

## REVIEW

**UNMASKING IBSEN**

Ivo de Figueiredo: *Henrik Ibsen. Mennesket og masken*.  
Oslo: Aschehoug, 2010. 717pp. ISBN 978-82-03-19811-3

To write a new biography of the Norwegian cultural icon Henrik Ibsen can undoubtedly be called a challenge. The brave young man (today in his mid-forties) who has undertaken to perform such a task, commissioned by the publishing house Aschehoug, is the Norwegian historian Ivo de Figueiredo. His previous experience with writing biographies included a book about Johan Bernhard Hjort, the court lawyer and co-founder of the fascist political party Nasjonal Samling, a book for which he was awarded the prestigious Brage prize. Unlike his predecessors, Ivo de Figueiredo did not have any previous expert knowledge of the topic of his research. His former works were mostly related to World War II.

The present biography was originally a two-volume work. The first part (*Henrik Ibsen. Mennesket*) was published in 2006 on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Ibsen's death, and the second (*Henrik Ibsen. Masken*) came out a year later. In 2010, an abbreviated version of both books was published under the combined title *Henrik Ibsen. Mennesket og masken* (*Henrik Ibsen. The Man and the Mask*).

To write something new about the life and works of Henrik Ibsen, to find novel perspectives and to avoid repeating what has been written many times before, is most certainly challenging, particularly due to the fact that there are at least seven extensive biographies of the Norwegian playwright written by scholars and authorities such as Halvdan Koht (a two-volume biography from 1928–1929) and Michael Meyer (three volumes, 1967–1971). Ivo de Figueiredo did not even have the opportunity to write the most critical biography of Ibsen since such a book had already been written by Robert Ferguson in 1996. However, the frequently criticised book by Ferguson, who seemed to focus a little too much on the ugly sides of Ibsen's character, set the scene for a new writer. In other words, there was a need for a new, rectified and multi-faceted portrait of one of the most important Norwegians.

In the afterword de Figueiredo explains his position among the other Ibsen biographers and presents some methodological questions. His approach is not particularly radical. He sees the author and his work as interrelated. However, he hesitates "to fill the dark places with various motifs from the plays" ("å fylle de mørke feltene med alskens motiver fra skuespillene," 656). He rather concentrates on finding answers to these three questions: What kind of author did Ibsen *want* to be (what aesthetic program did he

have)? What kind of author *could* he have become (on which requirements did he have to compromise)? How was he *perceived* as an author (what was the reception)?

De Figueiredo proceeds in chronological order, his perspective being that of a traveler. The book is divided into chapters named after the places where Ibsen lived and worked. The story thus begins in Skien, continues to Christiania via Grimstad, then to Bergen and back to Christiania. In 1864 Ibsen left Norway for twenty-seven years. De Figueiredo tracks his movements step by step, starting with the playwright's stay in Rome and following him moving mainly between this city, Dresden and Munich, before returning to Norway in 1891. The author describes the respective places in great detail. For example, his picture of Rome (which for Scandinavians represented a materialised dream of paradise), still very rural in the middle of the 19th century, is very convincing. It must have been fascinating for Henrik Ibsen, coming from far north and having only a theoretical knowledge of the classical art, to see the Forum Romanum being uncovered by degrees.

The biography is very reader-friendly and differs from the others in that it tries to tear down or to modify the codified myths and statements which one has long accepted as the truth. These parts of de Figueiredo's text have also caused a stir among Norwegian critics (although, generally, the book was received very positively). The author corrects, for example, the deep-rooted image of the boy from a ruined family suffering the feeling of being *déclassé*. De Figueiredo points out that the bankruptcy of Ibsen's father was not total and that it was also very common in those days. The family had to start living more modestly and to move to the Venstøp farm (then still quite a big place, which had previously been used as a summer mansion). De Figueiredo presents evidence that Knud Ibsen remained a respected citizen surrounded by friends, and he claims that the so-called "declassing theory" was so irresistible for the previous Ibsen biographers because it supported well the image of a writer who is formed by his suffering.

De Figueiredo's perspective is also very refreshing when it comes to putting certain beliefs into the historical context. For example, the traditional view in theatrical circles is that Ibsen was a bad director. This statement is often supported by the quotes of actors remembering working with the young playwright (cf. *A History of Scandinavian Theatre* by Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker, 1996). De Figueiredo remarks correctly that part of this bad reputation was caused by the fact that Ibsen's charismatic counterpart Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson worked in the same theatres after Ibsen. In comparison with the eloquent Bjørnson, who was seen and heard everywhere, Ibsen had to appear less capable.

The biographer also has a sense of portraying small details of Ibsen's life, which help to create a more complete picture. For example, he outlines the relation between Ibsen and Strindberg with the help of an episode which describes how these two playwrights could have met at the Lund train station in 1898 but did not, Strindberg being too pompous to wait there for 50 minutes which separated the arrival of their respective trains.

Ivo de Figueiredo portrays Ibsen's life with a great understanding and a safe hand. For a reader who enjoys bolder theories, his conclusions might sometimes seem too cautious. However, de Figueiredo is a biographer and not a fiction writer, and it is understandable that he resists the temptation to skate on the thin ice of speculations. In any event, his book is an erudite work and his thorough interpretation of facts brings a number of noteworthy observations.

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