



Saturday, Mar. 17, 1928, page 13. © Times Newspapers Limited

See end for full credits and page images

The text that follows is a corrected transcription of the page images supplied by the database record. Paragraphing, original spelling and punctuation are retained. The line endings are word-wrapped.

During this month, Robins also worked on an essay on Ibsen for *Time and Tide* and delivered the lecture *Ibsen and the Actress*, each with a more feminist slant than the material here. *Ibsen and the Actress* was later published by Hogarth Press (1928) and reissued by Haskell House in New York (1973).

# HENRIK IBSEN.

— —

## THE DRAMA OF IDEAS.

— —

### A DETERMINED ORIGINATOR.

*The celebrations in Norway of the centenary of Ibsen, born March 20, 1828, are now at their height. The appreciation printed below is by one who was among the early interpreters of Ibsen on the English stage.*

———

(By Elizabeth Robins.)

The venerable custom of looking down upon the art of the stage was more honoured up to the 'nineties than it has been since. To say that any one person was responsible for the change would be to put the cart before the horse. The theatre has too great a part to play in civilization for that old attitude--part fear, part contempt--to endure. The one person most responsible for the more enlightened attitude of to-day is beyond doubt the man who was born in the small Norwegian town of Skien just 100 years ago. The noise of the conflict created by Henrik Ibsen's plays has long died out. His influence, whether realized or not, is a part of the inheritance of all who concern themselves with the art of the theatre.

If it is interesting to know what goes to the making of a master-dramatist, it may be well to consider some of

the influences that went to the making of Ibsen. Apart from what he brought into the world with him, the main factors in his shaping were the two that ministered to that passionate interest of his in the connexion between human character and fate. The first factor to serve this end was the stimulating variety in his own outward conditions. The second was the fostered intensity of his intellectual life. The variety included much of the schooling called hardship, followed none too soon by success, material ease, and honour.

A good deal of sympathy has been lavished on the conditions of Ibsen's early life by those who think that, in any sense serviceable to art, variety of experience is out of question in a small provincial town. Such critics are under the same type of illusion as those who limited the word tragedy to the fortunes of kings.

A boy born into a family of ample means who at the age of eight sees poverty close round his people, sees a large cheerful house opposite a fine old church exchanged for a derelict farm in the country, has very early an unforgettable basis for observation and comparison. The child Ibsen's devotion to drawing and painting seemed to indicate his one talent; but for people whose problem, now, was how to get bread there was no question of spending money in cultivating a *brodlose Kunst*.

### APOTHECARY OF GRIMSTAD.

If, as Ibsen believed, knowledge of human nature is the dramatist's capital, few schools could better the range and variety of knowledge offered by the necessity of supporting oneself from the age of 14. For the next six years "one of the acutest brains in Europe," as Sir Edmund Gosse says, served first as apprentice and later

as assistant to the apothecary of Grimstad. To suppose this post was one of hopeless dullness would be to lose sight of the fact that little can come to the artist's mill--specially the mill, of an artist in embryo--that is not grist. Since young Ibsen could not afford to study painting he would study drugs and dispensing, with a view to being a doctor one of these days. Some of his profoundest writing bears impress of this early ambition. He stole hours from shop work to study for his matriculation at the University of Christiania, and he stole glowing moments from both to try his 'prentice hand at verse. Soon he was writing poetry that his countrymen have not let die.

Some of his ephemeral rhyming made very early a dangerous reputation for him. From the stage box of the apothecary's shop young Ibsen was looking on, with piercing precision, at the humours and hypocrisies of his fellow-townsmen. While he was still a boy of school age he was already writing lampoons and drawing caricatures of leading citizens.

All this, with some experience of falling in love, and his first essay in play-writing does not adequately represent the variety or the fullness of his early youth. Evidence of this is everywhere present in his later work. By far the greater part of his most productive life he was to live in foreign lands, hardly seeing his native country. With a single exception, the Norwegian scene and Norwegian character were to be his unchanging theme. Yet during the formative years, while he was laying the foundations of this future capital, his poverty was so great that the books he refused to do without could be bought only by stern economy in food and clothes--and Ibsen had a liking for good clothes, even for decorations, orders, &c., which he later defended with spirit. For six years at Grimstad he lived in a garret, "learning," as he says, "the psychology of rebellion out of his own heart."

Even if he had not told us that his mind and character were deeply affected by the stir of political unrest in Europe, Ibsen would have been called a child of '48. His play of this period, *Cataline*--far cry as it seems from the public events of Ibsen's youth on the one hand, and on the other from the subject-matter of *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*--represented his reaction to mid-century Radicalism. From one stage of his development to another he was to be seized by the struggling thoughts of his age and made their mouthpiece.

### THE NATIONAL THEATRE.

His later plays were epoch-marking and epoch-making, because, in addition to being a master builder of the dramatic form, Ibsen had been thinking with clearness and intensity about the life of his time. In face of bitter misunderstandings with the few friends he had come to value, he succeeded in making his intellectual participation in public affairs an outlet for his genius, instead of a blind alley of anger and helplessness. Nothing could divert him from his special business of poet-dramatist holding up a mirror to the age. He knew he could do this only through the theatre. But the theatre for such an enterprise as his did not yet exist. So potent an influence in the modern theatre as Mr. Bernard Shaw at one time believed that the "new theatre" (the theatre which we, like the Ibsen of 80 years ago, are still looking for) "will never exist till there is a sufficient supply of masterpieces." . . . "It is the drama that makes the theatre," Mr. Shaw said years ago, "and not the theatre the drama."

Had this been the view of his own time adopted by the famous Norwegian musician, Ole Bull, we might never have heard Henrik Ibsen's name. Ole Bull believed that a national theatre must be actively, hopefully *there*,

before the dramatist, however great in possibility, can begin to go to school--let alone produce masterpieces. Certainly Ole Bull was responsible for the beginnings of such a theatre in Norway in 1850. When it was one year old he engaged Henrik Ibsen, "to assist the theatre as dramatic author."

Ibsen was twenty-three. He had written one long play (refused alike by the Danish Theatre and by publishers in general), and a one-act imitation of *Oehlenschläger*, which had been played three times. Neither of these has been considered worth republishing in his collected works. But the infant National Theatre of Norway, poor as it was, presently found means to educate its dramatist. Young Ibsen was allowed to go abroad to study the art of theatrical production, on the understanding that he was to fit himself to add stage-management to the duties of his post at home. The account of Ibsen's interpretation of his mission deserves a place in theatrical history, and deserves--for the sake of its practical instructiveness and tonic spirit—a place in the counsels of any national theatre of the future.

He sees every possible play in French, German, Danish, and English. He goes thoroughly into the question of stage machinery, of scene painting, dancing, the terms offered to dancers by other theatres, the collection of music for his theatre at home and of books on costume. He considers it his business to make acquaintance with "everything of artistic interest."

### A CLEAR PURPOSE.

One would think it must be difficult, for a modern who cares about the function of the theatre, not to respond to the greatness of Ibsen's caring. Yet few who talk of him to-day know that the man who wanted more

than anything else on earth to write his own plays and get them acted devoted so many of what are called the best years of life to producing other people's plays and laying the foundations of a rational theatre.

Ibsen knew a rational theatre was impossible until it should be fit to give original talent opportunity for growth. He knew the theatre should be not only a source of refreshment and be common pleasure, but of uncommon pleasure too; a stimulus to all the arts, perhaps, above all, a clearing-house of ideas.

He had spent nine precious years in the practical work of theatrical management when he again petitioned the Norwegian Government this time-for a grant that he might visit London, Paris, &c., to study dramatic art and literature. He was taking this step, as he said, "after ten years of literary activity," and very significantly adds: "also whilst preparing for the same."

Anyone who is under the temptation to think this an evidence of modesty rather than of intelligence need only remember Ibsen's adamant refusal to accept suggestion of change in either his ideas or, their form. If changes were to come they must come through him. To those who ridiculed "Peer Gynt" he said: "My book *is* poetry. And if it is none, then it will be. The conception of poetry shall be made to conform to the book."

The final paragraph of his petition to the King in 1860 *might* be used to-day by a young enthusiast for a national theatre:--

Of late years the opinion has become more and more prevalent that the development of art and poetry, in their various forms, cannot but concern the State. . . . The reason for the drama having hitherto received no State aid is not to be sought in any repudiation on the part of the State of the claims of this art; on the contrary, the State has, by giving its support to poetry, plastic art,

painting and music, distinctly implied its recognition of the drama, which is, by its very nature, a unification of all these other forms of art., Moreover, the experience of all other countries has sufficiently established the fact that dramatic art, in every age in which it has been cultivated, has, in a higher degree than any other, shown itself an important factor in the education of the people-- a very obvious explanation of which fact is to be found in the drama's more intimate and direct relation to reality; in other words, in its greater intelligibility and in its easier and more general accessibility to the whole people.

No one should be misled by Ibsen's later - commentary on the comparative failure to create in Scandinavia the kind of theatre he had laboured for.

As long [he says] as a people considers it more important to build meeting-houses than theatres, as long as it is readier to support the Zulu Mission than the Art Museum, art cannot really thrive, cannot even be considered as of immediate necessity.

Ibsen could not know that his own fortunes were to belie his scorn; that the people who had been so bewildered by the newness of his dramatic forms, and so terrified by their content as to refuse him a hearing, were to compete for the honour and glory of producing his plays, and were to crown him the greatest dramatist of modern time. Though the greater genius is so much more instinctive than conscious, Ibsen must have known that, while he was busying himself with the theatre as it then was, he was not only making the theatre that was to be. He was making Henrik Ibsen. Making him again and again--which is growth, but grief, too, and renunciation. From contemplation of the later Ibsen the mind goes back to the reserved and lonely child. He is said to have had only two games, one for indoors and one for the open, both self-invented.



## BUILDING.

With pencils and an old paint-box, he seems to have given himself his first lessons in art. Bolting himself into a little room, "he would sit, not merely in the summer but in the winter, through the severest cold." It was found that he had "painted a great number of figures on cardboard in gaudy costumes, and afterwards cut them out and fixed them to little blocks of wood so that they would stand.". He would compose them "into various groups, some as if in conversation, others in attitudes to convey the idea that some important event was going forward." And, in truth, the little paper men and women were right.

The one outdoor amusement the future master-builder dramatist was ever known to care for was "building." His sister and friend says:--

I remember among other things a fortress, to my childish apprehension a work of art, which cost him and his younger brother long and severe labour. But the fortress was not to stand long; when it was finished he took it by storm and levelled it with the ground.

It would be hard to invent a clearer allegory for Ibsen's later mode of progress --for that passion of service to the building up of an idea, the loftiest he could at that stage conceive, and his rage of courage to destroy it, clearing the ground for home, or church, or tower that should rise higher still, till at last the only building that reached near enough to the infinite was the castle in the air—"too high for human beings."

-----

## Citation:

Robins, Elizabeth. "Henrik Ibsen." *Times*, 17 Mar. 1928, p. 13+. *The Times Digital Archive*, link-gale-com.lib-proxy.jsu.edu/apps/doc/CS219487857/TTDA?u=jack26672&sid=TTDA&xid=3668b75d. Accessed 26 Jan. 2021.

Title Henrik Ibsen.

Author (By Elizabeth Robins.)

Date Saturday, Mar. 17, 1928

Issue Number 44844

Page Number 13

Place of Publication London, England

Language English

Document Type Article

Publication Section News

Source Library Times Newspapers Limited

Copyright Statement © Times Newspapers Limited.

Gale Document Number GALE|CS219487857

Page images follow:

# HENRIK IBSEN.

## THE DRAMA OF IDEAS.

### A DETERMINED ORIGINATOR.

The celebration in Norway of the seventy-fifth anniversary of the birth of Ibsen, on March 20, 1928, was more than a local affair. The appreciation passed before it by one of our own countrymen, the early recognition of Ibsen on the English stage.

(By Elizabeth Robins.)

The reasonable content of looking down upon the art of the stage was never lessened up to the "middle class" in his own time. To say that any one person was responsible for the change would be to put the cart before the horse. The theatre has had great a part to play in civilization for that old attitude—part first, part contempt—to mention. The man just now most responsible for the same old-fashioned attitude of to-day is legend itself, the man who was born in the small Norwegian town of Helsingør just 100 years ago. The man of the middle class, created by Henrik Ibsen's stage has long died out. His influence, whether realized or not, is a part of the advancement of all who connect themselves with the art of the theatre.

It is interesting to know what goes to the making of a modern dramatist. It may be well to consider some of the influences that went to the making of Ibsen. Apart from what he brought into the world with him, the main factors in his shaping were the two that culminated in their premature impact of his in the opposition between himself and the world. The first factor to serve this end was the atmosphere of his own childhood conditions. The second was the historical intensity of his intellectual life. The narrow, isolated world of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, followed some time by science, materialism, and socialism.

A good deal of sympathy has been bestowed on the conditions of Ibsen's early life by those who think that, in any sense, it was to be a source of enjoyment or of quietude in a small provincial town. Such claims are made for the same type of Ibsen as those who limited the most largely to the fact of his birth. A boy born into a family of eight sons was at the age of eight sent to a boarding school in a large school where opposite a small island submerged for a distant town by the sea, he was very early an unforgettable name for discipline and organization. The child Ibsen's devotion to dancing and painting seemed to indicate his own taste, but for people whose problem, now, was how to get Ibsen there was no question of spending money in maintaining a boyish dream.

### APOTHECARY OF HELSINGØR.

It is Ibsen's knowledge of human nature in the doctor's office, his ability to feel the energy and variety of knowledge which he brought to the study of medicine from the age of 14. For the next six years "one of the most famous in Norway," as he himself wrote, served first as apprentice and later as assistant to the apothecary of Helsingør. To suppose this post was one of business duties would be to lose sight of the fact that Ibsen was to the world's eye, probably the first of an artist in medicine—that is not great. Ibsen going there could not afford to study medicine he would study drugs and chemistry, with a view to being a doctor one of these days. Some of his professional writing bears signs of this early medicine. His first letters from this work to study for his matriculation at the University of Christiania, and his first glowing remarks from both to my late husband's hand at once. From his first writing poetry that his medical career have not been.

Some of his professional writing reads very early a professional reputation for him. From the stage box of the apothecary's shop young Ibsen was looking on, with passing interest, at the harmony and organization of his fellow-townsmen. While he was still a boy of school age he was already writing paragraphs and showing caricatures of local doctors.

At this very early experience of falling in love, and his first steps in the writing, was not adequately represented by the early or the influence of his early years. Evidence of this is everywhere present in his later work. By far the greater part of his most productive life he was to live in foreign lands, hardly seeing his native country. With a single exception, the Norwegian scene and Norwegian characters were to be his unchanging theme. Yet during the formative years, which he was living, the influence of his father's shop, his journey was so great that the home he returned to in 1842 could be brought only by sheer necessity to food and clothes—and there had a living for good reasons, even by themselves, unless, which he later defended with equal force, as a dramatist he lived to a great "reading" as he says, "the psychology of medicine was of his own heart."

Even if he had not had that his mind and character was deeply influenced by the air of political unrest in Norway, Ibsen would have been called a child of 18. His play of the period, *Catiline*—the first of his works from the public events of Ibsen's youth on the one hand, and on the other from the subject-matter of a Dutch phase and *Offshore*—represented his reaction to social reality. Evidently, from one stage of his development, in another he was to be moved by the struggling thoughts of his age and made their medium.

### THE NATIONAL THEATRE.

His later plays were epoch-making and epoch-making because, in addition to being a master builder of the dramatic form, Ibsen had been thinking with obsession and passion about the life of his time. In fact of better understanding with the few friends he had come to value, he succeeded in making his intellectual participation in public affairs an actual fact in his genius, instead of a kind of stage and hopelessness. Nothing could divert him from his special tradition of post-dramatist, holding up a mirror to the age. He knew he could do this only through the theatre. For the theatre he had an intense interest in his did not yet exist. As yet, no influence in the theatre was known as he, Bernard Shaw at one time believed that the "new theatre" (the theatre which he, like the friends of 80 years ago, are still looking for) "will come out of the theatre, not from the theatre of the theatre." "It is the drama that makes the theatre," he, Shaw said years ago, "and not the theatre that makes the drama."

That this was the case of his own days, adopted by the famous Norwegian dramatist, Ole Bull, we might never have heard Henrik Ibsen's name. Ole Bull believed that a national theatre must be actively, especially, there, before the dramatist, however great in possibility, can begin to go to school—his drama, his masterpiece. Certainly Ole Bull was responsible for the beginning of such a theatre in Norway in 1849. "What if one one year did he engaged Henrik Ibsen," to name the theatre to establish another?

Ibsen was lucky there. He had written one long play (refused titles by the Danish Theatre) and by publication in, possibly, need a second nomination of *Catiline*, which had been played three times. Whether of these has been

considered worth republishing in his selected works. But the under National Theatre of Norway, poor as it was, presently found money to educate its dramatist. Young Ibsen was allowed to go abroad to study the art of dramatic production, on the understanding that he was to fit himself to add stage-management to the duties of his part of actor. The account of Ibsen's interpretation of his mission throws a place in theatrical history, and deserves—for the sake of its practical instructions and tonic spirit—a place in the annals of any national theatre of the future.

He saw every possible play in French, German, Danish, and English. He gave thoroughly into the opinion of stage machinery, of mere painting, dancing, the scenes offered to dancers by other theatres, the reflection of nature for his theatre at home and of books on costume. He craved it his business to make acquaintance with "everything of artistic aspect."

#### A CLEAR PURPOSE.

One would think it must be difficult, for a freedom who came about the function of the theatre, not to respond to the greatness of Ibsen's calling. Yet few who talk of him to-day know that the man who would have done anything else on earth to write his own plays and get them acted devoted so many of what are called the best years of his life to possessing other people's plays and laying the foundations of a national theatre.

Does know a national theatre was impossible until it should be fit to give original talent opportunity for growth. He knew the theatre should be not only a source of refreshment and continuous pleasure, but of continuous pleasure too; a stimulus to all the arts, perhaps, above all, a clearing-house of ideas.

He had spent some previous years in the practical work of financial management when he again petitioned—the Norwegian Government this time—for a grant that he might visit London, Paris, etc., to study dramatic art and literature. He was taking his step, as he said, "after ten years of literary activity," and very significantly adds: "also whilst preparing for the same."

Anyone who is under the temptation to think this an evidence of modesty rather than of intelligence need only remember Ibsen's obstinate refusal to accept suggestion of change in either his ideas or his plans. If changes were to come they must come through him. To those who retorted "Few things," he said: "No, look to poetry. And if it is none, then it will be. The conception of poetry shall be made to conform to the book."

The first paragraph of his petition to the King in 1890 might be used to-day by a young critic for a national theatre:—

Of late years the opinion has become more and more prevalent that the development of art and poetry in these various forms cannot be reserved for the State. — The means for the drama having hitherto received no State aid is not to be regarded as any impediment on the part of the State to the exercise of this art. — On the contrary, the State has, by giving its support to poetry, plastic art, painting, and music, directly impeded the development of the drama, which is, by its very nature, a combination of all these other kinds of art. Moreover, the expression of all other sciences has gradually established the fact that dramatic art is every one to which it has been cultivated, has, to a higher degree than any other science, shown itself an important factor in the education of the people—a very obvious extension of which has to be found in the theatre's more intimate and direct relation to reality; in other words, in its greater intelligibility and in its more and more general accessibility to the whole people.

No one should be misled by Ibsen's later commentary on the responsibility he lays to create in Scandinavia the kind of theatre he had laboured for.

As long the art as a people consider a more important to hold themselves than drama, so long as it is ready to support the State. Hence, the Art of Ibsen, or exact reply, cannot even be considered as an immediate success.

Ibsen could not know that his own fortunes were to be his own; that the people who had been so hitherto by the means of his dramatic drama, and so troubled by their own as to refuse him a hearing, were to require for his future and glory of producing his plays, and were to erect him the greatest dramatist of modern times. — Through the greater of modern times, Ibsen must have known that, while he was keeping himself with the theatre as it then was, he was not only building the theatre that was to be, he was making Henrik Ibsen. Making Ibsen, noble and acute—which is Greek, but not, too, and something. From contemplation of the later Ibsen the mind goes back to the reserved and lonely old, the old so long had only two guests, one for indoors and one for the open, both self-reverent.

#### BUILDING.

With pencil and an old paper-box, he seems to have given himself his first lessons in art. — Biting himself into a little room, "he would sit, not rarely in the summer but in the winter, through the narrow cold." It was found that he had "possessed a great number of figures on cardboard in queer positions, and afterwards cut them out and fixed them to little blocks of wood so that they would stand." He would compare these "into various groups, some as if in conversation, others in attitudes to convey the idea that were important about was going forward." And, it is true, the little paper men and women were right.

The one outdoor amusement the future winter-builder dramatist was ever known to care for was "walking." His sister and friend says:—

I remember almost other things a feature, in my childish appreciation a week of art, which was his and his younger brother long and warm labour. — But the feature was not so much long; when it was found to be fit by time and reward it with the ground.

It would be hard to invent a clearer allegory for Ibsen's later work of progress. — In that position of service to the building up of an idea, the effort he could at that stage make, and his rage of courage to destroy it, clearing the ground for home, or church, or house that should rise higher still, till at last the only building that reached near enough to the height was the shaft in the air— "too high for human hands."