

The British theatre and its impact: a personal reflection

By Ellen Horn

Ellen Horn was educated at the Norwegian National Academy of Theatre and made her acting debut in 1975. Since then, she has participated in a wide range of stage drama and film. From 1992 to 2000, Horn was director of the National Theatre of Norway. In 2000-01 she was Secretary of State for Culture. Currently the director of Riksteatret, she has also maintained a successful acting career.



To be or not to be are Hamlet's immortal words from the famous play by William Shakespeare. And without the heritage from William Shakespeare, the European theatre would definitely not have been what it is today. The influence of British theatre on my generation of theatre people, writers, artistic directors, actors and directors cannot be overestimated.

I was lucky when I came to London for the first time around 1970, at the age of 19 and - after having slept on the street a whole night - managed to buy a ticket for Peter Brook's legendary production of Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It was an unforgettable experience: poetic, magic and physically breath-taking. Brook has almost become a legend, working all over the world, and is famous for making a theatre simple in form and rich in meaning. I was proud and found it extremely touching when he was the first artist in the world to receive the International Ibsen Award in 2008.

The classical British text-based tradition of playing Shakespeare is the fundamental schooling of my generation. When the Royal Shakespeare Company was established, we all travelled to Stratford-upon-Avon to admire their brave renewal of tradition, building a modern theatre based on Shakespeare's work. I dare say that this brave effort of the Royal Shakespeare Company has inspired us in Norway to work more unconventionally with our own Ibsen plays.

But the Norwegian interest in British theatre is not only based on Shakespeare and the classics, we have through the years played a lot of modern British drama in Norway. Especially the works by Nobel Prize laureates Harold Pinter and Arnold Wesker are highly appreciated, and in the 1990s we discovered many

strong new British playwrights at the Royal Court theatre in London. There, the young and wild ones would show up, with the provocative Sarah Kane and Mark Ravenhill at the forefront, and they revolutionised the theatre both in Britain and in Norway.

At the National Theatre of Norway, Nationaltheatret, where I have worked as an actor in the company and was artistic director for many years, we invited the great Shakespeare directors John Barton and Terry Hands to come and work with us. They directed several performances of both Shakespeare, Ibsen and Checkhov, and inspired the company at Nationaltheatret to work hard with the language. At the same time they gave the Norwegian audience a sense of the high quality of British theatre.

Today, I would argue, Norwegian theatre is more influenced by the expressive intellectual theatre from Berlin, and directors are less conscious than before of the language, the words and the precise delivering of a line which are so typical for the British. But those of us who have had the privilege of experiencing such high-class actors as Judy Dench, Maggie Smith, Glenda Jackson or Helen Mirren, Sir Laurence Olivier, Ian McKellan, Michael Gambon or Alan Bates live on the main stages of London's West End will never forget it. These impressions from British actors are still alive in many of us. We will continue to study their work, and use what we learned by watching these great artists on the stage as long as we are active in the Norwegian theatre, and we will keep on dreaming about reaching their level.

I also must use this opportunity to mention my favourite theatre company, the Theatre Complicité, with their artistic leader Simon McBurney. Their offices and rehearsal studios are situated in Camden Town in London, but they work internationally most of the year. I have seen many of their performances, but the first one was *Street of Crocodiles* which really knocked me out. I first and foremost remember the beauty of the choreography and the tenderness of the acting in this very intense story from the Second World War. It was so humane, so intelligent, so simple - and visually poetic and tragic. Brilliant. As all the best theatre experiences of my life (most of them happened to take place in Britain) it made me cry and laugh at the same time. I also remember very well meeting coincidentally with the writer Salman Rushdie during the break, and we were both extremely touched by the play. I suddenly felt I was part of the world.

The two last performances I saw with

Simon McBurney and Theatre Complicité, *A minute too late* and Beckett's *End Game*, were performed at the British National Theatre. This theatre is exceptional, and has to be mentioned as one of the most inspiring arenas that I know. I always make a visit to the massive building at the South Bank of London whenever I have the opportunity. When you enter the front door of house, you discover the best theatre foyer of the world, with so many activities - concerts and readings - and the most attractive theatre bookshop you could possibly find - and finally its two wonderful stages, Lyttleton and Olivier. I wish from the bottom of my heart that we could offer Norwegian audiences a theatre institution like this one day! Moreover, the National Theatre has the most superb, vivid and easy to-go-to homepages on the internet, where you can really spend a day or two finding interesting information.

In my capacity as Norwegian Secretary of State for Culture (2000-01), I made an official visit to London and I was very happy to meet with my British colleague, the Secretary of State for Media, Sports and Culture, Chris Smith. We had a lot to talk about, and I found it extremely interesting to learn how British politicians were deeply involved in promoting the arts and culture, as well as what they call the cultural industries - seeing culture as the most rapidly growing business in Britain.

When I read in the papers that the wonderful actress Susanna York died a few weeks ago - the memory of a most brilliant performance of *Ghosts* by Henrik Ibsen passed through my head, were she played the most intelligent and sensitive Mrs. Alving I have ever seen. They visited Nationaltheatret in 1989, and we were all thrilled.

In way of conclusion, I would like to tell a true story from recent British theatre history: When the late Sir Laurence Olivier passed away, the head of the Royal Shakespeare Company, Terry Hands, went on stage before the evening's performance at the theatre in Stratford, to share the sad news with the audience. But he ended his speech in a very special way: "I could think of nothing worse for an actor than one minute's silence," he said, "So I suggest one minute of standing applause!"

And so they did - they stood up with tears in their eyes and clapped their hands for one of the greatest actors in modern history. This story is also one of the reasons why I love and admire the British theatre.

To be or not to be!