

Sunday, November 03, 2002

Last night Mark Moorman and I went to see Ibsen's notoriously unstageable verse drama "Peer Gynt" in a production (program information here) directed by Andrei Serban and with a cast from Columbia University's Theatre Arts Division.

Not in the least familiar with Ibsen's Norwegian original in translation or otherwise, I'm not entirely sure what we saw but I have a feeling that there was not a whole lot of literal Ibsen remaining in the colloquial English prose adaptation by CU student Bathsheba Doran. When Mark and I read the following in the program notes -- "Ibsen never intended it to be performed -- he wrote it to be read. This original intention gives directors and actors a fresh challenge for the imagination -- to delve into a realm never before experienced. The scope of the play is unrestricted." -- we looked at each other and simultaneously said, "Oh-oh."

The selfish and perpetually questing Peer is played anticly by nine different actors each handling a separate episode of the drama. Without meaning to nitpick a student cast, it must be said that not every Peer was equal to his scene, although Michael B. Downing deserves special points for performing the long and demanding episode in the troll kingdom entirely in the nude. I found some of the secondary roles the more sharply etched. Oliver Henzler was slyly hilarious as the German superintendent of a lunatic asylum, a part he played half as Ilse Koch and half as Dieter from SNL's "Sprockets."

I suspect that Serban's overall imagination was a little constrained by the facilities of the Theater of the Riverside Church. The staging seemed a tad rudimentary even for an economical college production. Bleeding chunks of Grieg's familiar incidental music, carelessly mixed and amplified, more or less accompanied the action. And the program contained this charming disclaimer from an anonymous Philistine:

The Theatre of the Riverside Church does not condone any nudity or sexually explicit material in the productions presented by The Columbia University School of the Arts Theatre Arts Division.

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