

IBSEN'S TWO VERSIONS OF *THE BURIAL MOUND* A COMPARISON AND DISCUSSION OF THE STAGE DIRECTIONS OF THE TWO VERSIONS OF THE PLAY

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Introduction

The first Ibsen play ever to be given a theatrical production, was the second play he wrote: *Kjæmpehøien – The Burial Mound*. Ibsen finished writing this one-act play in May 1850. The theatre board of *Christiania Theater* accepted the play for production on the 22nd of July (Aarseth, 2005a, 220). At the opening night, 26th September 1850, 557 tickets had been sold, making it one of the best-attended theatre evenings of the season (Aarseth, 2005a, 224).

The Burial Mound (1850) unfolds in a grove situated on the coast of Valland, at the cusp of Christianity in Norway. A young Viking chieftain, Gandalf, arrives, seeking revenge for his father – slain in an attack on those very shores some years ago. Gandalf then encounters a fair maiden, Blanca, who attends to the burial mound dominating the grove. Gandalf is smitten with her, and stirred by her Christian doctrine of love and forgiveness. Gandalf has sworn an oath of revenge to the Norse Gods, promising to either revenge his father or to die at his own hands. Thus he offers to kill himself rather than killing Blanca's foster father Bernhard – the confessed murderer of his own parent. Bernhard then reveals himself as Gandalf's father Audun, thus eradicating any necessity for revenge. Bernhard/Audun blesses Blanca's union with Gandalf. The newly betrothed couple will sail home northwards, while the old father remains – watching over the burial mound (Ibsen, 2005a, 256-291).

Ibsen would return to this play while working at the theatre in Bergen, rewriting it for his own staging. The board of *Det norske Theater* accepted the new version of *The Burial Mound* for performance on 29th December 1853 (see Ms230b/25, December 29th 1853).¹ The rewritten play opened on 2nd January 1854 to a full house, i.e. approximately 800 audience members (Losnedahl, 2006, 91).²

The 1854 version of this play is a thorough reworking of the initial version. Of the original 610 verses, less than 50 remain untouched (Aarseth, 2005b, 266). The location is changed, as the play now unfolds on a small island by Sicily (Ibsen, 2005b, 297). The father so pivotal to the plot is now named Roderik/Røræk. Otherwise, the plot is largely the same. However, the characters are to a larger degree fleshed out, most easily perceived in the now more individualized horde of Vikings accompanying Gandalf on his vendetta (Aarseth, 2005b, 262-263). The conflict is

¹ Ms230b/25 refers to a manuscript in the collection of the Bergen Theatre Archives. As with following references made to manuscripts from this archive, this manuscript have no single author or page number to refer to for reference. Whenever the manuscripts give dates for the section I refer to, this is used as a point of reference. The full title of this manuscript is Ms230b/25: *Erindringsliste 1850-1854*, a translation of the title into English could be: "Memoranda 1850-1854".

² According to the four, surviving plans of the auditorium of the theatre, the seating capacity – over time – varied between 368 and 547 (see Ms230a/12). At full capacity a fair number of the audience would thus be standing. An English translation of the title of this source, Ms230a/12: *Forskjellige Plancher over Tilskuerpladsen*, would be "Various charts of the auditorium".

clarified, and changes in the characters are better motivated (Rudler, 1963, 246; Aarseth, 2005b, 263).

The scholars that previously have discussed the differences between the two versions of *The Burial Mound* have mainly been addressing various aspects of content as well as the change of location, from the coast of Normandy to an island in the Mediterranean Sea (see Aarseth, 2005b). However, there is an issue that has been almost ignored, and that are the changes Ibsen made to the stage directions. Stage directions are “/.../ instructions extraneous to the dialogue /.../ They largely confine themselves to actors’ *moves* (described by the use of *stage areas*), *scenic detail* and *effects*” (Harrison, 1998, 256).

In this article I will compare and discuss the stage directions of the two versions of Ibsen’s play. I will focus on the stage directions relating to scenic detail and the use of stage areas. In Ibsen’s two versions of *The Burial Mound* there are also a few stage directions regarding how lines are to be delivered, but these are not of relevance to the topic of this article. Furthermore, I will explore how the diverging stage directions of the two versions can be explained by Ibsen’s increased affinity with theatre, and more specifically the 1850s theatre culture as it manifested itself in the day-to-day workings of the theatre in Bergen where Ibsen was hired between 1851 and 1857.

Comparison of the stage directions of the two versions

In the 1850 version, the stage directions are few. The most detailed is the first one, giving the setting for the play:

A woodland close to the sea, which is visible through the trees in the background. In the middle of the stage a burial mound with a menhir, in front of the mound: a moss-clad altar with a cross – decorated with flowers. The roof of a hut can be seen through the foliage. Under a tree in the foreground sits Bernhard, writing on a piece of parchment. Next to him stands Blanca, in a meditative position. It is evening (Ibsen, 2005a, 259 – *my translation*).³

The majority of the remaining stage directions concern the actors’ movements. After the opening conversation, Bernhard and Blanca exit into the woods. The Vikings subsequently enter from the opposite direction. After some movement and changes within the grouping of these men, all but Gandalf and the bard exeunt. Blanca then enters, kneels by the altar and proceeds to hang a fresh garland on the cross and sprinkle flowers on the mound. The bard is sent off. Gandalf and Blanca talk, before the Viking horde enters with a captive Bernhard. During the ensuing scene, fingers are pointed, Blanca rushes into her foster-father’s arms, swords are drawn, Bernhard rushes to Blanca and grabs her hand and falls onto his knees, Blanca helps him to his feet, and Bernhard shows his arm – proving him to be Audun. Bernhard/Audun then

³ “Skovegn nærvæd Havet, der skimtes i Baggrunden mellem Træerne. Midt paa Scenen en Kjæmpehøi med en Bautasteen; foran Høien et lille mosklædt Alter, hvorpaa et kors behængt med Blomster. Taget af en hytte sees mellem Løvet; under et Træ i Forgrunden sidder Bernhard skrivende i en Pergamentrulle, ved hans side Staaer Blanka i en eftertænkende Stilling. Det er Aften” (Ibsen, 2005a, 259).

embraces his son and foster-daughter, and the bard sings and plays his harp before laying the harp down upon the altar. The young couple kneel to receive their father's blessing, and as they rise again he embraces them. Bernhard/Audun sits down by the mound, with his old bard at his feet. Blanca grabs the Viking banner as she steps forth, and there ends the play.

How does this compare to the stage directions of the 1854 version? The opening stage direction is again detailed, giving the setting of the play:

An open place surrounded by trees, situated close to the beach. To the left in the background: an antique temple in ruins. In the middle of the stage a large burial mound, with a menhir on top – decorated with flowers (Ibsen, 2005b, 297 – *my translation*).⁴

There are major differences between the two versions of *The Burial Mound* already at this point. The 1850s location: a woodland close to the sea, is now an open place surrounded by trees, situated close to the beach. The roof of the hut seen through the foliage is in the 1854 version replaced by a temple ruin from antiquity, and the moss-clad altar with a cross is gone.

Whereas the first version gives the time of day as in the evening, no indication of the time of day is given in the stage direction in the 1854 version. However, Blanca – in a line – gives the time as in the evening (Ibsen, 2005b, 297). Thus information is moved from stage direction to play text. Whereas the stage directions of the first version places two characters together on stage, information regarding the characters' position is postponed in the second version, as the opening stage direction now exclusively focuses on the setting of the play.

The 1854 version of the play divides the action into scenes, numbered from one to six. The first scene commences with a stage direction placing Roderik seated to the right, writing, while Blanca is on the left, in a reclining position (Ibsen, 2005b, 297). The two characters are thus placed at opposite ends of the stage in this version. During the first scene, Blanca gets up and moves over to Roderik to sit by his feet before they both rise and exit to the left in the background.

The second scene opens with the Vikings and Gandalf entering from the right, thus upholding their entry from "the opposite direction" – as it was put in 1850. The scene then proceeds as before, with one exception: When the Vikings exit, they exit into the woods to the left, and they all leave but Gandalf. Gandalf then hears footsteps and hides in the shrubbery to the left. The third scene begins as Blanca enters from the left, carrying a basket of flowers and wearing a garland in her hair. She makes a wreath of the flowers and hangs it on the menhir upon the mound. Then she takes off her garland and throws it in the air, Gandalf catching it. Blanca comes down from the mound and sits down. Gandalf walks towards the background and stops. Blanca takes the garland, which Gandalf has dropped, and puts it around his helmet. Gandalf exits to the right.

⁴ "En aaben Plads, omgiven af Træer, nær ved Strandbredden. Til Venstre i Baggrunden, en antik Tempelruin. Midt paa Scenen en stor Kjæmpehøi, hvorpaa en Bauta, omvunden af Blomsterkrandse" (Ibsen, 2005b, 297).

Blanca is then alone on stage during the fourth scene; the only stage direction given is that a Viking war horn is heard from the left. This brings about the fifth scene and Gandalf's re-entry from the right, and the sixth scene immediately follows as the Vikings enter with Roderik. Blanca throws herself into Roderik's arms. One of the Vikings exit to the left, and re-enter with their banner. Roderik falls onto his knees, and then rises again showing his arm. Gandalf throws himself into his father's arms. One Viking exits, hands are shaken and Roderik betroths his two children to each other. Blanca and Gandalf embrace their father; Roderick ascends the burial mound and the bard seats himself with his harp by Roderik's feet. Blanca grabs the Viking banner and the play ends.

Discussion of the diverging stage directions

Besides the obvious changes to the appearance of the setting, what I find intriguing is how the stage directions of the 1854 version display a more three-dimensional theatrical space than the 1850 version.

The first version of *The Burial Mound* operates within a theatrical space that is only defined regarding depth. According to its opening stage direction, there is a background, middle and foreground (see Ibsen, 2005a, 259). All the action takes place on the same level. Blanca's flower ceremony takes place by the altar placed at the foot of the mound. The characters come and go, but wherefrom and whereto is unspecified. There is no left or right in the stage directions of the 1850 version, the setting is not defined sideways. This is a valid observation for the whole first version of the play; it takes place within a theatrical space only defined by its depth.

The stage directions of the second version of Ibsen's one-act play present us with a more defined theatrical space. In the 1854 version there are only two instances where the direction someone enters from or exits to is unspecified.⁵ Otherwise the dramatis personae enter and exit somewhere specific: left or right, foreground or background. Roderick Rudler, in his article on the stage directions in Ibsen's earliest plays, points out how Ibsen in the 1854 version also lets the action unfold on multiple levels simultaneously (Rudler, 1963, 247). One example of this being Blanca standing upon the mound talking while Gandalf is standing on the forest floor. The theatrical space of the 1854 version is thus more accurately specified, and it presents a theatrical space defined both regarding its depth, width and – to some degree – height, creating a more three-dimensional space than in the previous version.

Ibsen's perception, notation and use of the stage, had thus changed between 1850 and 1854. What happened in the intervening years that altered Ibsen's stage directions in such a way? The answer, I believe, lies in Ibsen's increased theatre affinity. Thus I will make a necessary detour into the theatre culture that Ibsen became part of, in order to point out how this culture as well as Ibsen's responsibilities within this cultural framework were essential in transforming the stage directions of the second version of *The Burial Mound*.

⁵ Both instances of unspecified coming and going takes place during the sixth scene. Firstly when the Vikings enter with Roderik, secondly as one Viking exits (see Ibsen, 2005b, 327 and 336).

Ibsen – a practical man of the theatre

Although Ibsen most likely had seen theatre performances before moving to Christiania, Ibsen's practical theatre experience was meagre at the time of writing *The Burial Mound*. Whereas Ibsen in 1850 was a theatre novice, by 1854 he was a far more seasoned man of the theatre. This was due to him being hired as a dramatic writer at *Det norske Theater* in Bergen, in November 1851. More importantly: other tasks besides writing was rapidly added to Ibsen's workload at the Bergen theatre. In April 1852, Ibsen was appointed stage director by the board of the theatre, and in May 1853 he was appointed stage manager as well. Thus, by 1854 Ibsen had gained an intimate knowledge of the 1850s theatre culture, and more specifically how this culture manifested itself in the day-to-day workings of the Bergen theatre.

Within the theatre of the 1850s, what was expected of a stage director and of a stage manager? According to an instruction for the stage director, written by the board of the theatre, Ibsen was to organize the scenic arrangements; the costumes and the scenery of each play produced at the theatre. Ibsen was also responsible for achieving the necessary interplay of the ensemble. All in all, he was to stage the play (Ms230b/3a, August 1852).⁶ However, the theatre board's perception of staging did not at this point in time include the instruction of roles. Consequently, the theatre had hired Hermann Laading, a local schoolmaster, to perform this task. According to the theatre board's instruction for the role instructor, he was to explain to the actors how their characters were to be understood and how their lines were to be pronounced and performed (Ms230b/3a, August 1852).

A little more than a year after being hired as stage director, Ibsen was appointed stage manager as well. As such, he was to supervise all rehearsals on stage, decide on the setting and scenery, and run the performances from the stage manager's desk placed just off stage (Ms230b/3a, 5th of May 1853). Ibsen was thus by the spring of 1853 given full responsibility for everything relating to the staging, scenery and machinery for all productions staged at the theatre in Bergen.

When performing his duties regarding staging, such as seeing to the scenic arrangements, supervising the rehearsals and running the performances, exactitude regarding where the actors were to exit and enter, was essential. Thus a specified perception, notation and use of the stage, were needed in order to perform his tasks at the theatre in Bergen.

Ibsen's changed perception, notation and use of the stage are not only apparent in his 1854 stage directions, but also in the production books that he kept while in Bergen. A production book contains descriptions of the staging of given plays made in order “/.../ to commit the performance to memory” (Pavis, 1998, 287). The need for documenting the staging in this manner and the need to remember the performance was due to the theatres at the time being based on the repertory system. As weeks and months, even years, might pass between each performance of a given play, a thorough documentation of the planned staging would come in handy. Ibsen kept three successive production books, in which he recorded 53 production notes – that is his planned staging of these plays – from autumn 1852 until he left Bergen in summer 1857. During this time period the theatre gave 358 performances, adding

⁶ The full title for this manuscript is Ms230b/3a: *Copibog for det Norske Theaters Bestyrelse*, that is “Book of outgoing letters from the Board of the Norwegian Theatre”

122 new plays to its repertory (Lorentzen, 1949, 124).

Ibsen's production notes give a solid impression of Ibsen's perception, notation and use of the theatrical space while performing his duties as stage director and stage manager in Bergen. Ibsen's production notes consistently contain information on two main topics: the creation of setting and the use of these settings. The production notes lists information about the scenery and stage properties used for establishing the diverse settings, as well as on the changes of setting. Comments about sound and lighting are recorded, as are technical cues. The actors' use of the stage is described in varying detail, but at times the description deals with their relation to each other as well as to the setting. When Ibsen is placing persons and items on the stage, these are placed to the left or right, in the foreground or background. Entrances and exits are specified; sometimes detailing between which pair of wings they are to take place.

In order to make sense of these production notes, as well as Ibsen's job description, some information regarding the theatre Ibsen worked at in Bergen is necessary. The local Dramatic Society had built the theatre that opened in 1800, and it stood until a British bomb hit it 29th October 1944. The theatre was built with a raked stage fitted with five pair of wings. From 1825 onwards the theatre had state-of-the-art stage machinery that performed the essential, rapid changes of scenery (Nygaard, 1984, 65). The stage was deeper than its width, 11.3 metres deep and 11 metres wide. It was lit by a combination of oil lamps and tallow candles until gaslight was installed in 1856 (Broch, 1994, 31). The different settings to be displayed on stage would be created by means of scenery, which consisted of painted borders, wings, backcloths, set pieces and flats. Wings on the sides of the stage, borders above and a background would compose a full set of scenery. The scenery was largely two-dimensional, but the elements were painted and placed in relation to each other in such a way as to produce the illusion of a three-dimensional perspective painting.

The stage illusion, governing the creation of stage pictures in the 1850s, aimed to give a visual imitation of the object and/or place in question. Whereas the stage picture previously would offer a spectacular background for the play to be performed in front of, the 1850s stage illusion led to staging practices providing a stage picture that would become involved in the play. Within this stage illusion new kinds of scenery, such as three-dimensional set pieces, produced stage pictures that the actors could – and would – become involved with, and in which the action of the play could unfold (Gjervan, 2010, 195).

This involvement with the stage picture is perceptible in the stage directions of the 1854 version of *The Burial Mound*, most notably when Blanca ascends the mound. In 1850, she performs her flower ceremony in front of the altar and the mound, in front of the stage picture, whereas Ibsen now, with greater affinity with the theatre culture of the 1850s, places her within the stage picture – upon the mound.⁷

So, how would the titular mound have been established in 1854 at the theatre in Bergen? Two of the four inventories pertaining to the Bergen theatre in the 1850s,

⁷ A similar motif, albeit picturing a blonde woman standing upon a mound by a menhir, is the subject of Andreas Bloch's 1905 postcard:
http://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fil:Norsk_Nasjonalisme_Vikingdyrking_1905.jpg

lists the following piece of scenery: “En Kjempehøi med Bautastene /.../” – a burial mound with a menhir (see DdSx6 and DNTx1).⁸ What kind of scenery could this item have been?

In both versions of the play, the mound is placed centre stage. Assuming that Ibsen the playwright learned from Ibsen the stage director and stage manager, I turn to his own production notes in order to see how centre stage items were to be established. There are four instances in the production notes where Ibsen places a piece of scenery stage centre, and in all of these instances Ibsen uses a set piece to establish the central element of the stage picture (Gjervan, 2010, 198).

A set piece is “/.../ a two- or three-dimensional scenery unit which has been set to stand independently on stage /.../” (Harrison, 1998, 241). This is probably how the mound in Ibsen’s 1854 production of his own play was established as well, the question being whether this set piece was two-dimensional or three-dimensional? Two-dimensional set pieces had been in use at least in exterior settings in the theatre since prior to 1638 (see for instance Sabbatini, 1958, 142). In England three-dimensional elements of full scenery had begun transforming theatrical aims already from 1760, beginning in exterior settings (Nicoll, 1958, 174).

The use of a three-dimensional set piece seems perhaps most likely. The three-dimensional set pieces were practicable, i.e. they could be used, thus being better able to satisfy the ambitions of the current stage illusion. As this illusion sought to give a truthful imitation of an actual object, the three-dimensional set piece could take this imitation one step further than the two-dimensional set pieces. The two-dimensional set pieces could hardly be involved in the performance without betraying their true, flimsy nature.

However, Ibsen himself provides possible evidence to the contrary, through a commented sketch that he made for a Danish production of *Peer Gynt* at the *Dagmartheatret* in 1886 (Neiiendam, 1978, 37). The sketch is quite crude, depicting Peer running away from mother Åse – which he has placed upon the roof of the mill-house. Under the sketch Ibsen comments: “NB. Hun løftes på et bag huset anbragt stativ, som kan skydes i vejret” – “NB. She is lifted on a stand, which is placed behind the house and which can be elevated” (see Neiiendam, 1978, 36).⁹ A contemporary artist’s impression of this scene is to be found in the review of the production (see Neiiendam, 1978, 36).¹⁰ Here we only see Peer’s mother from the waist up, the rest of her is hidden behind the house. This points to the use of a two-dimensional set piece, the mill-house, behind which the actor playing Åse is placed on a stand and lifted in the air. Perhaps this comment by Ibsen also gives us a clue as to how Blanca was placed upon the mound in the 1854 version of *The Burial*

⁸ These are manuscripts in the keep of the Bergen Theatre Archives: *DdSx6: Fortegnelse over Decorationer og andre Gjenstande til Brug paa Scenen* and *DNTx1: Fortegnelse over Decorationer samt Theatrets øvrige Løsøre*. The title of these two manuscripts in English would be “Catalogue of scenery and other items used on the stage” (undated), and “Catalogue of scenery and of the theatre’s remaining goods and chattels” (first half dated 05/12/1864, the other half dated 06/12/1864).

⁹ The sketch is also listed as picture 124 on

<http://www.ibsen.net/index.gan?id=13509&show=yes&start=121&stop=126&active=121>

¹⁰ The drawing can also be found on: <http://www.ibsen.net/index.gan?id=11113136&subid=0>

Mound? The comment is nonetheless given by an experienced man of the theatre, in the know regarding how to employ the theatrical tools to his own ends.¹¹

Conclusion

In this article I have looked at the differing stage directions of the two versions of Ibsen's play *The Burial Mound*, and how an explanation for the variance between the two can be found in Ibsen's increased experience as a practical man of the theatre. John Northam, in his study of the stage directions in Ibsen's prose dramas, claims ".../ that Ibsen presents his characters not only through dialogue but also through the suggestiveness of visual details contained in his visually important stage-directions /.../" (Northam, 1953, 11). By comparing the two versions of *The Burial Mound*, it becomes apparent that Ibsen's stage directions were not always fashioned in the manner most familiar to us – that is, as they appear in Ibsen's contemporary plays. The content and form of the stage directions of the *The Burial Mound* (1850) are not written with the same meticulous attention to visual detail that we have since come to associate with Ibsen's stage directions. The stage directions of the 1854 version, however, present a more familiar organisation of the types of information that the stage directions of Ibsen's contemporary plays usually display. The opening stage direction exclusively gives information regarding the setting of the play. Any other information, such as the position of the characters in relation to each other or the set, is listed below. The stage directions of the 1854 version also present a theatrical space that is conceived of as a three-dimensional, and hence more visually detailed, setting.

This first look into the differing stage directions in the two versions of *The Burial Mound*, displays an interesting stage in the development of the form and content of Ibsen's stage directions. Something had happened in the four years that passed between the two versions, making Ibsen change his perception, notation and use of the stage – on the page. Svend Christiansen, in his treatment of Ibsen's stage directions, draws attention to the fact that Northam failed to recognize the role played by theatre conventions as a formative factor for Ibsen's stage directions (Christensen, 1983, 7). Based on the finds of this article, I will claim that the stage directions that Ibsen wrote for the 1854 version of *The Burial Mound* are not only tangible reports of his intentions regarding the setting of this play; they are just as much tangible reports of the theatre culture for and within which they were written. A study of Ibsen's stage directions regarding what kind of information they give and how this information is presented at different times in his oeuvre has, to the best of my knowledge, yet to be performed. Such a study of the development of the content and form of Ibsen's stage directions should be traced in light of Ibsen's intimate familiarity with the theatre of the 1850s, as I believe that is where important clues lie as to how Ibsen's stage directions as we know them came about.

¹¹ How could the remaining stage directions of *The Burial Mound* (1854) be transferred from page to stage? The forest setting indicated in the stage direction, was one of the standard settings that a theatre of the 1850s would be expected to have in its stock. According to the inventories, the theatre in Bergen had no less than three such sets of scenery (see Ddsx6 and DNTx1).

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Biographical note

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Summary

In this article I compare and discuss the differing stage directions of the two versions of Ibsen's play *The Burial Mound*. Furthermore, I explore how the variance regarding the stage directions of the two versions of the play can be explained by Ibsen's increased theatre affinity, due to his work as stage director and stage manager at the theatre in Bergen during the early 1850s.

Keywords

Stage directions, Ibsen as a practical man of the theatre, theatrical space, the 1850s theatre culture, *Det norske Theater* in Bergen.