different events in his/ her time line, and each four-dimensional point coincides with an event. By connecting those points, one traces out a line of existence.

Therefore, it is only the relations between the events that are observed and felt as real, just as in the case of Fosse's plays, it