Ibsen op de planken. Een ensceneringsgeschiedenis van het werk van Henrik Ibsen in Nederland 1880-1995

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Summary

This work has been written for three reasons (chapter 1). In the first place it is intended as a plea for a theatre history explicitly devoted to performances. Many books are published about drama texts; about directors and actors; furthermore, studies appear which approach the history of theatre from the point of view of stage architecture or scenography. But only recently has attention been focused on the stagings itself. The reason for this lack of attention is clear. The historian who wishes to study stagings in the past, is faced with what the discipline of theatre research calls 'the transitory character of the subject of research'. When the curtain falls, a performance definitely ceases to exist. Obviously this fact makes the writing of a history of staging very difficult and explains why historians of drama tend to avoid the subject. Nevertheless, its neglect is unsatisfactory. Imagine a history of Dutch literature that only analyses the sources that inspired the famous Dutch poet Martinus Nijhoff to write *Aawater*, his most important work, but not the poem itself.

In the second place this work is intended to fill a gap in existing research on Ibsen. During his own lifetime, the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) was regarded as one of the classics. It is therefore not surprising that now, a century later, much has been written about his work. Studies like *Le théâtre d'Ibsen en France, Ibsen in England, Ibsen und die Deutsche Bühne* are well-known. A study of the history of Ibsen in the Netherlands however did not exist yet. With *Ibsen op de planken* I map an uncharted area of 'the history of Ibsen'.

Finally, this work is intended to contribute to the history of Dutch theatre in the twentieth century, a subject on which little research has been done. The

1 Translation: Rudolf Valkhoff
question naturally arises how a history of the staging of Ibsen in the Netherlands can make such a contribution. The assumption is that research into an often and regularly performed author will automatically reflect the history of Dutch theatre. There have not been many of these ‘often and regularly performed authors’ in this century. Obviously Ibsen is one of them.

The first phase of the inquiry consisted of a study of the literature on the history of Ibsen in the countries surrounding us. There were two reasons for undertaking such a study. Firstly, I would thus be able to place the history of Ibsen in the Netherlands in an international context. Secondly, I hoped to get acquainted with the methodology of the subject. How do you write a performance history? Which aspects should be taken into consideration if one makes stagings the subject of one’s studies?

The results of this phase of the inquiry were quite disappointing. The various studies hardly considered the staging of Ibsen in Europe. In addition, they lacked a solid methodological basis, never really rising above the level of impressionistic history. The history of the staging of other playwrights to which I had recourse also did not yield anything useful in the way of methodological pointers.

Disappointing results, therefore, but not completely useless, of course. With some perseverance I was able to get a reasonable impression of the when and how of the staging of Ibsen in Scandinavian, German, English and French theatres (chapter 3). Some striking differences became apparent. Also, other scholar’s methodological mistakes at least made me aware of the pitfalls to be avoided (chapter 2).

This preparatory work led to three basic decisions. Firstly, the study would not be focused on a limited period of one or two decades, but on as much of the hundred and fifteen-year history of the staging of Ibsen as possible. Clearly, the most interesting results could be obtained by studying trends. The focus on trends instead of events would prevent the study from getting bogged down in a mire of details, names, titles, dates and anecdotes.

Secondly, I decided to use only contemporary sources because memoirs, recollections and the like, whether coming from directors, critics or set designers, often proved to be biased. Because I wanted to cover the whole period of hundred and fifteen years, I decided to restrict myself to three kinds of materials and not
more. These sources were programmes, reviews and photographs. There were enough of these to produce a balanced set of source material for the whole period.

Finally, I decided to base the study on a quantitative analysis. Such questions as: has an author been accepted, does he belong to the established practice of theatre or is his fame in decline, can be answered excellently on the basis of precise figures like the number of productions.

Having reached this point, the actual study of the history of Ibsen in the Netherlands could commence. I started out by making an inventory of all the productions of Ibsen’s work in the Netherlands (chapter 5). There had been 187 stagings. A quantitative analysis showed that these stagings could be elegantly subdivided into four periods.

After an introductory decade, 1880-1890, the staging of A Doll’s House on 29 March 1885 marked the beginning of a period of forty years in which the number of productions per decade fluctuated around twenty. The following period also lasted forty years. In this period the number of productions per decade decreased sharply: there were never more than nine in any single decade. In the last period, 1970-1995, the number of productions per decade increased again: to seventeen in the seventies and to twenty-six in the eighties. That number of twenty-six productions per decade had already been reached halfway the nineties.

This means that there were two major turning points in the history of the staging of Ibsen in the Netherlands which deserve special attention. These turning points occurred around 1930 and around 1970. From about 1930 the number of productions decreased sharply. From about 1970 the trend reversed and the number of productions increased just as sharply.

Furthermore, the quantitative analysis showed that over a period of a hundred and fifteen years the three plays by Ibsen with the highest number of productions were Ghosts (twenty-nine productions), Hedda Gabler (twenty-eight productions) and A Doll’s House (twenty-seven productions). If we eliminate the guest productions staged by foreign companies, Hedda Gabler emerges as the clear front runner. It was staged twenty-two times as opposed to Ghosts with eighteen and A Doll’s House with sixteen stagings.

There are indications that Hedda Gabler, Ghosts and A Doll’s House were the three plays by Ibsen with the highest number of productions in other countries.
too. It could be that these plays were produced so often because they gave great actresses an opportunity to star as Hedda, Mrs. Alving or Nora.

It must be noted though that these figures only prove something about Ibsen's popularity among theatre makers. It is very difficult to retrieve figures on Ibsen's popularity among theatre audiences such as the number of performances per production and attendance rates. Furthermore, the figures would be more meaningful if they could be compared with those of other playwrights. Using the database set up by the Theater Instituut Nederland, such a comparative study for the period after the second World War will become feasible in the near future.

Because it seemed impossible to examine all of the 187 productions, I decided to use the play with the most productions as a case-study. Relying on the three types of source material (reviews, programmes and photographs) I tried to reconstruct the history of Hedda Gabler in the Netherlands as completely as possible.

Did this case-study produce any significant results? Well, yes and no. At least I was able gradually to develop a descriptive model based primarily on the work of Erika Fischer-Lichte that allowed me to utilize optimally the information that lay hidden in the sources.

### IBSEN'S DRAMA TEXT

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<td>relation to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>text spoken by the actors</td>
<td>space realized in the staging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>text spoken by the actors</td>
<td>actor's appearance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>text spoken by the actors</td>
<td>actor's activities</td>
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<tr>
<th>relation to</th>
<th>space realized in the staging</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>text spoken by the actors</td>
<td>theatrical space, décor, stage props, lighting, music, sounds</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>text spoken by the actors</td>
<td>actor's physique, costume, hairstyle, make-up</td>
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<tr>
<th>relation to</th>
<th>actor's activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>text spoken by the actors</td>
<td>movements, gestures, mime, intonation, (music), (sound)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The succession of twenty-two stagings of Hedda Gabler did not reveal any clear
trends, however. The development of the history of the staging of Ibsen in the
Netherlands still remained largely a matter for conjecture. I was therefore forced
to take into consideration all the plays staged here. I only neglected Brand and
Peer Gynt because they were originally written as dramatic poems and involved
very specific problems of their own.

In this way I succeeded in charting the history of the staging of Ibsen in
the postwar period, but it still remained very difficult to get a clear picture of that
history in the prewar period. There were two explanations for this.

Firstly, each set of signs developed in its own way. Though the way Dutch
directors treated Ibsen’s primary text and the décor did not change until the
middle of the nineteen-twenties, at that moment some changes had already been
made in the treatment of costume and in the way of acting.

Secondly, it emerged that in the period before the second World War there
were clear ideas about the way in which Ibsen was supposed to be performed, but
that theatre companies were not able to realize these ideas in practice.

Both circumstances together meant that there were almost no stagings
that could be regarded as typical for a certain period. At this point there was
nothing else to do but to abandon the staging as a unity and to treat the develop-
ment of each set of signs on its own. The result was a hundred and fifteen-year
history of the staging of Ibsen described through a hundred and fifteen-year
development of text (chapter 6), a hundred and fifteen-year development of
theatrical space (chapter 7), a hundred and fifteen-year development of the appear-
ance of the actors (chapter 8) and a hundred and fifteen-year development of ac-
ting style (chapter 9). The study of the four sets of signs produces four different
periodizations and fifteen turning points in all (chapter 10). These fifteen turn-
ing points represent a clear and very concise history of the staging of Ibsen in the
Netherlands.

**Fifteen turning points in the history of the staging
of Ibsen in the Netherlands**

1889 29 March: A Doll’s House (Nora) by the Toneelvereeniging.
This staging really made Ibsen part of Dutch theatre life. The way this
production faithfully depicted reality remained unsurpassed for a long time.
1893 15 December: Rosmersholm by the Théâtre de l’Oeuvre. 
The first time a work by Ibsen was (partially) staged according to symbolic principles in the Netherlands. In practice this meant a static mise en scène, calm and solemn movements, little gesturing and subdued diction.

1913 7 February: Ghosts by Het Toneel. 
In this staging symbolic principles gave way once again to an unmysterious, more sober and unemphatic way of acting Ibsen.

1925 17 October: A Doll’s House (Nora) by the Vereenigd Rotterdamsch-Hofstad Tooneel. 
The first time an adapted translation was used. From now on it became accepted practice to delete parts of Ibsen’s primary text in order to make his work seem contemporary.

1928 23 January: An Enemy of the People by Het Schouwtooneel. 
The first in a long series of stagings in which Ibsen’s characters were situated back in the nineteenth century using ‘old-fashioned’ décors, costumes and hairstyles.

1931 4 March: Hedda Gabler by an ad hoc company. 
This staging marked the end of a period of forty years in which practically every season saw one or more productions of Ibsen’s work.

1955 28 February: Hedda Gabler by Peggy Ashcroft’s company. 
After years of relative quiet, Ibsen’s anniversary year of 1956 saw a spate of productions. This English staging was the first of those. It had a ‘dream’ décor for an Ibsen play: a fin-de-siècle salon copied down to the smallest detail.

1966 12 March: Hedda Gabler by the Nederlandse Comedie. 
This was the first production of many that used Cora and Sybren Polet’s translations. This couple’s adapted translations modernized Ibsen’s idiom.

1971 A Doll’s House by the Groot Limburgs Toneel. 
From now on practically every season would again see at least one production of Ibsen’s work.
1972 22 November: Hedda Gabler by Globe
For the first time a production was based on a drastically revised primary

text and acted in a stylized and artificial way. On top of that the stage did

not show a nineteenth century salon, but an abstract space dominated by

a huge portrait of general Gabler: a visual sign which determined the

meaning of this production.

1977 25 January: Hedda Gabler by the Onafhankelijk Toneel.
The first time Ibsen was not performed in a traditional theatre building.
In a small theatre room the piece was set in a construction of wood and

canvas, representing a ‘nineteenth century stage with a proscenium arch’.
The actors were dressed in inconspicuous, everyday clothes. They tried
to behave as naturally as possible and to charge their actions with mean­
ing.

1978 27 October: Rosmersholm by Fact.
The first production in a small theatre room that set the characters in

another historical period. Action and appearance were used to deprive

Ibsen’s heroes of all their heroism.

1984 17 March: Rosmersholm by the Theaterunie.

Director Strijards’ search for an adequate body language for Ibsen’s

characters was so overdone that the play became a grotesque.

1987 2 December: The Lady from the Sea by Zeno.

From now on every production would include a person especially respon­
sible for the design of the stage lighting. From now on, too, actors were
dressed in contemporary costumes.

1988 14 June: The Master Builder by Discordia.

With this production, décors that actively contributed to the meaning of

the performance disappeared. Together with stage lighting the most

important function of a décor became the creation of a non-specific loca­
tion. Because of this and the sober and unemphatic style of acting, atten­
tion was focused once again on Ibsen’s (fully performed) primary text.
With regard to the history of Dutch theatre, the study has produced two important results (chapter 10). Firstly, it has become clear that nineteenth century theatre practice has been much more persistent than has been generally believed until now. Nineteenth century conventions have continued deep into the twentieth century. The programmes show for example that set designers were involved in productions as a matter of course only after the second half of the nineteenth thirties. From now on each production would have an original décor and not one that was simply put together with what happened to be in store. Also, it was only after the nineteen fifties that costume designers became members of production staffs. From now on actors would wear costumes specially designed for each production.

It is not possible to precisely identify the turning point in the history of the practice of acting because the number of stagings of Ibsen’s work remained relatively low between 1931 and 1955. It is clear though that nineteenth century conventions had definitely become obsolete halfway the nineteen fifties. This was probably due to the structural subsidies provided after the second World War by the Dutch government. In the past, lack of money had forced companies hastily to replace a piece that was not well attended with a new one resulting in insufficient preparation, poor acting and loose directing. Now, companies could pay more attention to rehearsals. This greatly stimulated improvement of acting and directing practice.

Secondly, this study has been able to identify very precisely the effects on Dutch theatre practice of the so-called ‘Action Tomato’ (1969) and the desire for change that swept the seventies and eighties. To start with, innovators no longer regarded the drama text as the most important component of a staging. In approximately a third of the new productions directors departed radically from (more or less adapted translations of) Ibsen’s text. They deleted parts of it, changed the structure, added fragments from other sources etc.

In a second important innovation décors acquired a new or at least an additional function. From being a sign indicating the time or place of action, the décor now (also) became a sign with symbolic meaning. Now the décor, too, actively contributed to the meaning of a staging. It articulated the view of the theatre makers on the piece and/or the characters. In other words, the décor became semanticized. It could be done unemphatically, staying within the boundaries of the author’s primary and secondary text, but it could also be done
emphatically, pushing back or even breaking through those boundaries. These innovations not only changed the hierarchical relation between text and décor – text became less dominant – but it also changed the nature of that relation: instead of two sets of signs that supported each other’s meaning, the two could modify, contradict or completely disregard each other.

After 1877, Ibsen’s works were regularly staged in small, modern theatre rooms. In these productions theatre makers not only broke radically with the author’s instructions about the stage set, but also went in search of a new way of acting. It could be called ‘de-stylization’. Actors tried to act as little and to behave as naturally as possible. In addition they tried to load their actions with as much meaning as possible. Mime, posture, movement and gestures were adapted to the meaning given to the text. In this way a separate layer of meaning was created, a commentary that told its own, ‘true’ story, bypassing if need be the meaning of the spoken text. Ideological as well as formal aspects of the staged works were attacked in these productions. Soon, regular theatre companies also started to add extra meaning to drama texts in this way, although it was done less obviously.

Other signs like costumes and stage props could also have actively contributed to the meaning of the performance, but in most cases they only supported the meaning generated by décor and acting.

The composition of the programmes partially betrayed these changes. The decline of the text’s importance could be gathered from the fact that translators lost their prominent place in the credits to directors and from the fact that programmes increasingly neglected to print the information Ibsen had provided at the beginning of his texts such as place of action and family relations. Furthermore, the fact that the programmes available since 1979 regularly indicate the presence of a dramaturgist on production staffs is certainly related to the semanticization of décor and action.

When the search for new meanings became a cliché in the second half of the nineteen eighties, theatre makers once again changed their approach. Décor, actions and/or appearance of the actors no longer determined the meaning of a staging. Texts regained their prominence against a background of functional décors, unemphatic costumes and a sober, down-to-earth, natural style of acting. The semanticization realised in the seventies and eighties was not abandoned, however, but was quietly integrated. It is remarkable that since 1987 productions as a
matter of course include a person especially responsible for the design of the stage lighting.

How are the radical changes that swept Dutch theatre life in the seventies and eighties to be explained? Dutch theatre practice had not been able to keep up with the international avant-garde between 1890 and 1930. This backwardness was not always due to ignorance, conservatism or incompetence on the part of theatre makers. The circumstances in which theatre had to be made in those years also stood in the way of innovation. Against this background it is tempting to think that the changes made in the seventies and the eighties were the result of an attempt by Dutch theatre makers to make up for lost ground.