

# *A CAPRICE*

## – THE SUMMIT OF IBSEN’S THEATRICAL CAREER

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Erik Bøgh’s *A Caprice* (En Kaprice) premiered 7 September 1859 at the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania (Oslo), staged by theatre manager Henrik Ibsen. The production then ran for another thirty-five performances during the 1859-60 season. In relation to the population of the town, this is by far the greatest box-office success in the history of regular theatres in Norway. No wonder that Michael Meyer understood *A Caprice* as the ultimate example of the unholy trade Ibsen was forced into as a theatre manager. According to Meyer, in staging *A Caprice* Ibsen was for the only time in his life “rebuked for truckling to the box-office” (Meyer 1971, 166). The contemporary criticism claimed that Ibsen, by staging *A Caprice* and other dance performances, was reducing the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania to a kind of amusement park for the lower classes (*Morgenbladet* Nr. 278, 9.10.1859).

Contrary to prevailing opinion, we will in the following present *A Caprice* as the summit of Ibsen’s theatrical career and underline that both this and other dance productions staged by Ibsen in this period were not at all mere amusement for the lower classes but instead important expressions of artistic creativity and development.

### IBSEN’S THEATRICAL CAREER

Ibsen’s career as a theatre director and later theatre manager at the Norwegian theatres in Bergen and Christiania started unexpectedly and surprisingly all of a

sudden in October 1852 and ended in disaster and bankruptcy in June 1862. Almost all Ibsen scholars have therefore understood his later advice in a letter to his friend and rival Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson that, for a poet, working in a theatre would be like a repeated daily abortion,<sup>1</sup> was Ibsen's verdict over his own theatrical career. This understanding is supported by the fact that Ibsen wrote no new dramas during his time at the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania, from 1857 to 1862. This was his "longest period of inactivity as a dramatist" (Meyer 1971, 166).

We, however, interpret Ibsen's words within another context. During the entire period from 1852 through 1862 Ibsen was occupied full time in a theatre. He had his salary and income from the theatre. Only in his Bergen period did he write dramas to be staged at the theatre, on the annual occasion of the founding day of the theatre. Bjørnson on the other hand was first of all a poet, a writer, who occasionally and for shorter periods worked as a theatre director and manager. While Ibsen during these years had a theatrical career, Bjørnson established a literary career which also included close relations to literary critics in Denmark, such as Clemens Petersen and the publisher Frederik V. Hegel at Gyldendal.

It is therefore important to study Ibsen's theatrical career in terms of his staging and what he staged. So, contrary to Meyer who claimed that Ibsen "staged nothing of interest at the Norwegian Theatre during the autumn" of 1859 (1971, 166), we will argue that Ibsen during the autumn of 1859 staged the most interesting production in his theatrical career and probably also the most interesting production for understanding his later development as a dramatic writer, namely *A Caprice* by Erik Bøgh.

Why did Ibsen stage *A Caprice*? The immediate answer is: to attract a large audience. The Norwegian Theatre in Christiania, like all theatres in Norway at this time, was a private theatre with no state subsidies or support and with limited private contributions from board members and others. The theatre was

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<sup>1</sup> "Theaterstrævet er for en Digter en dagligt gjentagen Fosterfordrivelse", Rome 1867.12.28. HU XVI, 203

accordingly almost totally dependent on the market, on the income from its audience. Ibsen as the new director of the theatre increased the income of the theatre considerably. In his report to the board in 1861 Ibsen proudly presented that from a yearly average of 6,998 specie Dollars before he took over in 1857, the box-office income increased considerably in the next years and rose to over 11,000 specie Dollars in the 1858-59 season, with almost 12,000 specie Dollars in the 1859-60 season (HU XV, 277). This indicates that *A Caprice* contributed to the high income of the theatre, but the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania also had a high level of income in the years before and in the year after the 1859-60 season as well.

Despite the high income, the theatre still had a deficit, even after the 1859-60 season. The problem for the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania, like all theatres before and after, was the high operating costs. To run a theatre with a building, props and machinery, actors and staging is extremely expensive and most of the costs are repeated every night. Contrary to the production of books, where the costs per copy drops radically with the number of copies produced, there are in the theatre hardly any long-term savings other than the scenery and costumes and special props for the production. The differences in the costs per night for a production performed one or two times and a success like *A Caprice* running 36 times were rather limited. If not before, so definitely during and after the performing of *A Caprice*, these facts should be obvious for all engaged in the theatre, included the members of the board.

On 25 October 1859, seven weeks after the opening night of *A Caprice*, Ibsen on behalf of the board of the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania sent an application to the Norwegian Parliament (Stortinget) for support for the theatre (HU XV, 224 – 230). Here he underlined that while the other artists, painters, sculptors, composers, musicians and poets had been granted state subsidies, only dramatic artists were left unsupported and dependent on their institutions own income. This was the third application for support from the board of the theatre and they were seemingly not optimistic because only two days later, the 27 October 1859,

the board of the theatre called for a national subscription to pay for construction of a better venue for the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania.<sup>2</sup>

Ibsen was strongly opposed to the board's plans for a renovation of the theatre and in a letter to Peter Blytt, member of the board of the Norwegian Theatre in Bergen, 6 August 1859,<sup>3</sup> Ibsen added a post scriptum where he openly ridiculed that the board of the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania had sent one of their members, Siegwald Petersen, all over Norway to beg for money for the renovation of the theatre. One of the reasons the board gave for the necessity of the renovation was that the stage at the theatre was so narrow that the actors could not move. This argument has again, uncritically been developed further by theatre historians such as Roderick Rudler and repeated by Ibsen scholars like Meyer, who popularized the false notion that actors in the theatres in this period stood in a bow around the prompter's box and that all of them faced the audience, even when they were meant to be speaking to each other (Rudler 1962,13; Rudler 1982,83; Meyer 1971, 106).

The production of *A Caprice* proved in this regard both that it was possible to perform dance on the original stage at the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania, which means that the planned renovation of the stage was unnecessary, and that the actors both could and did move on the stage and still be visible for the entire audience in a full auditorium. In other words, by producing *A Caprice* Ibsen proved that there were no valid artistic reasons to renovate the theatre.

Nonetheless, the board still decided both to buy the theatre building and to renovate it. The re-opening was delayed and the renovation became much more expensive than planned. The result of the renovation was that the number of seats in the auditorium were reduced rather than expanded. The board therefore decided to raise ticket prices to compensate for the reduced size of the audience. Because the stage was enlarged, the inventory of decorations and

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<sup>2</sup> ([http://www.edd.uio.no/cocoon/ibsenarkiv01\\_01/BREV\\_1844-1871ht%7CB18591027NN\\_Vi\\_tillade.xhtml](http://www.edd.uio.no/cocoon/ibsenarkiv01_01/BREV_1844-1871ht%7CB18591027NN_Vi_tillade.xhtml))

<sup>3</sup> ([http://www.edd.uio.no/cocoon/ibsenarkiv01\\_01/BREV\\_1844-1871ht%7CB18590806PB.xhtml](http://www.edd.uio.no/cocoon/ibsenarkiv01_01/BREV_1844-1871ht%7CB18590806PB.xhtml))

sceneries had to be enlarged, altered and renewed. The result of all this was an exploding deficit, ultimately leading to the financial collapse of the theatre; the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania went bankrupt in 1862. However, not only the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania went bankrupt in the early 1860s. The following year the Norwegian Theatre in Bergen went bankrupt and soon after the Norwegian Theatre in Trondheim. Of the four public theatres in Norway only one, Christiania Theatre, survived, and only just.

This wave of bankruptcies in the Norwegian theatres indicated that the idea of establishing Norwegian theatres was dead. But Christiania Theatre also had difficulties despite the fact that the theatre no longer had a rival theatre and the number of inhabitants in Christiania was growing rapidly. So why was not the theatre audience growing?

There are two interrelated reasons for the crisis in the Christiania theatres in the early 1860s. On the one hand, Christiania as the new capital of Norway after 1814, acquired an urban class associated with state and private administration and business and to the new university founded in 1813. This class had a strong relationship to theatre, but as a class it did not expand quickly. On the other hand, the growth of the population from the 1840s and onward occurred largely among people who moved in from the rural areas and were engaged in the growing industry in the town. These new inhabitants had no theatre tradition. But because Norway since the school reform of 1739 had a literate rural population (Fet 1995), Christiania gained a fast growing reading audience recruited from the new inhabitants moving in from the countryside. This opened a large market for print media such as journals, newspapers and books. In the early 1860s Norway underwent a media revolution, which was most noticeably in Christiania (Fulsås 2011). As a result of this revolution the audience for print media started to grow rapidly, while the core audience for theatre after the summit of 1859-60 rapidly declined (Andersen 2010, 2011).

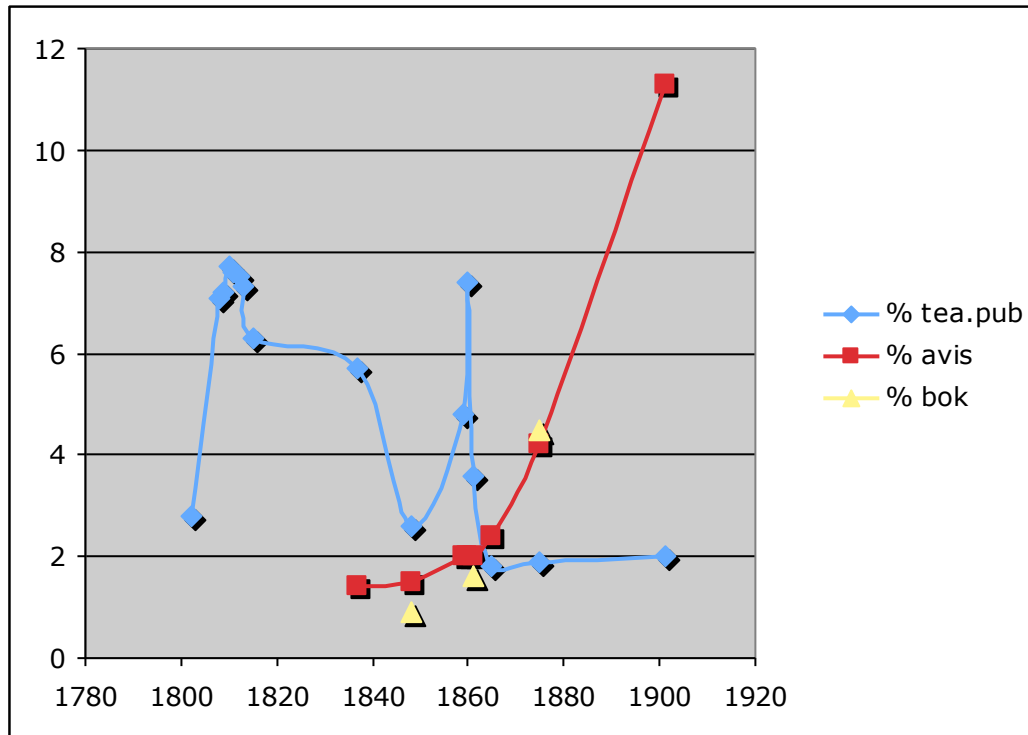


Diagram showing the audience in relation to the population in Christiania between 1800 and 1900.

The blue line for the theatre audience had a peak around 1814 and declined to a low level around 1850 before it experienced rapid growth during the 1850s to a summit in 1859-60 and then dropped to a stable, low level after 1864. The red line for newspapers and the yellow dots for the book market both grew rapidly after 1850 (Andersen 2010, 217).

The question, however, is who were the audience for the theatre “boom” around 1859-60? Was it a new lower class audience, as suggested by the contemporary critic in *Morgenbladet* and later repeated by prominent Ibsen scholars like Meyer, or was it just a last bloom of the upper class audience? Our answer is that Ibsen with *A Caprice* did not attract a new audience, but rather attracted a maximum of the already established audience. Our reason for this claim is the history and social function of the Norwegian theatre.

#### THEATRE WAS AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE NORWEGIAN UPPER CLASS CULTURE

Unlike even the closest neighbours, Sweden and Denmark, nineteenth-century Norway had no royal and feudal traditions. The land-owning aristocracy died out in the late middle Ages and in the constitution of 1814 nobility was abolished. But even if the social structure of Norway was more equal than in other European countries, Norway too had a distinct upper class of ship owners,

merchants, higher civil servants, and owners of saw mills, iron and copper works. Generally this Norwegian upper class has been labelled as the *patrician* class.

Contrary to other nations where the first theatre institutions were established as royal theatres, theatre in Norway was from the earliest stage a citizens' theatre. The first Norwegian theatre institutions started with dramatic societies, which were founded in the larger towns along the Norwegian coast starting in the late 1700s. The members of the dramatic societies were almost all members of the patrician upper class in these towns. The seating capacity of the theatres was adjusted to the number of members: between 300 and 500 in the smaller towns and around 1000 in the larger towns of Christiania, Bergen and Trondheim. These figures correspond to around 10% of the inhabitants in these towns.

Interest in theatre expanded and after 1800 the established dramatic societies of the patrician class were challenged by a new class of citizens who started their own dramatic societies, first in Trondheim in 1803 (Anker 1958, 8), then in Christiania 1804 (Huitfeldt 1876, 399). Associated with both these theatres was the Swedish ballet-master Johan Peter Strömberg who also was the first to found a public theatre in Norway when he in 1827 opened a new theatre building in Christiania with the intention of educating professional Norwegian actors. He had to give up after only one year and from 1828 a new institution, Christiania Public Theatre (Christiania offentlige Theater), rented Strömberg's building. After a fire ruined the theatre a new institution, Christiania Theatre, opened in a new theatre building in 1836 with Danish actors and management. This theatre was in turn the impetus for the founding of Norwegian theatres, first in Bergen, then in Christiania and finally in Trondheim. The ambition of these theatres was to establish a Norwegian theatre tradition based on professional Norwegian actors as distinct from the imported Danish tradition.

This development from dramatic societies to professional theatre institutions represented an important change in the relation between theatre and audience. In the dramatic societies the upper class members functioned in turn as actors,

board members, management and audience. The theatre was a social arena for the upper class where they could meet their business partners and the younger generation could find their partners for marriage. The new professional theatres on the other hand had professional management and professional actors, but the members of the upper class were still the members of the board and the audience.

According to the information in Øyvind Anker's surveys of the repertories, the members of the boards of the two theatres in Christiania in the 1850s and 60s came from the upper class, just as with the former dramatic societies (Anker 1956a, Anker 1956b). The social status of the members of the board of the Norwegian Theatre was more impressive than the status of the members of the board of the Christiania Theatre. They represented a selection of the richest merchants, industrial entrepreneurs, bankers, government officials, officers, lawyers, judges, headmasters and university professors in Christiania.

In her study of Ibsen and the Norwegian theatre in Christiania Audhild Lund underlines that, based on the general opinion in the press, there was no difference between the repertory and the quality of acting and staging between the two theatres in Christiania (Lund 1925, 113). Despite this fact Lund claimed that the two theatres in Christiania had different audiences (Lund 1925, 7). This opinion has later uncritically been repeated by among others Daniel Haakonsen and Ann Schmiesing (Haakonsen 1981,65; Schmiesing 2006, 111). Anette Storli Andersen has, however, based on Lund's observations that the success of one of the two theatres came at the expense of the other, drawn the opposite conclusion, namely that the two theatres actually shared the same audience (Andersen 2010, 180). This means that even if it pretended to be a "Folk" theatre, the Norwegian Theatre had the same upper class audience as the Christiania Theatre.

In accordance with Andersen we will argue that *A Caprice* became such a great success at the Norwegian Theatre not because it attracted an audience from the lower classes, but because it attracted a larger proportion of the upper class



audience; this was an audience, which in number and status corresponded to the audience of the former dramatic societies. The reason for this, we will claim, was because the production was based on dance.

#### DANCE WAS A DISTINGUISHING FEATURE IN UPPER CLASS CULTURE

Dance or more specific the dances presented and referred to in the text to *A Caprice*, the *minuet*, *feier* and *quadrille*, were an important part of upper class culture. During the seventeenth and and eighteenth centuries the minuet was the most central ballroom dance at royal courts all over Europe, and especially in France. Several versions of the minuet existed: advanced choreographed minuets, which were danced by professional dancers on stage; and simpler minuets, which belonged to the ballroom repertoire. The main form, *le menuet ordinaire*, was danced at balls by one couple at a time in rank order, starting with the king and queen. It consisted of six figures: a presentation, a z-figure, presenting of the right hand, presenting of the left hand, another z-figure and the presenting of both hands to conclude the dance (Rameau 1725). Other choreographed dances on the eighteenth-century repertoire, such as the *sarabande*, *bourrée* and the *gavotte*, were composed to specific tunes and had different step combinations for nearly every bar in the music. On the contrary, the ordinary minuet consisted of almost only minuet steps and the figures were a well-established pattern. This made the minuet appropriate to be danced to nearly all minuet tunes. Still, to be able to perform the minuet properly and without *faux pas*, hours of practice with a dancing master were needed. The technique is advanced, requiring strength, control, musicality and precise accuracy in the performing of each step. "Sinking and rising, moving in serpentine paths, the shifting movements from close to distant along with the eye contact between the dancers filled the minuet with aesthetic surprise and delight for both the performers and spectators" (Russel & Bourassa 2007, 4).

The minuet went out of fashion as a ballroom dance after the French Revolution in 1789. It was abandoned for the aristocratic associations connected to it. This caused, however, a tension between the real attractions of dance as entertainment and the dancing masters' resistance to its disappearance. They

continued to promote it throughout the first half of the eighteenth century (Lempa 2007). The minuet remained a favourite with the dancing masters for its potential to develop technique, control, discipline and classical elegance, which other dances in fashion, such as the waltz and the English dances, could not provide in the same way.

*Feier* is a Norwegian word for an English dance (Engelskdans) of four tours or dance sequences (as seen in Hall 1831). English dances have their origin from mid-seventeenth-century England (first popularised by John Playford in 1651, in *The English Dancing Master*). Spreading throughout Europe, the English dances became highly popular in the ballroom. As a complete opposite to the minuet, the English dances and related country-dances were dances for many couples at a time. The most usual form of the English dance in the mid-nineteenth century were the so-called triple minor set dances. Couples were organised in rows, dancing in sets of six people. The dances consisted of tours including figures such as *la chaine*, *le moulinet* and *dos à dos*. The steps in the English dances were quite intricate, resembling basic steps from the classical ballet repertoire, such as the *chassé*, *assemblé* and *balancé*. Still, the social aspect in these dances was the most important. Usually the dances consisted of a short sequence, which was repeated, as many times as there were couples. The first couple leads the dance. They move one place each time the dance is danced so that every couple dance with each of the other couples. The dance is finished when couple number one returns to their original places.

The *quadrille*, the so-called *Quadrille Française*, is a dance related to the English dances in terms of tours, figures and steps, but performed in a square of four couples. It usually differs from the *Feier* by being composed of sequences performed by two opposite couples, which are repeated by the two remaining couples. The quadrille was already well established as a ballroom dance during the eighteenth century, but gained high popularity during the nineteenth century.

In Norway, as in Europe more broadly, dance was an important part of the social life of the upper class. To be a good dancer was a highly appreciated skill. Dance lessons with a dancing master were seen as mandatory for upper class children in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Dancing masters gave lessons in dance in the largest cities in Norway. Children of wealthy families attended their dance courses at the dancing masters' schools, or the dancing master taught the children in their homes.

The dancing master taught the children not only dance, but also etiquette and correct behaviour expected in social life. Dance was a method for teaching genteel behaviour including basic activities such as standing, walking, entering and leaving a room, as well as gestures of reverence. Social dances and gestures were politicised and expressed class identification and class exclusion (McKee 2012, 3). To appear as an educated person with dancing skills was important. Impressing a powerful audience of the wealthiest families could lead to important network connections and a future spouse.

Before young members of the upper class and newcomers to the upper class could be included in the inner circles of formal dining and balls they had to be trained in the noble arts of the upper classes. There was therefore a market for ballet-masters, like Strömberg, who in addition to the dance instruction also gave education in "Conversation, Pliering og Complimenter" (Anker 1958, 11), which means polite conversation, courtesy or gentle and cultured behaviour and compliments or proper introduction to dance.

Dance was not only a part of the social life of the community of businessmen. Dance was also – and is still today – a part of the training in the military academy and the ball of the officer cadets marked the cadet's formal entry to the rank of officers. An employed dancing master taught the cadets at the *Norwegian Military Mathematical School* in Christiania in minuets and country-dances, as well as in etiquette, on a weekly basis. According to protocols in the Military Archive, dance improved not only the cadets' ability to dance and move with grace, but helped remarkably in better learning the exercises at the regiments,

than when "their peasant-like nature makes their [bodies] stiff and unsuited" (Svarstad 2014).

Military officers, lieutenants and captains, were members of the board of the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania and one of the founders of the theatre, Johannes Klingenberg, was a military officer, first as lieutenant and then as captain. In Christiania there was an important military base at Akershus castle and a number of the audience members at the Norwegian Theatre were officers with their wives, sons and daughters.

An additional argument for the claim that *A Caprice* attracted a primarily upper class audience, was the fact that the main role, according to Ibsen's report to the board for the season 1859-60, was played by the German-Danish dancer Miss Bills (HU XV, 234). In the hand-written promptbook from the production (Bøgh) most of the dialogue in the first part was in German and most of the points in this dialogue assumed that the audience had a good command of German. Good knowledge of German was a required part of the education of the cultural class in Christiania (Lødrup 1991, 166-67). Most of the members of the new class of merchants in Christiania were also first or second-generation immigrants from Northern Germany or the Danish-German province of Southern Jutland. They had their business training in Northern Germany, in Bremen and Hamburg, and had their main business partners in Germany.

#### WHY DID IBSEN INTRODUCE DANCE AT THE NORWEGIAN THEATRE?

Ibsen had an upper class background. In his childhood memories he described Skien as an extremely happy and sociable town with many refined, wealthy and distinguished families and repeated balls and dinner parties winter and summer (HU XV, 369). The upper class social life included both the families in the town of Skien and the families living at the farms in the countryside surrounding Skien. When the Ibsen family moved out of Skien to the farm Venstøbb, they were not isolated from the social life of Skien and the surrounding country. The Ibsen family was not the only family who had to move out of Skien to farms in the countryside. Almost all the former patrician families in Skien, even the richest

and most successful, went bankrupt in the 1820s and 30s and moved out of town. The Ibsen family's closest neighbour in Skien, the Cudrio family, also moved out of Skien and became their closest neighbours at Venstøb. The former patrician families at the Venstøb farms established a social life similar to their former upper class life in Skien and included the neighbouring families of the county officials, the parish clerk and the sheriff. They also raised their children to be a part of this culture with balls arranged at Christmas time for the children at Venstøb and the neighbouring farms. At these balls young Ibsen is reported to have been quite a dancer, a "ballkavalér". According to the description by two sisters who knew him as a child (presented in *Nationen* 1920, nr.179 and repeated by Mosfeld 1949, 94-5), Ibsen obviously knew all the skills of proper ballroom behaviour, as they were conceived of by Strömberg, as "Conversation, Pliering og Complimenter". He was a nice and well-bred boy who behaved in a due and polite manner (Pliering). It was a great honour to be asked for a dance (Compliment). He had a gentle understanding of matters and situations and had an unconstrained ease of manners and was always able to talk openly and without obligation (Conversation). Most likely he also knew how to dance the minuet and the English dances, as these dances were still strongly present in the repertoires of the dancing masters around 1850.<sup>4</sup>

With such a background and basic knowledge of dance it was no wonder that Ibsen introduced dance at the Norwegian Theatre, and just like the theatre pioneer Strömberg who understood dance as a basic training for actors (Anker 1958, 11), Ibsen also established a dance school at the Norwegian Theatre (Lund 1925, 81). Dance training was actually introduced as early as 1853 at the precursor to the Norwegian Theatre, the dramatic school's theatre (Christiania Norske Dramatiske Skoles Theater) with classes by the famous Danish ballet master Bournonville, who visited Norway several times in the 1840 and early 50s (Norsk balletthistorie).

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<sup>4</sup> Newspaper advertisements show that the minuet still was highly appreciated as an educational dance throughout the 19th century. When dancing master J. C. Larsén announces his dance courses, he stresses as late as in 1876 that especially the most decent minuet will be taught in addition to the now usable social dances: "Særligt skal jeg gjøre opmærksom paa, at den anstandsfulde Menuet vil blive indøvet ved Siden af de nu brugelige Selskapsdandse" (Dagbladet, 27/12/1879)

As early as on his study tour in 1852 Ibsen brought with him to Copenhagen three of the actors from Bergen and arranged dance training for them by the Royal solo dancer Hoppe. In his letter to the board of the theatre Ibsen underlined that the actors were first and foremost trained in dancing minuet and elegant performance on stage.<sup>5</sup> Ibsen suggested to the board that Hoppe and members of the ballet in Copenhagen should visit Bergen the following year and he underlined that the actors from Bergen were both very interested in the dance training, and that they fully understood its necessity.<sup>6</sup>

Dance was not introduced by Ibsen as an attraction, but as an integrated part of his theatre program. From the very beginning of his career in the theatre, Ibsen was concerned with movement on the stage. As Ellen Karoline Gjervan (2010) has discussed, from his Bergen years three production books have been preserved with Ibsen's detailed indications for movements, first indicated by dotted lines on the stage drawings, later just described in text. For Ibsen it was not only important where the characters moved, but also how they moved. His early interest in movement on stage also question the established myth, presented by Rudler and others, that the actors in this period of time were not moving but stood in a half circle around the prompter's box. Even before *A Caprice* Ibsen had expressed an understanding of theatre as action, based on movement, dance and bodily and physical activity.

Ibsen was well aware that dance was an essential part of the audience's social life. The fact that the audience was an educated class, also in dance, contributed to this play's popularity by means of bodily involvement. Their familiarity with the movements performed on stage most likely prompted kinesthetic recognition in the audience. Recalling pleasurable experiences from dance in the body engaged the audience in additional ways than just intellectual perception (Fraleigh 1987, 183).

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<sup>5</sup> – Hvad der hovedsagelig bliver gjort til Gjenstand for Dandseunderviisningen er Menuet, samt hvad der forøvrigt kan bidrage til en elegant Optræden paa Scenen. (HU XVI,31)

<sup>6</sup> – Saavel H. Nielsen, som Bruun og hans Kone omfattede Dandseunderviisningen med megen Interesse, og, hvad der er det Bedste, de indsee fuldkommen det Nødvendige ved Samme. (HU XVI, 33):

From this perspective it is interesting to read Bjørnson's contemporary review of *A Caprice* in *Aftenbladet*. His angry accusations gain a double meaning when he claimed that with *A Caprice* the Norwegian Theatre was recovering [literally "dancing back"] all its health of youth: "det danser sig sin hele Ungdomshelse tilbage" (*Aftenbladet*).<sup>7</sup> Ibsen's vision for the theatre had been to turn it from the outward declamation to action and vitality and with this turn he wanted to reform the theatre. This was underlined by Bjørnson in his ironic words that Ibsen by staging *A Caprice* was about to reform the dramatic world: "holder paa at reformere vor dramatiske verden." What Bjørnson unconsciously and unintentionally underlined in his negative review was the fact that Ibsen with *A Caprice* actually introduced a modern revolution in the theatre through dance.

#### THE SUMMIT – AND TURNING POINT

With *A Caprice* Ibsen not only turned to a new theatre language based on body and movement. He also turned away from the past and toward an immediate theatre, which opened for the contemporary. His ideal for the theatre was no longer narrow-minded Norwegian nationalism and idealistic romanticism. Bjørnson was therefore totally right when he accused Ibsen of no longer fighting for the Norwegian national theatre and claimed that the Norwegian Theatre had cast overboard the heavy burden of what Bjørnson called the honest nationalistic intent. *Morgenbladet*, in accordance with Bjørnson, also claimed that the so-called Norwegian Theater no longer existed.

Meyer found it:

[...] especially ironical that Bøgh's play should have revived the fortunes of the Norwegian Theater, for it poked considerable fun at the extravagances of nationalism: one of the characters was a Norwegian ballet-master who spoke broad *pipersvik* dialect (Meyer 1971,167).

Meyer interpreted this as if Ibsen with *A Caprice* had encouraged a parody against the dangers of extremism. The parody in *A Caprice* was, however, not a

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<sup>7</sup> And not "it is dancing away its youth" as Michael Meyer (1971, 167) wrongly has translated Bjørnson.

parody against extremism, but a parody of the superficial nationalism represented by the ballet-master and “Norwegian Norwegian” (“Balletmester og norsk Nordmand”) Bjerkebæk.

In this relation it is important to underline that Erik Bøgh wrote *A Caprice* especially for the Spanish dancer Pepita de Oliva at the Casino Theatre in Copenhagen. He was the manager of the theatre and a prolific contributor of farces and vaudevilles for the Danish and Norwegian theatres. He had a rather good knowledge of Norwegian. He had lived in Norway, was married to a Norwegian and had actually had his breakthrough as dramatic author in Norway by writing farces for Christiania Theatre. So when he in *A Caprice* introduced the parody of a Norwegian, his context was Danish but his parody was not superficial, because he knew Norwegian and Norwegians. The character Bjerkebæk used vocabulary from the common Danish-Norwegian understanding of Norwegians as being as strong and healthy as the Norwegian mountains. His words, however, become a parody when they were taken out of their heroic context. Most of Bjerkebæk’s words are also similar to the words Ibsen himself had used as a theatre critic of “national” Norwegian plays like *Hulderens hjem* (The Home of the Wood Nymph) and *Gudbrandsdølene* (The Dalesmen) and in his essay on the genre of the giant ballad (“Om Kjæmpevisen”).

It seems rather unlikely that Ibsen should present a play that ridiculed his ideas and position. When the parody in *A Caprice* is obvious, it is also obvious that Ibsen no longer represented the ideas and values that were ridiculed by Bjerkebæk. *A Caprice* is therefore also the first indication of Ibsen’s farewell to national romanticism and romantic idealism – and to the theatre. This turn was openly expressed in his letter to Bjørnson 16 September 1864 where he first tells that he had refused to accept the offer to be the manager of Christiania Theatre absolutely, without any reservations, and without opening any possibilities that other circumstances could change his mind.<sup>8</sup> At the end of this letter he bitterly refutes the principles of national romanticism as lies and dreams. The old history

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<sup>8</sup> ”definitivt, uden Forbehold, og uden at aabne nogen Mulighed for at forandrede Omstændigheder skulde kunne fremkalde nogen anden Beslutning fra min Side” (HU XVI, 100)



had, according to Ibsen, to be crossed out because contemporary Norwegians had as little relation to their past as Greek pirates had to those who sailed to Troy and was helped by the gods.<sup>9</sup>

Ibsen's new programme was then finally established in his letter to Bjørnson 9 December 1867 after Clemens Petersen's reception of *Peer Gynt*. Here Ibsen declared that if he was no poet he should be a photographer: "Jeg skal forsøge det som Fotograf" and he should deal with his contemporaries, one by one: "Min Samtid deroppe, enkeltvis, Person for Person, skal jeg tage for mig" (HU XVI, 199).

Ibsen's turn away from national romantic ideas and aesthetic idealism has generally been explained by Ibsen's disappointment and anger after the Norwegians failed to support Denmark in the Danish-Prussian war in 1864. This was the final demise of the national myth of the Norwegians as the strong supporters of Denmark. But in our understanding the turning point actually took place with *A Caprice*, staged in 1859, five years before the Danish-Prussian war. In this production Ibsen questioned all the ideas of Norway and the Norwegians he had believed in. The production was also the turning point in his relation to the theatre. In short, when it was impossible to profit even from a hit like *A Caprice*, which attracted the majority of an upper class audience, and when it also turned out to be impossible to get governmental support for the theatre, he concluded that it was impossible to run a theatre.

Ibsen experienced after the success of *A Caprice* that the golden age of both national romanticism and the theatre was over. It was a breakdown of all his former ideas and ideals as well as the theatre, the art form for which he had been the most prominent representative. This breakdown is an often overlooked explanation for Ibsen's collapse in 1860-61. Ibsen, who in all the years before and after was known to be accurate, punctilious and strict suddenly lost all

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<sup>9</sup> "Løgn og drømme var altsaa det Hele. [...] Vor gamle Historie faar vi nu slaa en Streg over, thi Nutidens Nordmænd har aabenbart ikke mere med sin Fortid at gøre end Grækerpiraterne har med den Slægt, der sejlede til Troja og blev hjulpen av Guderne." (HU XVI, 104)

control over his professional and private life. No other scholars have offered any other viable reasons for this breakdown.

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