

NORA'S CHILDREN—A NORWEGIAN-CHINESE THEATRE ADVENTURE

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240 HOW DID NORA'S CHILDREN FIND THEIR WAY TO CHINA? —A SHORT AND RECENT HISTORY

In 2003, Teater Ibsen in Skien, Norway, in collaboration with Grenland Friteater produced Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, directed by Lars Vik. Vik is one of the founding members of Grenland Friteater. *Peer Gynt* was invited to Beijing where Vik re-worked the show in collaboration with Chinese artists in the Spring of 2004. (Vik 2009, Teater Ibsen 2009) Meanwhile the 100th anniversary of Ibsen's death was approaching and Norway planned to launch a worldwide year of Ibsen celebrations in 2006. One of the preliminary products of these efforts was a new play, published in 2005, by the Norwegian playwright Jesper Halle, entitled *Nora's Children (Noras Barn)* (Norske Dramatikerforbundet 2009), which subsequently was directed by Sylvia Salvesen at the above mentioned Teater Ibsen.

In 2006 Norway launched the Ibsen Year 2006 as a global event, including a number of activities in China. Many of these activities centered upon Nora, the central character of *A Doll House*, including a panel seminar at Beijing University called *Nora's Sisters*, opened by the Norwegian Prime Minister which was held on March 27, 2006. (*Norwegian Prime Minister opens Nora's Sisters Seminar* 2008)

Another event, *Hunting for Nora (Jakten på Nora)*, a dance show directed by Un-Magritt Nordseth opened on December 14, 2006, in Beijing (*Hunting for Nora* 2008). In addition, the Beijing Today Art Museum curated the exhibition *Post-Nora* that opened at the end of November 2006. (*2006 Ibsen Year* 2008) A concert entitled *Nora's Song* was scheduled for March 20, 2006, at the Peking University Concert Hall. The *China Daily* writes of the event, "With pianist Wolfgang Plagge, violinist Annar

Folles and soprano Gao Xia, the Norwegian Ibsen Trio will present the classic works of the celebrated playwright” (*China Daily*: March 18, 2006).

The Second International Drama Festival in Beijing, presented by the China National Theatre Company (former National Experimental Theatre), took off at the end of August 2006 and showcased five Ibsen related productions. These included the reopening of the 1998 bi-lingual production of *A Doll's House* (wan'ou zhi jia) directed by Wu Xiaojiang, starring the Norwegian Agnete Haaland in the lead role of Nora. Ibsen's *Ghosts* was produced in a bi-cultural effort by the POS Theatre Company from Norway and the Drama Company of the Chinese People's Liberation Army, directed by Jiang Mingxia. Finally, well-known senior-director Lin Zhaohua directed *The Master Builder*. (Chen 2006) Before *The Master Builder* project Lin was supposed to direct the show *Nora's Children* in collaboration with Lars Vik. The Chinese production first and foremost targeted a young audience in Chinese universities.

Now the story becomes full circle. It was Teater Ibsen that was involved in both productions, *Peer Gynt* (Skien and China) as well as *Nora's Children* (Skien). Lars Vik directed *Peer Gynt* and had a professional relationship with Teater Ibsen as well as some working experience in China. Furthermore, Vik has an interest in telling stories from the children's perspective, as his own play *Little Henrik* (2003) suggests. This play deals with Ibsen's childhood in Skien where Teater Ibsen is located. Given the fact that Vik worked in China before and that he has an interest in the special perspective in plays like *Nora's Children*, which retells the doll house events from a children's perspective, it is not surprising that he was approached to co-direct this project. However, due to irresolvable conflicts during the early rehearsal process he left the project and Frede Guldbrandsen was asked to take over. It is, however, Lin Zhaohua who is credited with the successful direction of *Nora's Children* (Xiao 2006) while the two associate directors Wang Xiaoxin and Frede Guldbrandsen are hardly ever mentioned.

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CREDITS:

Nora's Children (nuola de ernu). Ibsen 2006 China. China Beijing International Theatre Festival. Produced by Lin Zhaohua Theatre Studio and Peking University Theatre Research Institute. Supported by the Royal Norwegian Embassy, Beijing. Credits: Directed by Lin Zhaohua, Associate Directors: Wang Xiaoxin, Frede Guldbrandsen (Norway), Playwright: Jesper Halle (Norway), Translator: Shi Qine, Cast: Li Zheng, Zhang Luyi, Zhang Nanhua, Zhao Hui

NORA'S CHILDREN—PLOT AND DRAMATURGICAL STRUCTURE²

242 The one hour play consists of fourteen scenes which correspond to and are intertwined with the three act play of *A Doll's House* by Ibsen. Scenes one to five deal with selected events from Act One in Ibsen's play, scenes five through nine with Act Two and finally scenes ten through fourteen with Act Three. Krogstad is a centre of attention, who, in the imagination of the children, becomes a dark and frightening intruder, a black clothed Santa Claus. Another point of interest is the discussions and fights between their parents, which the children witness, more or less indirectly, by overhearing their parents' voices through the walls, or by catching short glimpses of them through the door of the room where they were sent to play while the adults go about their adult's business. At some point, each child accuses him or herself of being responsible for the parents' conflicts and final separation. This sense of guilt produces conflicts in the children's adult lives. The plot fundamentally evolves around the three children of Nora and Torvald Helmer, who, after 20 years, return to the house in which they grew up, where they were left by their mother and subsequently raised, more or less, by their father and mainly by Anne-Marie, their nanny. Adults themselves now, the children delve into their traumatized past attempting to liberate themselves from their experience, as well as gain some insights into the ways they deal with current affairs of relationships, parenthood, and professional life. The actors are supposed to constantly switch between these two stages of their character, the child and the adult, while, at the same time, being fully aware that they are playing with and in Ibsen's play. The reality of the play is a fictional reality—Ibsen's play from the beginning—while the discourse on Ibsen and his impact on modern Norway is part of the audience's reality. This aspect is addressed in the play; for example, in the Prologue, when the three grown up children enter the stage/house each with Ibsen's play in their hands, they announce the characters in Ibsen's play and become upset that it says "three children". Not to have names means to be less important than the other characters. They throw the books away and introduce themselves to the audience by identifying their name and the age they had when the events in Ibsen's play were happening. At the end of the Prologue Ivar, the oldest sibling, picks up the book again in order to read it and get to the bottom of the events now that they are adults. Yet, he says "If you ask for the truth you open a door.—You don't know what will come through that door" (Halle 6). It is interesting how the door metaphor is reversed here. While Nora shuts the door and we don't know what is behind it now the truth comes in/intrudes and opens the door in the opposite direction. Truth comes from the outside in. The audience is part of the outside. Ivar later announces, "End of act one. In *A Doll's house* that is. The play we are in" (37). Bob, his brother, adds, "And after that act, they all forget about us. Mum has no time for us anymore. And dad has never had any time for us..." (37-38). Finally, Emma, the sister, completes: "And Mr

Doctor H. Ibsen, the playwright has got no time for us either. That's the worst" (38). With these complaints Act one of Ibsen's play-within-the-play and Scene five of the framing play end.

The re-enactment of childhood memories serves as a psycho-analytical means of emancipation. This play-within-the play device allows for a change of perspectives from child to adult and vice versa and critically connects both to the experience of the contemporary audience. To a certain extent the play reminded me of Marc Michel Bouchard's "The Orphan Muses" (Bouchard 1998).

Jesper Halle, in a note to Shi Qine, the Chinese translator of the play, wrote about his intentions:

127 years ago when Henrik Ibsen wrote a doll's house it was deeply provoking to the patriarchal society at the time, as it sided with Nora's right to pursue a life of truth, integrity and personal freedom, even if it meant turning her back on both her own husband and her children. It was seen—and still is—as a play that promotes women's liberation, and also individualism. In our time and in my society, present day Norway, women have the kind of freedom that Nora wants, and individualism and the individual's right to pursue his or her happiness and personal fulfilment is very important to us. So to me a natural question is who is the weaker part now, when both the man and the women have the right to pursue their individual happiness? To me that seems to be the children. So my play is not meant so much as a criticism of Nora's actions, as much as it is meant as a way of discussing the prize of modern individualism. (Halle 2008)

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While Frede Guldbrandsen was interested in this specific aspect of the play, the Chinese directorial approach was different, and focused its criticism rather on the performance history and theatre aesthetics of Chinese Ibsen productions than on the socio-political aspects of gender-equality and individualism. Seemingly, Lin Zhaohua's approach was rather concerned with form than with content. The context of discourse which is located in the history of the Chinese perception of Ibsen's play was a genuinely domestic one, dealing first and foremost with Chinese matters of interest, while at the same time approaching a young, urban and educated audience in Chinese universities.

YOUTUBING THE MASTERS: IBSEN AND LIN ZHAOHUA— MISSUMI/UMI/You Mi (由宓)

The youtube identity of missumi stands for the Chinese name You Mi, who is a visual video artist from China. She produced, among other projects, two video clips which deal with Lin Zhaohua's 2006 Ibsen related productions. One is called *Nora's Children in China* (5:19) (missumi 2008) and the other one *The Master Builder (Chinese version) promo* (3:03 min.) (missumi 2008). Under the name UMI, she submitted both projects to the Berlinale Talent Campus of the Berlin International Film Festival as well (UMI 2009a). According to the Berlinale web archive, both projects were labeled

as documentary films. While *Nora's Children...in China* had a running time of five minutes similar to the youtube clip, the documentary regarding Lin Zhaohua's *The Master Builder* had a running time of 70 minutes and used a different heading, *Master Builder Lin*, which indicates that Lin Zhaohua was identified as a master and that the film deals dominantly with Lin rather than with Ibsen's play. The synopsis states:

It's the making of a theater play directed by theater master Mr. Lin, of Ibsen's last script, *The Master Builder*, a wild and ambiguous love story of a master architect and a young girl. I followed the timeline, storyline, with a hidden line of "who is the Hilde (girl)/ inspiration for the director." (UMI 2009b)

As stated in the title and the synopsis, the focus of the video clip *Nora's Children...in China* is also concerned with Chinese matters: "Eye-candy short documentary of theater play *Nora's Children*, a spin-off of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, with a touch of contemporary relevance to China, and Chinese theater" (UMI 2009c).

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The youtube clip gives the impression that it was meant to be a promotional advertisement targeting young Chinese audiences who have access to computers and the internet and who can be lured into "old-fashioned" theatre with a fast music clip like presentation of the coolness of the three young actors directed by the pipe smoking inspiring master Lin Zhaohua. Again, the approach is more concerned with form than with information regarding the content of the play. Stereotypical Chinese assumptions like the belief that there are three existing theatre concepts/practices/systems in the world (Stanislawski–Brecht–Mei Lanfang) are reinforced without connecting either of them to the choice of the play, the dramaturgical approach and the performative and aesthetic realization not to mention the bi-cultural context of the actual production.

INTERVIEW WITH FREDE GULDBRANDSEN (JULY 9, 2008)

AB: When did you decide to engage in the Chinese-Norwegian project *Nora's Children*?

FG: I was contacted just two months before the rehearsals started. Usually, you are contacted a year or two in advance. But because another Norwegian director had dropped out of the project I was asked instead. I said yes. Decisions had already been made by the time I started. And the reason the Norwegian director dropped out was because he would have to cooperate with Lin Zhaohua, the Chinese director. I understood that they had difficulties in finding an agreement as to who was in charge and who had the final word in the process because the Norwegian director would not give up that position. The person who had made the contact with the Chinese group said to me: go over there and see what you can do, what you can learn, and take it from there. My main task was that of an assistant director, taking notes and directing rehearsals. The decision to do the play *Nora's Children* had been made already.

AB: What is the play about?

FG: The play tells the story of *A Doll's House* from the children's perspective. Nora and Helmer had three children, which we don't see in Ibsen's play but we hear about them. The play by Mr. Halle was very much about what happens when Nora leaves the house and the children grow up without two parents in the household. Jesper Halle has a quite conservative point of view. His criticism is that children aren't so well taken care of after the revolution of the 1960s and the consequences of that.

To claim the same in China is a bit absurd I would say, because in China getting a divorce is very hard. To get a divorce both partners should agree to separate and then they have to comply with the husband's firm (danwei, AB).³ If the firm agrees, the employee can get the divorce, but, if not, the firm policy will make a divorce impossible. Let's say that the boss is nice and lets them have a divorce; then they have to ask everyone in their apartment building and the council of that building if it's all right to have a divorced couple living there. You can see it's quite a long stretch from the woman's liberalization that Halle was criticizing in the play. Furthermore, Lin Zhaohua's most important approach to this play was to criticize the way Chinese theatre usually stages Ibsen. He was trying to create a parody of the cliché kind of way in which Ibsen is performed in China.

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AB: Do you mean the naturalism of that, the naturalistic Chinese style?

FG: Yes. It is a style, which, quite honestly, isn't really naturalistic. It is quite false, I would say, at least according to the Western-based Stanislavski theatre. Lin wanted the production to be about the criticism of Chinese Ibsen performance practices. There were a lot of agendas in this project. I was trying to find out enough information about how all of this was going to work together in the end. The most important thing for me was to analyze the situation, and what kind of play and point of view Lin wanted to apply. Something he didn't really know too well from his own cultural context was Norway. However, in the end the audience was quite fond of the production. But, it was mostly because we had three really, really, great actors on stage.

AB: Where did the actors come from?

FG: From different theatre schools in Beijing.

AB: Were they students?

FG: Quite young. They had graduated 2 or 3 years before in Beijing and were between 25 and 30 years old. There were three actors on stage. Mr. Lin would come in twice or once a week to watch some rehearsals and make some suggestions. He smiled, then left and said to move on. Fourteen days before the opening he came in and took over the rehearsals. He changed all the parts the actors had worked on.

AB: You did the daily rehearsals up until then?

FG: Yes, for the first month.

AB: How many hours?

FG: We started at 2 pm and worked until 10:30 pm. Because of the traffic in Beijing this was the best time slot. We had to rehearse in the evenings so that we had 7½ hours per day for a show that was one hour long. That was, of course, quite good.

AB: You directed the play for 1 month, 7½ hours a day, and Lin Zhaohua would come in once a week to watch rehearsals? That is a weird procedure.

FG: Yes, quite strange. There was another director who had been working on the show the three weeks before I started. The process reminded me on the old master painters in the 1600s and 1700s, who had their students paint their pictures and then they would come in and finish off the work. Lin worked a bit like that, I think.

AB: Altogether, that is almost two months rehearsal time for a one hour play.

FG: Yes.

AB: Who paid for all of this?

FG: I was paid by the Norwegian Embassy. The project was part of the celebrations of the Henrik Ibsen year in 2006.

AB: Did the embassy also fund the Chinese part and pay the Chinese actors and Lin Zhaohua?

FG: I'm not quite sure. I think they did most of the funding.

246 AB: The play was written by Jesper Halle. What kind of playwright is he? Have you ever directed a play by him before?

FG: No I haven't. I've seen some of his plays before. He usually takes the children's point of view. That is part of his message, I would say. At least in his most successful works he has always taken the perspective of the child, often concerning children who have problems with their parents or with each other. The children characters are written for grown up actors and adult audiences.

AB: Jesper Halle is Norwegian and his play *Nora's Children* makes a special reference to the well known play *A Doll House*. Are his other plays also dealing with popular plays like that?

FG: No, they are not. But there was a competition in 2003 or 2004 which asked for works which show how we are inspired by Ibsen today.

AB: From the 1920s onwards the Chinese were always very concerned with the question of what happens after Nora left. Many of the discourses at the time were regarding the consequences of her decision under the circumstances of the Chinese society in the 1920s and 1930s. I could imagine that this maybe was one of the reasons why your Chinese partners agreed to do Halle's play. Who translated it or was it translated already before someone offered it to Lin Zhaohua?

FG: It was translated as a draft. I'm not quite sure who did the translation. I think it was translated at the Norwegian Embassy which had been working with another Norwegian theatre company earlier called Ibsen Theatre (Teater Ibsen). They had a guest performance of *Peer Gynt* in China in 2004.

AB: Did you know that there was also a Norwegian-Chinese co-production of *A Doll's House* in 1998 staged in Beijing?

FG: No.

AB: I was wondering if maybe your project and this other project were somehow linked?

FG: I don't think so.

AB: The Norwegian Embassy is in charge of this kind of international exchange, isn't it?

FG: A committee was put together in 2003 in Norway. I think, the people in charge received substantial funding from the government of Norway in order to organize a big worldwide celebration of Ibsen and as well to do marketing for Norway. I think the Foreign Ministry in Norway was in charge of selecting the artists. They had administrators and other personnel who were to find different kinds of projects that would take part in the 2006 anniversary.

AB: In other words, there was a kind of centrally organizing body set up in Norway in order to celebrate Ibsen's 100th anniversary around the world. The committee then probably approached embassies around the globe to ask them who they could suggest for collaborations?

FG: Yes, I think so.

AB: Do you know who came up with the idea of performing *Nora's Children*?

FG: I think it was the director of the Ibsen Teater at that time. He had been in charge of staging *Peer Gynt* in China in 2004. Furthermore, they had done a Norwegian version of *Nora's Children* in Norway 2005. They thought it would be a good idea to play it in Beijing as well.

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AB: I see. That makes sense.—Let's go back to the play now. There are only three characters, three children.

FG: Yes, there are three main characters. When the play starts they meet again 30, no 20 years after Nora left the house. They come together in order to discuss who is going to take over the house. Both mother and father had died. The house is up for sale. The three of them meet in their childhood home, discuss what happened and reflect on the consequences imposed on them by growing up with just one adult. They start to go back in time when they were 5 or 6 years old which was the time when Nora left their home. They kind of switch back and forth between their today's life and 20 years back.

AB: Is this in any way contextualized by a contemporary setting? Or is the play suggesting that the action takes place in 1899, 20 years after the publication of Ibsen's play?

FG: That is an interesting question. The play doesn't deal with that. As a director you can choose to do it in a contemporary setting or back then 1910. For Lin Zhaohua the actors had their private clothes on in order to criticize the way Chinese actors were performing Ibsen traditionally.

AB: Have you seen the play in Norway?

FG: Yes several times.

AB: In different directions?

FG: Yes.

AB: How were these different from your Chinese experience?

FG: I think today directors try to be as revolutionary as Ibsen was in his time. I've seen a German production where Nora actually shoots Helmer at the end and I've

seen a Swedish production where Nora stays in the house. Both plays turned the ending of Ibsen's play upside down. The costumes were rather timeless or modern costumes or sets were used. This seems to be the most normal thing to do, at least in Scandinavia.

AB: But we are talking about the play *Nora's Children*, not about *A Doll's House*, right?

FG: *Nora's Children* had been performed only one time in 2005. It hadn't been played anywhere else as far as I know.

AB: That means, you've seen this production once in Norway before you went to China?

FG: Yes.

AB: Did you ever direct original Ibsen plays?

FG: I had been working with *Peer Gynt* during my studies, but not a full scale production, no.

248 AB: Is that because you didn't have the opportunity so far or because you weren't interested? And being Norwegian, Ibsen is a national icon, and I could understand if you don't want to do plays by him for this reason.

FG: For me it has to be the right play at the right time. Right now I'm mostly doing contemporary plays. I don't know why. I find the way in which they are written, dramatically and thematically, quite interesting. So far, I haven't been offered any Ibsen productions but we'll see how it goes in the future.

AB: I'll come back to *Nora's Children* again. One of our questions was: What is, in your opinion, the most interesting feature of this play in terms of content, form, setting, philosophy? Regarding form, what was the dramaturgical approach?

FG: The dramaturgical approach is that we meet the actors today and they go back in time. I would say the most interesting thing about the play is to see what happens when children who are now grown up or parents themselves ask if divorce is the best for their children, their family, themselves because this is like a riddle. You can't answer this question a hundred per cent in one way or another. The characters are confronted with a big dilemma. I think working with dilemmas is the most interesting thing in theatre because it doesn't provide any solutions. To ask one of those questions, which are impossible to answer, starts a very interesting discussion.

AB: Was this an aspect of interest for the Chinese? Did the actors, for example, have discussions with you about what this play was about?

FG: Not that much. No, unfortunately. From their point of view getting a divorce was really hard. All of them grew up with both their parents, all of them were single children, of course. In their lives they didn't have the experience of being divorced.

AB: How did they relate to this play at all then when they have to perform something that appears to be so alien to them?

FG: Emotionally speaking it wasn't so hard for them. They could find other problematic things and situations in their lives.—In the play leaving three children led to consequences for them. The oldest child thought that he didn't have any problems

with his mother leaving while the two younger ones developed substantial emotional problems while growing up. There was a big discussion about this issue in the play as well.

AB: And this was something that the Chinese actors could relate to?

FG: It seemed so in the discussion on stage. But, I think it was about believing in the circumstances that the characters were in.

AB: Did you work with an interpreter?

FG: Yes, I did. We worked with a script that had one column to the left with the Chinese text, one in English in the centre, and the Norwegian text to the right.

AB: Was your interpreter interpreting Norwegian to Chinese or English to Chinese?

FG: English-Chinese.

AB: The actors obviously could not fully relate to the problems in the play because in China things are different. But what about the audience which probably was mixed and comprised not only of young audience members?

FG: The show was mostly presented at the universities in Beijing and Shanghai so it was a play for young people. 249

AB: What was Lin Zhaohua's special approach?

FG: I would say the frame story from Lin's point of view was that there were three actors going onstage and presenting the parts as the three children. In Halle's play we see three adults who go back into their childhood and relive/re-enact what happened. In the former case we have two frame stories.

AB: One frame story is part of Halle's script, but was there another directorial one by Lin Zhaohua?

FG: Yes, I think so.

AB: I didn't understand what Lin Zhaohua's frame was.

FG: Basically, this frame is constituted by the idea that the actors enter the stage as the people who they are in real life and go from there. When the performance starts, the audience watches three actors as themselves entering the stage. I would say that they initially go on stage as actors, but not as actors who play certain characters, yet.

AB: How did they then approach their audience?

FG: They just walked in and started reading their lines from the script. Eventually they started acting in it and went into the different parts.

AB: There was an open transformation then that the audience was allowed to witness?

FG: Yes.

AB: I assume that this was essential to Lin Zhaohua's criticism of regular Chinese Ibsen productions. How did you like that?

FG: I wouldn't do it that way. I accept it because I think it is an important task to criticize the way of playing Ibsen in China. I don't know if this was the right way to do it—it was the wrong play to do it. How the audience understood it, I can't say.

AB: Were there no discussions or talkbacks afterwards?

FG: No. I left the group four days after opening night. I know that there were big audiences. Lin was quite happy about it.

AB: Do you have any idea of how theatre reviews were talking about the production? Were there any theatre reviews of these shows at all?

FG: I think there were two in Chinese.

AB: Did you see them or did anybody translate these reviews for you?

FG: No. I didn't hear anything. They sent me an email saying that the show had been reviewed but they didn't say anything more than that.

AB: Ibsen's *Nora*, the original play, has a lot to do with gender politics in Norway and feminism in Europe. Is that in any way reflected in *Nora's Children*?

FG: Generally, the play deals with the same issues only a hundred years later. It discusses that individualism has been taken too far according to the perspective of the children. In that way it was a bit like a discussion between Halle and Ibsen.

250 AB: It is a rare occasion that women leave their children. How does the play deal with this gender issue? Usually it is men leaving their children. The play was written by a man, Jesper Halle, and so was the original play written by Ibsen. Halle is a male playwright, while you and Lin Zhao-hua are both male directors and all of you are talking about how these women dare to leave their children. I wonder, what makes you guys specialists in this field?

FG: Directors find plays that they find interesting.

AB: There are two boys and one girl. How is their reaction to this problem influenced by their gender? Is the girl in any way acting differently from the boys?

FG: Interestingly enough, the girl is the one who refuses to discuss the consequences of her upbringing with her brothers. She is the one getting headaches and avoiding discussions.

AB: Why do you think that is? What is your understanding as a director?

FG: She was the youngest one of the children.

AB: So, you think it had more to do with age than with gender?

FG: I thought it had. I wasn't quite sure. I can't really remember how they were described in *A Doll's House* either. Maybe there are some hints in Ibsen's original.

AB: Did the Chinese actors know the original play?

FG: Yes, they did.

AB: Did they make any references to it in regard to *Nora's Children*? For example, did they take it as a kind of departure point for their work on *Nora's Children*?

FG: No, I wouldn't say so.

AB: You weren't doing a reading or discussion of Ibsen's play?

FG: No. The structure of *Nora's Children* is quite solid. It provides you with all the information you need. We didn't go back to Ibsen's play in the rehearsal.

AB: I was only thinking that it could have been part of the discussion. Since the actors didn't have a personal experience with the play's subject matter, they could have gained an experience by reading the original play.

FG: Yes, that's right. Interestingly enough, we didn't have many long or interesting discussions about it because the translation was quite bad. It was hard to go into discussions and understand the deeper meanings, feelings and points of views. Apart

from that, the Chinese history and habits are so different from ours. The play is more about young people in Norway today than about young people in China. This felt awkward in a way.

AB: Was there only one interpreter?

FG: Altogether we had three interpreters. They were university students learning English. Their English wasn't that good. In rehearsals we used a lot of body language in order to communicate with each other.

AB: Did these three English language students have any knowledge of theatre and how it works?

FG: Not that much, no.

AB: You were not assisted by professional interpreters who were actually knowing what they were talking about in terms of theatre practice?

FG: No.

AB: I understand that it was basically you who prepared the rehearsals. Did you include the interpreters in your preparations? Did they know what you were going to work on?

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FG: No.

AB: Where did you live? Close by?

FG: Yes. We were rehearsing in the university area.

AB: Which one? Beijing University?

FG: The one in the direction of the Summer Palace. We were rehearsing in the big hall where Bill Clinton held a famous speech⁴ in 1998. The Chinese were quite proud of Bill Clinton being there.

AB: The actors you were working with were professional actors. Did they study in Beijing at the Central Academy of Drama?

FG: I'm not quite sure what the school was named. I think they were from three different schools in Beijing. They told me that they educate about 300 actors a year in Beijing.—I haven't been working with such talented actors in Norway. They were very talented.

AB: On another note, you didn't have the impression that the actors or Lin Zhaohua were in any way referring to the Chinese history of feminism, did you?

FG: Actually, I don't know how much they knew about it. At least, there wasn't much reference in a scene.

AB: Did you talk to Lin Zhaohua about that?

FG: Very, very little. Mostly because he doesn't speak English. He talked mainly about his vision. I'm sorry for the lack of communication because I think he has a lot of knowledge. Maybe he wasn't that interested in a discussion or didn't take the time. Most of the time we talked about practicalities.

AB: Can we say that there was not much of a communication taking place regarding the directorial concept or the philosophy behind it?

FG: No, unfortunately, not that much.

AB: Did you know Lin before you went to China?

FG: Not before I was offered the opportunity to work in China. Then I googled him and read about him.

AB: Have you ever been in China before?

FG: This was the first time.

AB: The first time ever and you go and direct a play? That is a real adventure. How often did you watch the show?

FG: I watched it three times before I returned to Norway.

AB: Were the audience's reactions similar to what you knew from Norway or was there something specific about them?

FG: They didn't switch off their mobile phones. The audience made phone calls throughout the show. That was kind of unusual.

252 AB: The Chinese are famous for this behavior. It is part of their lively theatre tradition. Fifteen years ago they had these beeping digital watches. Then the equipment was updated to beepers, and now they use cell phones. The famous Austrian Jewish writer Egon Erwin Kisch (1885-1948) once wrote an essay about the habits of Chinese audiences in the early 20th century when he attended a Beijing Opera show starring the famous actor Mei Lanfang. He noticed that the audience members were chatting with their neighbors, they were eating, drinking and freely roaming between the auditorium, the stage and the outside. Chinese audiences did not go through such a rigid process of bourgeois disciplining and high-culture drills as we find it in mainstream theatre cultures in the West where the audience basically is supposed to shut up and to listen/watch what the authoritarian artists have to tell them. Chinese audiences don't care, which—in a way—is quite liberating. In some countries you can't even enter the theatre after the show started because they don't want to be disturbed by their audience. That is very telling in regard of Western cultures and their communication conventions.—Thank you for the interview.

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NOTES

1. According to our interview with Frede Guldbrandsen, it was the director of the 2004 Norwegian-Chinese "Peer Gynt" who was first assigned the job.
2. *Noras Barn* was translated into English as *Nora's Children* by Pernille Belsvik. The play was made available to us by Thomas Egedal who works for Nordiska ApS. International Performing Rights Agency, Copenhagen. Homepage: www.nordiska.dk
3. A danwei, generally speaking, is a work unit which can be a firm, a factory, a theatre company, a farm, etc. These Danweis usually have quite complex social responsibilities for their members if we compare them with Western companies.

4. BBC: President Clinton's Beijing University speech (June 29, 1998). <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/122320.stm> (accessed Sep.9, 2008).