

# PEER GYNT

## Director's Conceptual Notes 1-1-12

“To thine own self be . . . . enough!”

These six words not only reverberate around the Troll King's hovel as proclamation of the Troll-ic philosophy for living. This sardonic, but chilling, little nugget has consequences that reach much farther: Ibsen impishly pokes a stick in the eye of Shakespeare, specifically, (Hamlet, if you didn't catch it) and, more inclusively, the grand Western-literary establishment that he both desperately aspired to and seethingly loathed; the concept of the phrase is the cornerstone of the statuary, with bricks added later from *A Doll House* (“the door slam that shook the world”), *Ghosts* (“an open sewer”), *Hedda Gabler* (“people don't do such things”) and others, that marks Henrik Ibsen as among the earliest and arguably the foremost of the writers who undertook a new “Modernism” in thought, writing, artistry and technology—the old ways no longer defined the present and the future. . . . the “modern theatre” would deal with the truth of the now. . . . be “enough” unto itself; the “trolls” of Ibsen's time are the “trolls” of *our* time—self-centered, consumed with their own sometimes prurient, sometimes prudish, always inwardly targeted needs of the flesh, of finance, of having “enough” (which ought to be at least as much as everyone else), with little regard for what it takes or the cost of achieving the “enough;” it provides an understructure and a driving, if sometimes ambivalent, intention for a sprawling life journey by an exceedingly complex, undoubtedly “modern” Everyman. Peer Gynt's journey is one of the most compelling in modern drama, as a psychological exploration, a socio-political tract, and an articulation of one of the first and greatest quasi-anti-heroes in the modern theatre. Peer, and Ibsen, show us an immense horizon of what it's like to be human (albeit dramatized in fantastical circumstances): brash and shy, vicious and delicate, intolerant and sympathetic, heroic and infantile, seductive and repulsive, thoughtless and “deep contemplative” (my own Shakespeare reference. . . different play), vengeful and redemptive, a thick-skinned oak and a core-less onion. And more.

But, then, we cannot play most of these big ideas. . . .

In an effort to begin bringing some of these thematic concepts into the reality of staging a production, I will share what will likely be a mosaic of images, ideas, potential physical needs, potential stumbling blocks, and other components that have been rolling around in my head and heart, some for many years. This is not the kind of play where we start from a point of ‘knowing,’ but rather we, like Peer, should expect and embrace the journey-of-discovery that will be required to coalesce a unified whole. . . . even if said ‘whole’ is unified by its disunity(!)

For me, the journey starts with my contention that this play is supremely Modern. This may or may not mean that we will produce a “modern-dress” production or something like that. What I mean by “Modern” is that in terms of staging, we will take the position of many important Modern and Post-Modern practitioners that the theatre, and more precisely, Pote Theatre, is a place where rules about things like time, place, “look,” “feel,” are unique to and self-contained in the production itself. One need only to consider that the play was written in the 1860's, and feels like it could have been written yesterday. . . or tomorrow, to understand the notion that we will not be bound up in “historical realism.” How can we even decipher what that means when we talking about Trolls, and Boygs, and being ‘melted down’?! The Modern/Post-Modern milieu begins from the notion that we will use what a) “needs to be used” to convey locale, passage of time, etc., and/or b) will focus intently on finding the essential, as opposed to the “real” qualities of each scene, moment, character, and/or c) we will be vigilant in striving for a unity *that fits our particular production* but that is not bound by historical period or ‘genre’, but is driven by what we find in the text and in collaborative imaginations.

Three important process points need to be made here: 1) WORKING THIS WAY IS MUCH MORE CHALLENGING THAN IT FIRST (AND SECOND) APPEARS—if we are doing a play set in the 1950's in New York, we gather pictures and information and begin piecing together elements; in this case we are *literally* and *intentionally* making up the rules as we go along. 2) This should not be construed to mean that therefore the development of the production will be a free-for all, and we'll all just throw in anything that occurs to us. We still have a carefully planned process for development, and *everything must clearly serve the text and the story-telling*. 3) If you are not familiar with their writings and/or their practice, I strongly urge you to familiarize (or re-familiarize) yourself with some of the most significant theorists and practitioners in this regard. Here's a *starter list* (and with this note, I am charging the Dramaturg with seeking, finding and bringing forward useful information from these and many others of a similar ilk): Brecht (theorist/director. . . don't forget about the director), Erwin Piscator (director,) Vakhtangov (director,) Peter Brook (theorist/director,) Robert

Wilson, Giorgio Strehler, Ariane Mnouchkine, JoAnn Akalaitis, Elizabeth LeCompte, Andrei Serban, Liviu Ciulei, Julie Taymor (beyond *The Lion King* and, ahem, *Spider Man*.) Most of these last are directors or writer/directors. These are a few among many artists who have articulated, either through their writing or their practice, the basic understanding that a stage is a place *unto itself*, and all the rest. See the links and some of my comments about a few other people whose work has also resonated strongly with me in this regard.

Where does this leave us, Mister Director, other than with some more ...uh...homework? This play and this kind of process does not lend itself to my breaking down, area by area, what I think the X, Y, Z needs or desires are. Instead, I'll ask the reader to follow some of own 'Post-Modern' journey involving my work on the play thus far. I hope it will spur more thinking, research, bounce-back, imagining among all of us.

--One of the traps that we want to avoid with the play, particularly in terms of text and mood, is a tendency, particularly resulting from early translations of the play into English that were overly polite, and, probably, the desire of lots of Norwegians for the play to be seen this way(!), is the tendency for the piece to become too jaunty, too happy-go-lucky, too bad-farm-kid-goes-away-and-comes-back-as-the-prodigal-son-and-lover. The play is humorous throughout, to be sure, but it also shot through with darkness, hopelessness, viciousness and other clod that hang on the dark underbelly of the human experience. It is crucial that we be vigilant in addressing and, at least to start, err on the side of the "dark forces" in the play. If you have compared the draft of my adaptation with the other public-domain versions (Archer, Archer-cum-Northam, others), you will note that I have been working on making the play (and several of its characters—including the title one) more aggressive and pungent. The text is more muscular (and hopefully will continue in that direction as it keeps 'working out.')

This will not be the story of Peer Gynt as I remember seeing it on a "film strip" in third-grade with nifty drawings of Peer riding a flying pig and Edvard Grieg's musical treatment playing softly in the background while the recorded story-teller droned on. *Nie takk!*

--I have been thinking (a lot) about triangles. We can talk about that a metaphor later, but my mind's eye has been taking a much more concrete, specific look at how triangles can and should function in the environment. Mountain tops. Cabin roofs. Turning a "mountain top" 90 degrees can make it one corner of a suggested-tall building. Two together make a square. 6 together make a hexagon. Four of them leaning toward a common top-center point make a pyramid. Large ones-or-configurations function as projection screens (if they are 'filled in'). Upside down ones make boats, or waves. I see many triangles in the space—some flying, some "handled" but all moving, moving, moving....

--In any case, I imagine this as a visually powerful production. I do not necessarily mean that we need lots and lots of 'stuff' to look at. I mean, as Brecht and others have argued, that the visual power derives from asking (requiring) the audience member to look at "old" (I like "recognizable" better) things in a "new" way. Further, I am enthusiastic and adamant about using some of the magic tricks of the theatre...our theatre...to create visual surprise, irony, and arresting visual images (helped along by High Coolness Factor in the lighting plan.) Here are some examples of what I expect to utilize to our aesthetic success:

- At least one, preferably both, of our existing floor traps (+grenades to get them open.)
- Fog and haze. Much fog. Carefully controlled and directed. Maybe we'll even invest in dry ice.
- "The Lift." People crawling out of it...people crawling back into it, PLUS leaping, falling and otherwise disappearing into it. So it probably goes up and down at various positions.
- Additional trap(s) potentially included in any additional constructed flooring.
- Swinging, maybe as in "a swing", maybe as in "swinging as on a rope."
- Flying (not the Peter Pan type...some dead hung, some have the "appearance" of flying, maybe a zip line somewhere...)
- Velour cylinder/light trick for quick appearance/disappearance—see Orson Welles' FTP production of *Dr. Faustus* in 1936ish. See also—using "low curtain", light control, and blacked people-and-equipment to create illusion of other kinds of things "flying."
- Some Pyro—(exploding boat...maybe more)
- Film/Video/Projection—some as scenic metaphor, some as simultaneous/ironic/contrapuntal action, some as integrated into action. Often times it will be desirable to see Peer or other characters "in" the projected beam—the projected material lands on and beyond the actor, creating shadows, interesting visual images, etc. At this time, I expect the "Captions" to be delivered by actors, with no accompanying projection, but this could change.
- (Big one)—I have a very clear image in my head of a woman (I'm pretty sure it was Sarah Brightman...of Phantom 'fame) in what amounted to the following: woman standing on a raised platform, ladder, or something about center stage—the ENTIRE rest of the stage "hole" was filled with the 'skirt' of the dress the woman was wearing. Typically a production of *Joseph and...Dreamcoat* will use some form of this idea for its finale—as a point of reference. But this was much more arresting and creepy..in a good way. A woman, wearing a dress that fills the stage (but a bodice that fits and looks good.) I continue to seek the photo. I know I'll find it. Or the

Dramaturg will. I have rolled around some thoughts about what might come out of or happen under said giant skirt--but if this happens, it will involve rigging, costumes and a bunch of other doo-dah-day. But a very high coolness factor (HCF) for something like the first entrance of the “Woman in Green.”

-I also have a few thoughts about what I will call the “irony of scale” in the visual environment. I am intrigued by how things that are way larger or way smaller than one expects can provide commentary (sometimes ironic/humorous, sometimes ominous) on the action of the story. In the pictures I have included as resource material, please be especially mindful of this—you’ll see a giant feather, for example, and wagons with little, waist-high soldiers “in battle.” Clearly the “giant dress” above falls under this notion, but I want to consider other opportunities for this kind of visual commentary. As we think about this, the things to key in on are “where are we?” “what’s the central action?” “what’s the thing that wants to be ‘lifted up’ as a key image/energy/thought?”

-At last count (before I stopped counting) there are over 100+ characters in the play. I anticipate that about 15-20 actors will be in the ensemble. In keeping with the modern/post-modern approach, I suggest we start with the notion, in terms of costume and makeup and hair, that actors will put on bits and pieces that are a) easy to manage, b) evocative and clear in their striking of a character/metaphor, c) generally, no attempt to disguise that we will see the same actors “putting on” and “taking off” many characters.

-I have in mind that actors, costumes (racks?), scenic elements, etc. will be found on stage, and may be continuously present—actors “hanging about,” which enhances the modern theatricality of the piece by allowing the audience to watch actors watching the story and then stepping in and out of it. And putting on hats, vests or etc. This may or may not mean that all actors will be on stage all the time.....this will be a discovery, driven in part by acting rehearsals and part by costume/makeup needs.

-Although this may sound somewhat contradictory to my list of visual elements above, I have a strong feeling that actors will create scenic or environmental elements by ‘human sculpture’—a “boat”? a “Sphinx”, the “Boyg”. This will involve some lifting, tumbling and posing, and potentially, integrating props or scenic devices into a unified whole.

About the materials I am including as research-and-support:

-Over the holidays, I happened upon Matthew Bourne’s version of “The Nutcracker” and found it to be particularly provocative in its visual story telling, its reshaping of an old story and its combination of whimsy and terror. I’ve also included some relevant pics from his productions of Swan Lake (the thing that made him rich and famous), Cinderella, “The Car Man” (Carmen), Picture of Dorian Gray, and others. Word of warning—whenever you wonder about a picture, “Hmm, that seems a little...too perky in color and whimsy” it is(!) Look for what else might be useful/provocative.

-I rarely spend much time looking at “past productions” of a play we are working on, but this piece is so wide open for interpretation, and has been undertaken by such a wide range of directors and designers, that I have included a few things that I have found visually compelling. I am not inclined to try to copy any of these, per se, but there are some interesting ideas out there on the interwebs!

-I have included links to some videos as well, including Laurie Anderson (long the queen of the post-modern, deconstructed story-telling vibe!) and, perhaps more pertinent—some of the work of Sigur Ros, an Icelandic band that has been hot for some years, that is especially close in mood to how I hear and see some of the moments in the play, and, oh yeah, they’re from Scandinavia, too! They rock. In their own way.

-Let me know if the links aren’t working. There is bound to be some errata in a list that long.

-With some of the vid’s you can get the gist of what they are about after a few minutes (repetition is a popular technique) but I would encourage you, for a variety of reasons, to watch the Sigur Ros videos all the way through—they are cool, and they have a visceral power that seems to derive from the innocence of youth in contrast to its secrecy and strange imagination....they remind me of Peer’s wanderings a bit. And I anticipate using some of their music.

And a word about the film *Cosi* (1996.) I have pulled it into the conversation, because the last 10-15 minutes of the film are packed with what I think is some of the best, most imaginative, “using of things as other things” in the theatre. As you can tell from the pictures, the deal is some people not ready to do so put together a production of Mozart’s opera with what they have in hand. And it’s clever, fun, iconic, and imaginative. And when you might think “OK, that’s a little too hokey” or “that doesn’t seem right for our production”, you’re right! I own the film on VHS so will seek to get a copy onto DVD, or show it at a meeting in a room with a VHS player. Or something. Also, it’s a good movie!

SEE ALSO—a FILE OF PHOTOGRAPHS.....if they aren't attached to the email with which this came, I'll let you know how they are arriving or available.

AND ANOTHER SHEET WITH Links to additional photo research and images for Peer Gynt.