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## Ibsen on Art (Article by Henrik Ibsen)

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## Ibsen on Art

(*Note:* The first of two articles by Henrik Ibsen on the nature and function of art, being a letter from Ibsen as the Director of the Norwegian Theater in Kristiania (Oslo) to the Norwegian Parliament, dated October 25, 1859. Although these pieces have long been available to the person who could travel long distances to see the manuscripts and who had a working knowledge of Norwegian, these translations present essentially new material to the English-speaking scholar. Translation by John B. Harris.)

*Each man reveals himself, or at least re-reveals himself, with every utterance; and it is only through the study of recorded utterances that we are able to catch the revelation of people of enduring interest who are not our own contemporaries. The publication of the scholarly edition of Ibsen's collected works in 1952<sup>1</sup> has given us additional opportunity to view and review Ibsen and his concepts, not only through the definitive texts of the standard works presented to us, but also through many less accessible items and a good number of hitherto unobtainable items, some published for the first time in the edition.*

*In the following letter we see much that we have long known about Ibsen: it comes as no surprise to us that his focal point is drama; he is known to us, above all else, as a dramatist—in this case a dramatist in the seemingly perennial need for money for theatrical production. It comes as no surprise, either, to find him pointedly patriotic; anyone who has read "Peer Gynt," "The League of Youth," "The Wild Duck," etc. to the end of the list of his famous dramas, most of which were written while Ibsen was in willful exile from Norway, knows that they are strongly Norwegian not only in setting, but in flavor and essence. So one does not even need to have read the earlier, historical plays or be familiar with his early political activities to know of Ibsen's intense patriotism. Nevertheless, little has been said about Ibsen's*

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<sup>1</sup>Henrik Ibsen, *Samlede Verker*, eds. Francis Bull, Halvdan Koht, Didrik Arup Seip (20 vols., Hundredaarsutgave; Oslo: Gyldendal Norsk Forlag, 1928-1952).

*concept of the role of art in the patriotic cause, a basic point in this letter. Moreover, we tend to isolate Ibsen from the other arts because he functioned rather exclusively in the theater during his years of fame, despite the fact that he was a painter and a poet in his younger years. Both this article and the one to follow show that he not only was aware of the other arts but that he understood their methods and significance.*

*Both articles have a good deal to say to the modern artist and critic because they deal with problems still a part of our artistic age. This first article, however, seems to hold a particularly pertinent message for L.D.S. artists who are too often guilty of being unaware of the major point Ibsen is here trying to make.*

From: The Directorship of the Norwegian Theater in  
Kristiania<sup>2</sup>

To: The Parliament

The significance of *Nationalism* in the complete spiritual orientation and development of a people has, in the past fifteen to twenty years, become remarkably clear and understandable. In these last few years, it has become notably clearer and clearer to the common mind that political freedom alone by no means makes a people free in spirit and in truth, but that the higher spiritual freedom comes about above all through the breaking of those bonds which imprison a people's understanding of itself by way of a foreign artistic domain—that this freedom first comes about when people have viewed themselves and the world around them through that characteristic form and that characteristic illumination which is to us, as a nation, indigenous and natural. The battle in the service of this higher freedom is fought here, as in other places, by our artists and our authors, the spiritual eyes of the people who, prior to the masses, have caught a vision of it in this situation as an absolute necessity. And the battle is not fought merely over theories; hence, the results are immediately felt. Through their works, our poets have taught the people to understand and love their own heritage with all its variations.

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<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, XV, 224-230.

They have, in true and noble forms, presented pictures of the people's life to our eyes, and in the midst of all these variants, in the midst of these deviant forms, they have taught us to glimpse and admit of an essence which lies characteristically at the root—the common mind of the people, the characteristically basic points of view which belong to us and no other people because we, as opposed to the world at large, make up an entity, not simply because of political agreement, but because of common origin, common traditions, common language, and a common fate through good and bad times. In a word, because we, in the full sense of the meaning, *are* a Nation.

And our graphic artists have not been less stimulating. They have composed for us in colors and shapes as others have in words; they have taught us to grasp with the essence of understanding that particular Nature under whose influence we have grown up and which in its distinctiveness lies so close to our spiritual character.

The field of music has also been cleared and cultivated; a single eminent personality in this area has borne our country's name with honor far beyond our borders. Now, if we could imagine that all of this work of artistic spirit were left undone or that it had been performed by foreigners, the picture of the situation which would present itself before our eyes would then be dark indeed; only then could we completely realize the significance which lies in a *national* operation in poesis and art. It will become clear to us that in large measure it is from these things that our national spirit has received its awakening and strength; that it is from these things that our love for our country and our national institutions absorbs its most healthful nourishment; that we of these professions have a living obligation to create an organic unity and an obligation toward harmonious strife in peace as well as defense against an enemy attack.

This acknowledgement of lofty meaning in the national art for our most important and deepest interests has apparently been also clear in the eyes of the representatives of the people because, lately, they, by means of not inconsiderable financial support on the part of the State, have made it possible

for our young, struggling artists (namely painters and sculptors of stone and wood) to pursue their education for a greater or lesser period in foreign art centers. Moreover, by means of travel allowances, the opportunity has been given them to partake of that education which the study of nature and art offers, be it at home or abroad. Our musicians, also, have been benefited by this liberality; several of them have in part received instruction in foreign conservatories by means of public support. And finally, in previous years, certain authors have, by means of travel stipends, benefited by the awakening awareness in our society of the importance of intellectual achievement to our national well being.

But it becomes immediately apparent that while help and support have been given in all of the above-mentioned directions, our own dramatic art has been ignored and left to itself. The reason for this cannot reasonably lie in a denial or plain underevaluation on the part of the National Assembly of the importance of this art, for it has placed its stamp of acknowledgement on the national operation of poetry, painting, the plastic arts, and music; so it is impossible for it to deny the validity of the dramatic art. This art, because of its very nature, must be looked upon as an exalted commingling of all the foregoing arts in that it appears as a union of the elements of poetry, painting, plastic art, and music. Therefore, the parliament has, by supporting the foregoing arts, indirectly given its acknowledgement of the dramatic art's title. And when its title is once acknowledged, it incontestably follows that in its influence upon the people it has a wider importance than any other art form. For while each of these, in accordance with its basic idea, presents itself more or less abstractly—Poetry by words alone, painting alone through drawing and color, the plastic arts through pure form, etc., all of these media of artistic communication unite in the dramatic art to form a complete entity, to form a straightforward representation of life and reality, cleansed and elevated, in the manner in which the artistic ennobling process brings it into being. To understand completely the marked influence and significance of the dramatic art—that it is, indeed, national—one must further consider that in it, the

creating artistic personality is likewise the artistic medium: the painter employs canvas and colors; the sculptor, marble and brass; but the actor, simply himself—his voice, his movements, his facial expressions, his striding and posing—in short, everything which collectively moulds itself into a living, individual characterization, by which the laity justifies its concept of that individual as opposed to all others.

An artistic endeavor in this direction which is in essence and truth national must be granted by everyone (since they have already acknowledged the significance of a national art in general) to be of the utmost importance as a principal medium for the people to clearly find themselves, to be ennobled and taught, to be strengthened and united. Therefore, in most progressive societies, the dramatic arts enjoy a high valuation as a spiritual educational medium for the populace. In manifold places the operation of the theater is made a matter of state, and in general is partially supported with generous allotments from the official party, concerning which more exact statistical information is enclosed.

But when it is sufficiently substantiated, by experience as well as by the reasonable basis of the thing itself, that no art form can so forcefully and meaningfully bear upon the development of the people as the dramatic, it also necessarily follows that this particular art form—which can with greater success than any other strive toward the goal it should reach for, or at least toward that which it *can* reach—when pressed by circumstances and weighty conditions to go off on the wrong track, is forced at times to give up that goal in order to be allowed to pursue it in general. This has oftentimes proved to be the case in the theater when the official stipend has not been great enough; hence, is it not quite natural that the results are readily apparent in our theater, which is supported exclusively by its daily receipts? In such a circumstance it is altogether too frequently necessary for a theater to *follow* the public instead of *leading* it, to allow itself to be carried away by the prevailing, often vitiating taste rather than govern it. If our theater possessed greater means it would also be able to enlarge and improve its staff, together with supplying that staff with a more basic preparatory education;

it would be able to bestow greater care to the selection and performance of plays, to reward original authors more liberally and thereby promote our dramatic literature, and likewise be able in general to work in a more artistic and national spirit than any up to this point has seen the possibility of doing.

The Norwegian theater is a people's theater. It has established as its commission to work, as far as is possible, for the plebeian class. It has, therefore, an inordinate number of inexpensive seats; but as a result, the daily receipts are too small to support the institution without its resorting to an artistically damaging parsimony. Yet no one has thought that any change ought to be made in this regard because, as I said, it is part of the plan of the theater to make itself available to all. This characteristic of the dramatic art should not be ignored. The works of our painters and sculptors can be owned and enjoyed only by individuals; moreover, their greatest and best productions most generally remain abroad where they were created. Yet the State feels obligated to support their activity which by its very nature cannot really be said to benefit the people. This liberality is, to be sure, well founded; but the need of the theater for comparable support ought to stand established on equally firm ground: the contributions which are given here remain in the country and the gains are the common property of all.

This bold acknowledgement of the need and significance of a national theater has been declared in an unmistakable manner throughout the land in recent times by the fact that the newly established subscription for the procurement of a satisfactory building for the Norwegian theater has met with sympathy not only with the country's king and his family, but also with the farmer up in the mountain villages. As soon as this proposed building becomes a reality, the future of the dramatic art in our country will undoubtedly be secured. But that time still lies in the distant future, and until that time it is not only necessary to support the institution, but also to work vigorously and without losing sight of our artistic ideal. This problem is doubly difficult for the Norwegian theater to solve, for conditions have developed over the years

so that it not only has a goal to work toward but an opposition to conquer—in order to achieve, the dramatic art in our land must not simply learn, but also forget.

This humanistic and intellectual spirit, wherein our national unity has taken effect throughout the land during our period of independence, must essentially be regarded as a lever for the higher ideas which the time has called to life in our political state. And amongst these stands the idea of a National Theater of the first rank. It is, therefore, in full confidence that we address ourselves to the Norwegian Parliament in that we hereby request that a grant from the State Treasury of two thousand special kroner annually be given the Kristiania Norwegian Theater that it may more freely and unimpeded than heretofore work in the service of art.