

Ibsen and Naturalistic Theatre Workshop at the Higher School of Dramatic Art (ESAD) in Asturias, Spain – an Erasmus-based research

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Abstract: *Our practical study starts from the hypothesis that Ibsenian theatre is, for the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, what Shakespeare was for the eighteenth and nineteenth century theatre, according to the Mexican thinker Salvador Novo¹. During this research project, I studied the importance of approaching Ibsenian dramaturgy in the actor's art classes of theatre faculties. The article documents the author's activity carried out in the naturalistic theatre workshop developed during the experience exchange, made possible through the Erasmus-Plus scholarship, at the Higher School of Dramatic Art (ESAD)² in Gijón, located in Asturias. Through this scholarship offered by the "ERASMUS"³ agency from UNATC⁴ Bucharest (Romania), I had the opportunity to teach an actor's art course as a guest teacher. The*

¹ Novo Salvador, *Todo prosa*, Ed. Empresas editoriales, México D.F. 1964, P. 770-771

Mexican thinker Salvador Novo, playwright, writer, and professor at the School of Theatrical Arts, wrote in a publication entitled "Outside Theater", where he will refer to Ibsen as "the father of modern theater": "*El descubrimiento de Shakespeare significó mucho para el teatro de los siglos XVIII y XIX, la revelación de Ibsen y la difusión de su teatro, su impecable doctrina y técnica influyó en todos los países, y es el descubrimiento teatral para el siglo XX. Bien podemos creer en la germinación del primer dramaturgo universal que produjo este nuevo mundo. Un abuelo literario del que heredaron: Eugene O'Neil, Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams, un buen libertador, que acabará en Hauptmann, Chehov, Schnitzler, Zola, Brieux, De Curel, Galdos, Jones, Shaw, Ferrari, Bracco o Echegaray, entre otros*". (original Spanish quote)

² The Higher School of Dramatic Art is an educational center integrated in Higher Artistic Education, where theatrical studies of interpretation, scenography and directing or dramaturgy are taught. It is located in Gijón in the Spanish region of Asturias.

³ The Erasmus program is a European Union (EU) program for student exchange. Erasmus Plus is the new program that combines all current EU programs for education, training, youth and sports.

⁴ "Ion Luca Caragiale" National University of Theater and Cinematography is an educational institution in Bucharest, the only state school in the Romanian capital specialized in specific disciplines related to theater and film.

objective of this ERASMUS practice mobility was to organize practice courses related to the teaching of the actor's art in order to exchange experience and discover new study programs, ESAD being a faculty that offers courses related to community theatre, inclusive theatre and dance theatre.

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The Higher School of Dramatic Art in Gijón is located in the historic headquarters of the "Laboral" University of Asturias, Spain, where I was invited by the faculty management to hold a practical workshop on the actor's art specific to the Ibsenian naturalistic theatre with 3rd and 4th year students from the Acting Department (although they also adopted the Bologna system in Spain, the bachelor's programs retained 4 years of study).

Duration of the Erasmus-Plus scholarship workshop: 4 weeks (October-December 2019-2020).

Theoretical framework

Henrik Johan Ibsen is currently recognized as the father of modern drama, the Norwegian author made an important change during the nineteenth century in the way of writing and conceiving of dramaturgy. His work reformed and conscientiously renewed the art of the actor, since important theatre educators, such as Konstantin Stanislavski⁵, studied and staged a large part of his plays, not only with the objective of artistic creation, but with the pedagogical purpose of investigating what the Norwegian author researched; he tried to enter in the human interior and seek the psychological basis that would reveal character and conscience, with the aim of educating the viewer, not in a didactic way, but in a way in which to go deep in conscience about the moral ideas. Ibsen's legacy has lasted to this day, his theatre continues to be a very important base for contemporary playwrights, actors and directors, many of the themes of his works continue to be studied and show an enormous need to reveal the character of the humans and their internal psychology. The precursor of modern theatre created his own style in which the subtext showed its great capacity for observation and reflection as a forerunner for modern psychology.

⁵ Konstantin Sergeevich Stanislavski (1863-1938) Born in 1863, Stanislavski became the author of an aesthetic revolution by theorizing the realist current. Together with Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, Stanislavski founded the Moscow Art Theatre, which at the time had a revolutionary impact in the field of interpretation. In 1912 he initiated "Studio One", in order to be able to experience the "System" on stage, he made his own imprint on the evolution of the actor's art, through the conception of psychological realism, also called "Stanislavski's system".

The complexity of his characters showed at the same time the daily life of the common man, the traumas and the shadows that afflict him. His theatre plays wanted the reader and, later, the audience identify with his characters. Ibsen, through his playwriting, seeks to resolve the neurosis and mania of his characters, representing a moral, social or aesthetic philosophy, and these elements were central axes in his thinking and will be the outlets that his characters will have for their own redemption.

Today, with the repercussion of the avant-garde of the twentieth century, as well as modernity in post-dramatic theatre, little by little, through various projects or dramatizations, both the works of the Norwegian author and various dramatizations, that start from its themes, characters and theatricality, were retrieved. This has made it clear that the importance of the Ibsenian theatre continues to this day and its value more than ever has to be exalted and reflected on, since its intention are, without a doubt, to reveal the human interior.

I decided to carry out my doctoral research based on the analysis of Ibsenian characters and the specificity of their characters, influenced from the psychological and philosophical point of view that give them the power of being a mirror of the psychological human, as recognized by the father of modern psychology, Sigmund Freud. I also drew a parallel between Ibsen's development in Romania and in Mexico. In both countries, the theatrical tradition reveals creative capacity and a similar identity. Ibsen's theatre came to Romania at the end of the 19th century and to Mexico at the beginning of the 20th century, through European, Italian, French and Spanish companies, which brought with them the novelty of this theatre. However, Ibsen's theatre denounces problems that are still valid today in the Hispanic world, especially in Mexico, such as corruption, social hypocrisy, the ambition of the powerful, the situation of women in a "macho society" and the emotional resentments in many of his characters.

The great Norwegian author aimed to show the excesses of modernity, taking up some of the critical and idealistic points of two of the most important philosophers of the 19th century – Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, because in many of his works the Norwegian playwright made various social denunciations, criticizing the empowered classes, emptied by the growing capitalism of the time. Undoubtedly, the Norwegian author influenced the thinkers who followed after him in the field of theatrical writing, consolidating realism as the central axis in the acting development of the 20th century and as a pedagogical method that cared for the interpreter to deepen his emotions and feelings, lending thus life to fictional characters, now more real and closer to man himself. It is true that Ibsen influenced great Russian creators, such as Anton Chekhov, Maxim Gorki or Gogol, the Irishman George Bernard Shaw, who was undoubtedly his greatest admirer and defender in England through his treatise *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*⁶, or The North Americans Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee

⁶ Bernard Shaw. (2013) George, *La quintaesencia del ibsenismo*. Ediciones Cinca, CERMI, Tr. Miguel Ángel Martínez-Cabeza, Madrid.

Williams, Arthur Miller or Lilian Hellman. The Spaniard Miguel de Unamuno, the Mexicans Alfonso Reyes⁷ or Rodolfo Usigli⁸ or the Romanians Liviu Rebreanu and Mihai Sebastian were undoubtedly inspired by the Ibsenian Dramaturgy in their evolution as writers and playwrights.

The work that Konstantin Stanislavski did during his development of the laboratory of the Moscow Art Theatre, at the beginning of the first decade of the 20th century, was important because the Russian professor and actor developed through several of his montages an important study on the work that the actor needs to perform to decipher the characters of Ibsen. His inquiry into the construction of the character of doctor Stockmann in the play *An Enemy of the People*⁹ created a watershed in the way of understanding and building the characters of the Norwegian author from a truthful and a reliable understanding of their emotions and feelings. Stanislavski argued that to play a character of value, the actor requires talent and inspiration, in this case having approached Ibsen's texts, allowed him to be inspired by human situations that complemented his acting technique based on his famous work system. Through his publication *My life in Art*, in which the Russian pedagogue expresses his understanding of the Ibsenian character, Stanislavski makes it clear that the truth in interpretation lies in living the fiction of the character through the translation of the "Actor-character". Therefore, the importance of continuing his provocation with young actors in our days.

At present, the Norwegian playwright continues to have an important relevance and presence in various countries of the world, he has even been considered the most represented foreign author, even above Shakespeare despite the censorship that exists towards him, even to this day, in various nations such as China or the countries of the Arab peninsula. Ibsen was staged internationally in various theatrical versions, but his work was also transposed in different film and television adaptations. However, it is clear that there is a lag towards Ibsen's montages today. Especially due to the lack of encouragement towards his ideas and the little understanding of his emblematic characters. In Spain, Ibsen has an important relevance, being the first country in which an important translation of Ibsen was made in the second half of the 20th century. For this reason and taking advantage of the relationship between UNATC and ESAD of Gijón (Escuela Superior de Arte Dramático de Gijón, Asturias, España), I decided to participate as an Erasmus student, working as a visiting professor and assistant at the school.

⁷ Miguel de Unamuno, was a Spanish writer and philosopher belonging to the generation of 98. In his work he cultivated a wide variety of literary genres such as novels, essays, theater and poetry.

⁸ Rodolfo Usigli, was a Mexican poet, playwright, writer, and diplomat. He is considered the father of modern Mexican theater.

⁹ Stanislavski, Konstantin (2013) *Mi vida en el arte*, Ed. Alba (Artes Escénicas), Trad. Jorge Saura & Bibicharifa Jakimziánova, Barcelona.

Methodology

I decided to unify the theoretical and practical parts using Ibsen's emblematic works: *An Enemy of the People*, *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*. I started the study using guided improvisation in order to get to know the group, the availability of individual work and so as to harmonize the group dynamics. Classes began with Viola Spolin's famous "Random Walk" exercise (known in UNATC as the "Brownian Movement"), continuing with guided introspection exercises on topics related to "love", "selfishness", "pride", "restlessness". After these moments of reflection, there was an analysis related to the topic, about the students' perspectives on various life situations and about the physical and mental shapes that they used to express themselves during the exercises. Then, using the students' statements, we began the practical part of the exercise, using the improvisation system "A and B" (related to the method used by the famous Mexican pedagogue, director, and playwright, Hector Mendoza with his students, which is still being used in acting schools, and which can also be found in Romania, but in a different form). Through these improvisations, I tried to guide my students to highlight the way they think on stage, resulting from the personal reactions they each had at the time of improvisation with given situations. These sets of exercises evolved during the workshop, towards more complex motifs and themes, related to dramatic proposals (and life problems) such as: "losing a friend", "breaking up with a boyfriend", "cheating", "losing a job", and various other issues that people may experience during their daily lives.

Evaluation

The proposed evaluation method was one that involved the entire group, the improvisation exercises receiving objective feedback from each student. We avoided negative evaluation, criticism, or personal opinion, in order to better develop the chosen topics and to understand each student's reflective and stage process.

Next, we started work on the Ibsenian text, reading together the three pieces mentioned above, choosing a few scenes and approaching them, developing them with each student individually. The readings were a good starting point to get to know the personality of Ibsen's characters better. We tried to see the similarities and differences in the way Ibsen approaches female and male characters. The Norwegian playwright has now become one of the pioneers of feminist ideas, and Nora's slammed door to a no longer functioning relationship has become a symbol of liberation from the constraints of a society with strict and unjust morals for women. Although Ibsen intentionally wrote strong female characters, whose ideas and actions stood out even more over time, defining him as a pro-feminist author, he also gave a strong voice to his male characters, such as Dr. Stockmman, Consul Bernick, Torvald, Wangel, Arnold Ruteck, Peer Gynt, Brand¹⁰ and others, characters who are

¹⁰ Ibsen, Henrik, *Teatro Completo*, traducción y notas de Else Wasteson, completada por M. Winaerts y Germán Gómez de la Mata, revisión y prólogo de Germán Gómez de la Mata. Ed. Aguilar, Madrid. 1954.

not distinguished by masculinity or “machismo”, but by a very subtle sensitivity that allows us to understand humanity.

This is the great achievement of Ibsenian dramaturgy - it opened a window into the human inner world, in order to heal it; it triggered an impulse to research the morality of society in order to make it "more humane". We continued developing scenes, of which, the more resounding ones were the last act from *A Doll's House* (Nora's separation from Torvald) and the scene from *The Ghosts*, where Mrs. Alving watches her son, Oswald, on his deathbed. The scenes were studied by the students and were worked on during the workshop, where Ibsen's lucidity during these moments of crisis was researched by the group. I tried not to mount anything from a directorial point of view, but together with the students, I looked for the most motivating elements to fuel their work, I tried to discover the most significant details, emphasizing a faithful interpretation with real life; students, even if extremely young, experiencing in reality and with courage the strong feelings proposed by the author.



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Analyzing results

Even though the scenes were not presented to a wide audience, we all made important discoveries about Ibsen's characters' inner worlds. Students learned how to approach an acting theme organically and how to approach a character's problems personally, recognizing the value that high-level dramaturgy offers us. It has also resulted in increased self-awareness and valid knowledge of human behavior.

Approaching Ibsenian characters is essential in the actor's art because they, like the Chekhov characters, mark a break from the ancient dramatic writing and acting techniques,

containing a truth that brings the actor more tangible, concrete, results, closer to human nature, and therefore more credible to an audience.

The workshop marked an important moment for the students of the Higher School of Dramatic Art (ESAD) in Gijón (Spain), opening new research paths for students and interesting directions to follow on their future acting path. Some of the exercises done during the workshop can be viewed on the YouTube platform by accessing the following link: <https://youtu.be/l5x3GiQrDpQ>

Some of the students who participated in the workshop I coordinated gave me their feedback, and their personal conclusions are relevant. Fourth-year student Laura Meza Perez argued that the study of Ibsen's dramaturgy is essential in preparing the actor's art, because Ibsen's themes are an introduction to human thought and action, so they are essential elements in the actor's discovery of life and the ways of its scenic transposition. The treatment of Ibsen's subjects, with common but relevant life problems leads to an existential confrontation necessary in the actor's work. For Laura Meza Perez, Nora's voice is a feminist symbol that is beyond her time and is valid to this day, because it speaks of the freedom of the individual regardless of gender identity.

For fourth-year student Alvaro Alonso Celemen, Ibsen is the centerpiece of realistic theatre. His drama provides guidance to the actors, in order to experience a philosophical exposition through his characters. His work is based on constructing a strong personality, which falls in a context of imbalance and conflict, dismay or doubt, but in the end, the Ibsenian characters will always reveal hope, the desire to live a better life, a feeling each of us can identify with on a daily basis.

For Patricia Caso, also a fourth-year student, the psychology of the Ibsenian characters represents a mentality specific to an era, but which has not changed until today, the human feeling remaining latent. Therefore, by exploring the characters' depth, the generated material is extraordinarily rich for the actor's work, who requires complex knowledge and an openness of mind towards different inner worlds, towards human self-exploration.



Conclusion

All students agree that the influence of Ibsenian naturalism is found in contemporary theatre and current cinema or, as the term is called in the Romanian acting school – *psychological realism*. This is the main trend that guides the new currents in the work of the actor, because the modern-day man is searching for a mirror in which to analyze himself, in order to understand himself as an individual within the current social contexts.

At the end of the workshop, maestro **Joaquín Amores Moreno**, director of the School of Dramatic Art¹¹ (ESAD) in Gijón, (esad.dire@gmail.com) highlighted the fact that naturalistic theatre has brought a new way of thinking in theatrical creation, emphasizing that Ibsen proposes valuable characters, who face their own demons that lead them to face destiny and change their future towards something better. Master Joaquín Amores emphasized the importance of highly complex characters in the study of acting, offered by playwrights such as Lorca, Ibsen, Chekhov, or Strindberg. Through the great playwright, the actor has the opportunity to better understand mankind, in the context of his world and to bring on stage a reflection of the human interior, based on observation, personal experimentation, research and reconstruction. For this reason, the actor's work does not end, but remains continuous.

The purpose of this research was to discover in parallel with my Doctoral Studies research, the psychological depth of the human being developed through Ibsen's characters and how an actor can work these complex characters that direct him to the depths of the human being. I consider it necessary for the Ibsenian characters to be studied, especially understood by the new generations of student-actors. They give value to the human consciousness and creativity that the theatre and film actor needs in any construction of his characters. Research into the most emblematic characters of Ibsen, whose interior and emotional intelligence we have studied, incorporates psychological meanings in the work that the actor can undertake in deciphering a role, when he plays it.

An actor believes that he has to go through a long list of interpretive possibilities when building a role. If he understands them, his reason and talent can achieve, artistically, a synthesis that we will conventionally call a **ROLE**. I wanted to describe this diverse horizon of understandings through the doctoral paper, i.e. a mini encyclopedia of psychological reflections, referring to insights useful to the actor, in order to interpret a dramatic Ibsenian text in full accordance with its substrates of depth. This research aimed to raise awareness of the reflection and understanding of human freedom through the most important roles written by Henrik Ibsen.

Online education during the pandemic

During the second part of the academic year 2019-2020, I received a new "Erasmus" scholarship to participate as an assistant director in the staging of the bachelor performance *Nuestra Natasha*, by Alejandro Casona, the relevant Spanish-Asturian author being a forerunner of symbolism and realism, through his dramaturgy and literature in Spain and Latin America in the early twentieth century. However, due to restrictions and the Covid-19

¹¹ DEPARTAMENTO INTERPRETACIÓN (esad.interpretacion@gmail.com), *Jefe de departamento*: Nora López Casella, *Profesores/as*: Joaquín Amores Moreno, Carmen Sandoval Rodríguez, Nora López Casella, M.^a Aránzazu Atucha Gutiérrez, Pedro Ignacio Ortega Sanz, Francisco Pardo Almansa, Manuel Álvarez Guzmán, Cristina Suárez Menéndez

pandemic quarantine this was done through online means. I worked with Argentinian teacher and actress Nora Lopez and Spanish voice teacher and actress Carmen Bélen. From April to June 2020, I rehearsed with students online, and at the end of the work process, the play was recorded, performing a radio theatre show. The result was very valuable and is an example of artistic endeavor and effort to keep theater and arts education alive during this challenging time caused by the lack of direct contact during the quarantine and the general underfunding of art. It can be listened to for free on the YouTube platform: <https://youtu.be/vu7c6lNsbTc>

As for us, we want to continue this research of the human by means of the actor's art and theatrical pedagogy, consider that only art remains as a remedy against loss of consciousness, sensitivity and reflection on issues of human equality, freedom, and law. The force of theatrical expression, the truth of the discoveries that theater provokes in humanity are the most fervent consolation and a beacon of hope in the current context.

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