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Theatres of Reality, Fiction, and Temporality: Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller's *Ibsen-Saga* (2006 - 2015)

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THEATRES OF REALITY, FICTION, AND TEMPORALITY:
VEGARD VINGE AND IDA MÜLLER'S *IBSEN-SAGA* (2006-2015)

by

ANDREW FRIEDMAN

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2016

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Theatre in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

Theatres of Reality, Fiction, and Temporality:
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Advisor: Marvin Carlson

This dissertation examines the influence of modernist aesthetics and ideologies on contemporary, European and U.S. experimental theatre. I argue that modernist and contemporary experimental theatres offer competing notions of reality, fiction, and temporality, which I interrogate through Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller's *Ibsen-Saga*. I illuminate this tension by reading current modes of performance against the *Saga*'s productions and work practices, as well as their aesthetic and ideological foundation in three modernist sources: the artificiality of Ibsen's realism, the utopianism and totality of Richard Wagner's *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and the temporal provocations of the historical avant-gardes. I contend that the *Saga* reanimates Ibsen, Wagner, and the avant-gardes' modernist forms and ideas to reject the conventions of twenty-first century practice.

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Introduction

The Total Radical Fiction

Overture

Sometime in the sixth hour of Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller's 2009 production of Henrik Ibsen's *Vildanden* (*The Wild Duck*), the English rock band Muse's "Undisclosed Desires" plays in the theatre. Driven by a triplet of pizzicato strings and a steadily whipped snare, the song gives way to slapped-bass, hissing hi-hats, and a wave of synths that swell to the chorus. The lead singer's tenor voice rides just above the music—a hypnotic whisper atop pounding drums:

I want to reconcile the violence in your heart
I want to recognize your beauty is not just a mask
I want to exorcise the demons from your past
I want to satisfy the undisclosed desires in your heart¹

Those who stay for the entire seventeen-and-a-half-hour performance will hear the song at least a dozen more times before the sun comes up. On one occasion the track follows a scene in which Hjalmar, the play's surrogate father of Hedvig, places his penis on a table while his blind daughter wildly swings at it with a real hammer. The performers—hidden beneath full-cover rubber masks—betray neither fear nor malice, except when Hjalmar reflexively jerks away from the table, his naked legs visibly shaking. Sometimes the cast enters the auditorium to dance to the song. Taking to a platform alongside the spectators, Vegard Vinge, one of the production's creators, plays his Director character. He wears a baby-faced mask of pale skin with blue and red raccoon-ringed eyes, a wig of jet black hair, and a Nazi *Waffen-SS* jacket emblazoned with the last name of the production's hero: WERLE. His white track pants are smeared with fake blood and real shit. The

¹ *Muse*, "Undisclosed Desires," from *The Resistance*, Warner Brothers, 2009, compact

scent of urine hangs in the air. He dances passionately to the song, swinging his arms skyward with the clear instruction to get up and dance. And people do. By this time—ten-hours in—we have learned the song’s length and breaks, even the better part of the chorus. The repetition of the pop music is, as Vinge says, “a trigger for the DNA, something that goes into the body of the audience.”² Like all of Muse’s music, the song combines ecstasy and end times; it is an anthem for grandiose emotions and ideals.

Returning in hours eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen, and on, the propulsive music sustains the exhausted performers and audience. The Director’s abandoned dancing between scenes celebrates endurance in the face of fatigue and reminds us that we are doing something together in this one hundred-seat theatre on the edge of Oslo. The music stops. The curtain opens on another scene: Gregers—the show’s ideologue played by Ida Müller—is birthed from a massive Ibsen hell-mouth wearing a t-shirt on which Richard Wagner’s profile is emblazoned like a super-hero’s logo. Gregers wanders through the audience, blessing each spectator with a tiny miner’s hammer, the performer’s body dripping gore and green ooze. The other characters have mercilessly abused Gregers over the past dozen hours, punching, kicking, humiliating, and electrocuting the boy. As Gregers approaches, I look into the mask and see Müller’s eyes dart at me: a flash of grey life beneath a dead face streaked with blood. The curtain clangs closed and “Undisclosed Desires” pulses forth again. The audience laughs. Heads nod along. It is in our bodies. The song is a leitmotiv scoring the audience and performers. It is the anthem to this event called the *Ibsen-Saga*. The song’s blasting volume and first person address lands like a message, an instruction, an ideology. The

² Vegard Vinge, interview with the author. Internet videophone call. Jersey City, NJ and Berlin, Germany, July 6, 2010.

chorus tells us that we have gathered to expose undisclosed desires: violence, beauty, and demons. This is the stuff of Greek tragedy, but the *Saga* conjures these antique themes through the modernist figures of Ibsen and Wagner before unleashing them on us with an avant-gardist brio. Sitting on the tarmac the following morning, I am trying to download the song before takeoff. The performance ended at 7:30 a.m., requiring me to take a cab from the theatre straight to the airport. We are airborne before the download completes. It does not matter; I can hum the song from memory. It is in my body.

Introduction

“The most perverse theatre piece in Berlin;” “The 9/11 of theatre;” “The most radical theatrical event;” “The production of the decade;” “A watershed in Norwegian performing arts.”³ The *Ibsen-Saga* (2006-2015) has incited critical derision, accolades, and dismissal for its unpredictable and limit-testing performances that, according to William F. Condee and Thomas Irmer, “opened a new chapter for what Ibsen means in Germany.”⁴ This “new chapter” begins with Ibsen, but, as I will argue, the *Saga*’s

³Ronja Brier and Til Biermann, “*Das perverseste Theater-Stück Berlins*” (“The Most Perverse Play in Berlin”), *Bild*, October 28, 2011, accessed April 6, 2014, www.bild.de/regional/berlin/berlin-aktuell/perverses-theaterstueck-20695048.bild.html; Karl Wolfgang Flender, “#Borkman,” *Theatertreffen* blog, May 6, 2012, accessed April 4, 2014, <http://www.theatertreffen-blog.de/tt12/john-gabriel-borkman/borkman/>; Anne Peter, “*Aus der Verdrängungshölle*,” (Driven out of Hell) *Taz*, October 31, 2010, accessed June 5, 2014, <http://www.taz.de/1/berlin/tazplan-kultur/artikel/?dig=2011/10/31/a0155&cHash=0935ac3ae5>; Dirk Pilz, “*Ich bin hier nur geschäftlich*,” (I’m only here on business), *Berliner Zeitung*, May 6, 2013, accessed June 1, 2014, <http://www.berliner-zeitung.de/kultur/-12-spartenhaus--im-prater-ich-bin-hier-nur-geschaeftlich,10809150,22684532.html>; Eva Behrendt, “*Der Exzess kommt aus dem Norden ... und sieht doch sehr verschieden aus*,” (Excess comes from the North but looks very different) *Theater Heute*, no. 1 (2012), 18. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

⁴ William F. Condee and Thomas Irmer, “Theatertreffen (Review),” *Theatre Journal* 65, no. 2 (2013): 267.

importance lies in the animation of modernist figures and ideologies to reject the twenty-first century's theatrical preoccupations with reality, fiction, and temporality.

In this dissertation I historicize the artistic influences, aesthetics, and performance practices of the *Ibsen-Saga* that distinguish it from prominent modes of contemporary performance. I provide a critical analysis of the *Saga*'s production history and theorize the works through their four primary influences: postdramatic theatre, Henrik Ibsen, Richard Wagner, and the historical avant-gardes. These influences constitute the discreet lenses through which I will examine the *Saga* in the following four chapters. In the fifth and concluding chapter, I consider how the *Saga*'s use of these forms tests not only the limits of the contemporary theatre, but also scholarly discourses on contemporary practices. Simply put, the *Saga*'s aesthetics, performance practices, and ideology are the manifestation of Ibsen's idealism, Wagner's desire for artistic autonomy through totality, and the avant-gardes' oppositionality. The *Saga* mobilizes these modernist theatrical figures and theories to reject the predominant practices of contemporary experimental performance, which I attribute to tendencies within postdramatic theatre. The *Saga*'s efforts, therefore, afford an opportunity to examine today's experimental theatre in the reflection of modernist thought and practice. This juxtaposition enables us to ask: what does the contemporary theatre retain and jettison of Ibsen, Wagner, and the avant-gardes' legacies? How are these legacies reshaped and used in the present and to what aesthetic and ideological ends? If idealism (Ibsen), autonomy (Wagner), and oppositionality (avant-gardes) are unfashionable in today's theatre, what forms and thought have replaced them? In my efforts to answer these questions, I illuminate the aesthetic preoccupations and cultural assumptions that create a gulf between the experimental

theatres of the nineteenth and early twentieth-centuries and those of today.

Rather than produce a history that links the aesthetic and theoretical developments of the past three centuries, I opt for a more dialectical approach. Through the *Saga's* return to modernism, I emphasize the incompatibilities between modernist and contemporary thought and practice. Preserving this gulf enables us to see the experimental theatres of the modernist and contemporary periods in stark relief. While at the risk of reifying distinctions between these modes of performance, this methodological approach also has clear benefits. First, it works against narratives of continuity and evolution that naturalize aesthetic developments as either the maturation or direct outgrowth of historical and social conditions. While my arguments and analysis are deeply invested in the historical and social milieus that contextualize the modern and contemporary, these do not wholly account for the human imagination, desire, and interest of artists. One proposal the *Saga* implicitly makes is that art can turn in any direction, recover any form or thought; art is a forum of choice not inevitability. To that end, my methodology is rooted in the primary sources of the *Saga's* productions: my attendance at the *Saga's* performances, archival videos and photos, and extensive interviews with Vinge/Müller. Although my research is heavily indebted to conversations with the artists, I do not offer biographical narratives or conclusions. Vinge/Müller are known to refuse interviews or explanations of their art. As I argue throughout, their biographical and interpretive withholding is fundamental to the *Saga's* belief that art speaks for itself. This refusal reflects larger tensions between aesthetics and individuality, art and subjectivity that are at the core of the *Saga* and exemplify distinctions between contemporary and modern practice. My efforts here are to relay the

Saga's intentions through the historical contexts of modern and contemporary experimental theatre. That is to say, there is much of Vinge/Müller's art in this dissertation and almost none of their lives. In upholding the artists' division between their personal lives and art, I hope to provide a more faithful account of the *Saga*'s ethos.

I support my analysis with other critical and scholarly assessments and experiences of the *Saga*. Additionally, I draw on anecdotal accounts of the *Saga*'s performances found on blogs, twitter, and other forms of social media. The *Saga*'s expansive and ever-changing shows—in which the content and length of each performance is different—necessitate these multiple perspectives. The *Saga* is not a fixed performance and does not leave behind a singular artifact. While this claim is often made on behalf of theatre, the vast differences between any two of the *Saga*'s performances give the lie to theatre's liveness as mostly predictable.

Before reviewing the literature I use to define the *Saga*'s particular brand of modernism and provide a summary of the individual chapters, I first offer a history of the *Ibsen-Saga*. This overview is organized in two sections. The first is a précis detailing the *Saga*'s hallmark aesthetics and performance style, known as the "Total Radical Fiction."⁵ In the second section, I provide a production history that outlines the *Saga*'s five installments to date, their critical receptions, and the "Total Radical Fiction's" development from show to show.

Three key words that recur throughout should be defined upfront: idealism, autonomy, and oppositionality. While each of these terms has its own long and tangled history within the arts, my use of them corresponds to their function within the *Saga*. I

⁵ Andrew Friedman, "The Total Radical Fiction: Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller's *Ibsen-Saga*," *Theater* 42, no. 3 (2012): 11-29.

use these terms to describe broad qualities and preoccupations within the *Saga*'s productions rather than as descriptors of any single theoretical tradition. Idealism is the belief in art's capacity to transcend socio-political realities, history, and rationality. The *Saga* takes this notion from Ibsen's texts, but where the playwright sought to skewer this notion, the *Saga* imbues it with faith. This manifests itself in performances in which material concerns are sacrificed in the service of art. In the *Saga*'s refashioned idealism, art no longer expresses idealism's utopian drives—the notion that Ibsen sought to debunk. In the *Saga*, art is the lone utopian form. Autonomy, like idealism, denotes art's (ideal) independence from material concerns. While the *Saga* relies on the material and financial resources of institutions and governments, the artists' desire is for autonomy from external oversight and control. This is not a question of censorship in the traditional sense, but more a concern for how the institutionalization of theatre can and has produced proscriptive ways of making art. Oppositionality is simply the outward refusal to comply with regulations, rules, edicts, or standards that the *Saga*'s makers feel impede their art. I align this term with the antagonisms of the historical avant-gardes that sought to challenge their contemporary conditions. Opposition is distinct from notions of critique, subversion, and resistance. While all may share a common cause of undermining their chosen targets, opposition differs in its tact of overt rejection. It lacks subtlety and sophistication, but presents its self with clarity and force. These three elements—idealism, autonomy, and oppositionality—combine in a fairly straightforward manner. Idealism is a belief, autonomy is an aim, and oppositionality is a means. The *Saga*'s zealous pursuit of this agenda in the twenty-first century reveals the aspirations, limitations, and ideologies of modernist and contemporary theatre's practices and

discourses. In forcing the encounter between these discordant modes of theatre, the *Ibsen-Saga* wages a war between the ideologies and aesthetics of the past and the present. In the process, the *Saga* forces us to reconsider the legacy and currency of Ibsen, Wagner, and the avant-gardes within our contemporary moment.

The Total Radical Fiction

Since 2006, Berlin-and Oslo-based artists Vegard Vinge (director and performer) and Ida Müller (scenographer, director, and performer) have constructed a series of five interconnected theatrical productions based on the plays of Henrik Ibsen, known as the *Ibsen-Saga: A Doll House* (2006), *Ghosts* (2007), *The Wild Duck* (2009-11), *John Gabriel Borkman* (2011-12), and *12-Spartenhaus* (2013). Vinge/Müller's productions are durational reimaginings of Ibsen's plays that take stylistic and structural cues from splatter films, opera, melodrama, puppet theatre, performance art, and fairy tales. Each production features the duo's signature aesthetics of handmade and painted cardboard scenic designs, prerecorded text, and a flexible performance structure in which large sections of the pieces are improvised and their lengths are not predetermined. Throughout the event, performers operate like human puppets. The action follows numerous thematic threads but is primarily concerned with the children in Ibsen's texts, who must battle a corrupt adult world, leading to scenes of gory carnage in which performers douse themselves and their victims with squeeze bottles of fake blood, excrement, vomit, and semen, never attempting to conceal the artificiality of their actions.

The *Saga* coheres within the artists' aesthetic universe governed by stylistic fanaticisms and performative rules, which they have described as the "Total Radical Fiction." The phrase is a catchall for the ideals that ground their aesthetics, development

process, and performances in an alternate reality, antithetical to rational and technocratic methods of performance and art production. In practice, the Total Radical Fiction declares the theatre a safe house in which to nurture the unfettered imagination. It demands the reevaluation of theatrical conventions, work practices, and creative methods in an effort to move beyond art's utilitarian function and arrive at performances governed by commitment and sacrifice. Their desire to deinstrumentalize the theatre through the deification of the art process is a move against what Theodor Adorno notes as mass culture's "monopolistic compulsion to handle, to manipulate, to absorb everything, the inability to leave anything beyond itself untouched."⁶ Vinge claims that the creation of grand, fantastical narratives in which process mirrors product is important because "everything today is a demystification of the world, everything [is] taken away and categorized and you know everything and then there's nothing left to project into. They've taken the Gods away."⁷ Vinge/Müller "remystify" Ibsen and the theatrical event by drawing on a huge range of aesthetic models and theories, weaving a dizzying web of associations, references, and genres, which, no matter how knotted they may become, always have their source in the author's texts. As a result, Ibsen, his characters, and their conflicts are elevated to the status of archetypes, standing in for the vanquished Gods.

Within the range of sources influencing Vinge/Müller's productions, Ibsen's plays hide in plain sight. The broad structures and characters of each play are retained and fleshed out with what the artists see as their core elements. Vinge/Müller stage the works as directly as possible, materializing in literal terms as many of the plays' images as they

⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, "The Schema of Mass Culture," in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (New York: Routledge Classics, 2001), 72.

⁷ Vinge, interview with the author, July 6, 2010.

can manage.⁸ Better-known scenes from the plays and associative riffs on others are mixed with events only alluded to in Ibsen's texts. This creates narrative lines for the characters that extend well beyond the time frame of the plays' events.⁹ This process, as I argue in chapter two, updates and reimagines Ibsen's system of references and allusions, what Brian Johnston calls Ibsen's use of a "supertext."¹⁰ Ibsen's text, when used, is reduced to prerecorded, heavily distorted fragments or single words broadcast and repeated over the stage action. The artists liken the process to creating scenic haikus, in which they distill the essence of characters and conflicts, so they may be communicated as directly as possible.

Pruning Ibsen's texts enables Vinge/Müller to reshape the plays' plots to focus on ideological conflicts. Most often, Ibsen's idealistic children are pitted against corrupted adults highlighting the plays' ideas of national, artistic, and familial inheritance. Novelty aside, the greater value resides in Vinge/Müller's ability to imbue the divisions with a multitude of didactic coordinates: good versus evil, fiction versus reality, autonomy versus the institution, art versus commerce. The ideology driving the revolt of the children, whether it is framed in terms of justice, freedom, love, family, or art, intersects with three sources: Ibsen's idealism; Wagner's desire for autonomy and totality; and the avant-gardes' ethos of opposition. Through these binaries, the shows manifest the function and structure of fairy tales in their uncomplicated and universalized depictions

⁸ For example, wild ducks appear in *The Wild Duck*, ghosts in *Ghosts*, and when John Gabriel Borkman is referred to as a wolf, he transforms into a wolf.

⁹ Time frames for the action range wildly. The events in *A Doll's House* take place over the course of a few days, and in the most extreme case of *The Wild Duck*, the action begins at the time of the Neanderthals.

¹⁰ Brian Johnston, *Text and Supertext in Ibsen's Drama* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1989).

of existential dilemmas encountered and, through trial and effort, overcome.¹¹ The obstacles facing the children can, most often, be traced back to the plays' adults who are corrupted by capitalism's promises of unlimited wealth, power, and consumption. The children, in contrast, are the repository of idealism, imagination, and art.

These moralistic and didactic tales of redemption (terms neither the artists nor I use pejoratively) are crafted using Vinge/Müller's distinctive aesthetics. Their performers wear full-cover rubber masks at all times, and only with great exception is the human face ever seen in their work. Each mask is customized with brightly painted lips, ears, and rings around the eyeholes, and a uniquely colored and styled head of hair. The repetition of particular markings gives uniformity to the characters across their productions while effectively replacing the performers' actual personality with that of the character. The ideological divisions between children and adults are clearly illustrated in this manner. The kids' masks feature rosy cheeks, freckles, button noses, and other markers of cuteness. The adults, conversely, wear masks with signs of decay or corruption: heavy makeup, deep wrinkles, and male-pattern baldness.

Vinge/Müller's masks evoke the aesthetics and demonstrate the theories of Eugene O'Neill, Paul McCarthy, and the writings of Edward Gordon Craig. In "Memoranda on Masks" and "The Actor and the Übermarionette," O'Neill and Craig, respectively, theorize masks as capable of realizing characters through the erasure of the actor's personality. O'Neill suggests that masked performances of classic texts, *Hamlet* in his example, would allow one to see the characters as a "symbolic projection of a fate that is in each of us, instead of merely watching a star giving us his version of a great

¹¹ See, for example, Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage, 1989).

acting role.”¹² Vinge echoes O’Neill and Craig’s ideas, explaining, “It’s important to take away the faces, to take away this personality [. . .] We need this place to project. When you look at these masks, you see yourself.”¹³ McCarthy used masks in his 1980s and 1990s performance art to denaturalize the body and bring the category of the human into question. His characters feature grotesque and hybrid genitalia by which genders, orifices, and reproductive and digestive systems are routinely confused, and, according to Dan Cameron, “the standards for distinguishing between person and thing, or between living and dead, are rendered temporarily inoperable.”¹⁴ Vinge/Müller’s characters display similarly abstracted genitalia, and the performers’ sex rarely matches that of the characters, separating fictional and actual representations of gender. Faces shielded and bodies denaturalized by costuming and movement, the performers become something like technology that oscillate between puppet and human drawing sharp contrasts between the animate and inanimate.

Despite the heavy layer of artifice, the human body refuses to stay hidden. New and improvised scenes pose a particular challenge to the synchronized fiction, resulting in numerous moments of disconnect between movement and sound, performers and technicians. Performers display signs of confusion, frustration, and fatigue, and props routinely break. No attempt is made to hide such problems. Specific scenes and actions are meanwhile designed to highlight the corporeality of the otherwise puppet-like body: nudity, urination, defecation, flogging, sodomy, vomiting, slips and falls, and drawing

¹² Eugene O’Neill, “Memoranda on Masks,” in *Theatre in Theory: 1900–2000: An Anthology*, ed. David Krasner (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 187.

¹³ Vinge, interview with author, July 6, 2010.

¹⁴ Dan Cameron, “The Mirror Stage,” in *Paul McCarthy* (Germany: Hatje Cantz, 2000), 60.

blood. Rather than distract, the fiction's collapse powerfully highlights the live performer laboring beneath the theatrical fantasy. Vinge/Müller's insistence on challenging their own ability to sustain the fantastical artifice, through the physical demands of performance, the destruction of the set, or the corporeal body, reveals their desire for reality to be as powerful as their fetish for fiction. The ability to hold fiction and reality in dialectical tension, an aesthetic quality I address in chapter one, distinguishes the *Saga* from other contemporary experimental theatres.

The productions' sound designs are equally crucial to establishing characters and juxtaposing fiction and reality. The performers' slow and stylized movements are underscored by sound effects that since 2007 have been designed by Trond Reinholdtsen, one of Vinge/Müller's core collaborators. As if in a video game, hyper-realistic sounds, played at an exaggeratedly loud volume, accompany every motion made by the performers and inanimate objects. Doors creak, glasses break, toilets flush, and bodies make a litany of belches, gags, coughs, and moans. Scenes of violence are punctuated by thunderous kicks, punches, stabs, and cracking bones. Each character features a distinctive footstep effect (creaky floorboards, high-heel taps, plodding thuds, squeaky skips, etc.) and stylized voice (bass-heavy drawls, kittenish mews, digital stutters, sing-song distortion, etc.) that match both their physical movements and caricatured personality. During performance, the sound operators (also masked) follow the actions of both the performers and the scenic elements. The performers, likewise, spend much of their time staring into the technical booth above the audience, taking cues from Vinge and the sound operators. Reinholdtsen's designs are so integral to the aesthetic that he is frequently cited as a co-director of the productions. The articulateness and specificity of

the effects provide the images and actions with a sensorial vivacity that suggests a totally realized fictional universe.

Masked and rigged for sound effects, the performers are conceived as scenographic elements. Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Robert Wilson, and Richard Foreman's painterly compositions are comparable; however, it is an embrace of amateurism and physical dramaturgy that differentiates Vinge/Müller's aesthetic from those precursors. Designed by Müller, the costumes and sets are collectively painted and constructed by the performers. Vinge contends, "Amateurs are the best painters to use on the set because you feel there is an insecurity, that there's something not 100% controlled in the stroke and that's beautiful."¹⁵ Just as every movement must be distinguished by a sound effect, so too must every inch of the scenography be accented by their collaborators' brushstrokes. These "strokes," a term used to describe the paintbrush marks, physical gestures, and sound effects, are used, according to Vinge, to "lift things out and give [them] clarity, to structure [them] in a way."¹⁶ The clarity provided by these "strokes" contributes to the sense of directness with which their productions communicate. Each room of the diorama-like sets is painted in cartoonishly vivid colors, the visual density of which is magnified by the presence of color-coordinated props, furniture, appliances, and home decor. These items are extraordinarily elaborate, with dizzying patterns and minute details evoking the high contrast of graphic novels in which no preferential distinction is made between the foreground and background, the animate and inanimate. Rather, both are collapsed into a near two dimensionality reminiscent of Hieronymus Bosch's paintings or a *Where's Waldo?*[®] illustration that rewards the

¹⁵ Vinge and Müller, interview with author, July 6, 2010.

¹⁶ Ibid.

viewer with their ability to infinitely produce unnoticed details. Müller's impressively rich palette and detailed designs, once executed by the millions of handmade strokes of her collaborators, throb with the irrepressible enthusiasm of a child's coloring book.

The absence of reproducible items within the scenic design highlights the dramaturgical underpinnings of Vinge/Müller's aesthetic. The artists cultivate an intimate, bodily relationship among themselves, their casts, and the production elements through the collaborative creation of the shows' scenography. More than an aesthetic choice, the process is essential to Vinge/Müller's physical dramaturgy. There are no auditions for roles and trained actors are rarely used. Instead, it is important to Vinge/Müller that participants "have invested with their bodies in the sets [because] it's not about playing perfectly, but if you've painted your own set and your own floor, then it's just about being, it's not about perfection."¹⁷ Merging the body with the objects it creates is central to the Total Radical Fiction. Vinge claims, "If I don't have a personal connection to things, I can't put them in a show [. . .] it's very important for me that you have a fetish that you're very connected to the things, that you're not playing it, that they're connected to the body in a way."¹⁸ The process is taken to its logical extreme in that "even things that no one sees [the backs and undersides of objects and the sets] are important to paint. For us to breathe in the whole thing it has to feel like it's done with love."¹⁹ The performers' labor is equally illustrated in the destruction of the sets. In each production, performers destroy portions of the scenography to mark the transition between the tightly structured first half of the performance and its free-form counterpart.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

The ravaging of the set, with which the actors have developed an intimate relationship and which they must rebuild, imbues the act with an air of self-sacrifice. Vinge/Müller's cultivation of fetishistic and ritualistic relationships that collapse the distinctions between the body and the art it produces is inherited from the Viennese Actionists and later performance/body artists like McCarthy. This desire for a totalizing artwork, autonomous from the constraints of reality, is considered in chapter three through the theories of Richard Wagner.

Presiding over the performance is Vinge himself playing the character of “the Director” as Müller performs the protagonist children (Ivar, Oswald, Gregers, and Erhart). In chapter three I consider how Vinge's practical/parodic performance employs the popular image of the director as both genius and tyrant through the legacy of Richard Wagner's personage and theories. While directing, Vinge wears either a Nazi ‘SS’ uniform or, in later productions, a T-shirt emblazoned with Richard Wagner's face and name, a reference to both the composer and the Nazi mass murderer Gustav Wagner. These two figures (genius and Nazi) are key symbols for the Total Radical Fiction. The incorporation of so many dichotomies and contradictory impulses, not to mention the scale of the productions, lends the work a Wagnerian grandeur. As Matthew Wilson Smith notes, “The history of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is, to a large degree, the history of unreconciled dialectical struggles performed under the sign of aesthetic totality.”²⁰ Like the ideological polarizations amplified within the text, Vinge's Director embodies the contradictory notions of the “artist,” steering the performance, often wildly, between these two extremes. He joins the stage action, sometimes plays characters, roams the

²⁰ Matthew Wilson Smith, *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 3.

auditorium, and creates paintings, but he typically resides within the technicians' box barking digitally altered instructions or musings to the cast, crew, and audience.

Despite Vinge's performance, both he and Müller are credited as directors of the *Saga*. Although Müller, a trained scenographer, is tasked with rendering designs and Vinge is ultimately responsible for many directorial decisions, this division obscures the fluidity of their collaboration in which responsibilities are shared. The perception of this divide is no doubt encouraged by Vinge's performance as the Director and Müller's reluctance to be quoted in interviews. Yet Vinge's performance and Müller's distrust of interviews should not be taken as evidence of a strict division of labor. Recent German theatre collaborations, especially at the *Volksbühne*, are clear historical precedents for such working methods. The famed and career-length collaborations between directors and scenic designers like Frank Castorf and Bert Neumann as well as Christoph Marthaler and Anna Viebrock are two of the most well known pairings. Vinge/Müller's process, however, is distinct from these models in its emphasis on a communal work ethic and physical dramaturgy in which all collaborators must participate in the construction of a production. Contrary to the authoritarian ethos of the performances, all participants are tasked with various creative jobs including painting sets and constructing props.

Among the *Saga*'s most provocative characteristics are its durational performances and long, sustained periods of work. The shows are in a state of continuous development, and no two performances are the same. The order and duration of scenes, their content, musical scoring, and the performers are always in a process of revision. Many of these decisions are made during or just prior to performance. Without

a predetermined “end time,” their shows have run from an hour to fourteen continuous days. Durational, performance-art-influenced theatre, as Hans-Thies Lehmann argues, “no longer restricts itself to presenting the final outcome of its secret creative process but instead valorizes the temporal process of becoming a picture as a ‘theatrical’ process.”²¹ There are no intermissions in the *Saga*, highlighting its procedural and durational nature; rather, a system of short breaks is used between scenes. When the curtain closes at the end of a sequence, audience members enter and exit the theatre. The timing and duration of each break are unscheduled and can last anywhere from ten seconds to forty-five minutes. During these interludes, entertainment is often provided in the form of blaring pop music, videos of the play’s characters, or information on Ibsen’s life and career. Occasionally, the Director talks to the audience or dances with the characters to the music in the theatre. Audiences that I have been a part of in Oslo and Berlin took advantage of the informality by sharing meals, talking, and dancing during these respites. People come and go throughout the night while new visitors wander in after the initial crowd thins out.

The performers’ relationship toward the audience oscillates between generosity (showering the hungry crowd with massive bags of potato chips, wine, or pieces of art) and animosity (aggressively whipping cardboard boxes painted as stones into the crowd or removing the theatre’s seats to smash them onstage). Such schizophrenic behavior provides their performances with an added sense of unpredictability. The demands Vinge/Müller and their performers make of themselves prohibit shows from running on consecutive nights. Performances are typically held twice a week, on Thursdays and

²¹ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (New York: Routledge, 2006), 134.

Saturdays. Between performances, the artists develop new scenes to add to their repertory, experiment with existing ones, and clean and repair their much-abused set, props, and costumes. Any logistical challenge the work poses to theatrical institutions is countered by the limits to which the *Saga* pushes its performers, whose physical safety is regularly jeopardized by the shows' dangerous stunts, extreme endurance, and scenes of actual violence. In chapter four, I consider Vinge/Müller's temporal dramaturgy of unplanned running times as a form of avant-gardist opposition and examine the challenges it poses to theatrical institutions. In chapter five, I address a different aspect of the *Saga*'s oppositionality: its willingness to test the limits of the performing body.

Ibsen-Saga: A Production History

The Norwegian-born Vinge and German-born Müller met while working respectively as assistant director and designer on Alfred Kirchner's 2001 production of Richard Wagner's *Lohengrin* for the National Norwegian Opera. Both began their careers in Berlin's theatres and institutions, Vinge as an assistant director at the *Komische Oper* and Müller as a scenography student at the University of the Arts. Their earliest pieces were performed in their apartment's bathroom and kitchen, where they first staged actions integrating masks, gore, and fascist imagery and ideology. These one-off experiments, evoking the underground, psychosexual performances of the Viennese Actionists and U.S. performance artist Paul McCarthy, were the aesthetic building blocks of the Total Radical Fiction. The duo directed and designed an original opera in 2004, titled *Requiem: An Apocalyptic Evening*, based on Mozart's work of the same title.

Presented at the studio of Berlin's Maxim Gorki Theatre, it was, according to the artists, a

failure.²² Later that same year, a second iteration of the production, *Requiem II: A Reality Simulator*, was given a single performance at the Hebbel-Theater's 100° Berlin Festival. These productions exhibited much of the *Saga*'s future visual and thematic preoccupations. Performers wore masks or make-up that gave their faces an inexpressive stasis. Movements were likewise regimented into clearly defined gestures that suggested robots or puppets. Clean, archetypal costuming meanwhile delineated character and emphasized the mechanical quality of the performers. The look of these early works strongly echoed the designs of Robert Wilson. What would distinguish the *Saga*'s future productions is locating their desire for a unified aesthetic totality and their fetish for effort within the dramaturgy and narratives of Ibsen's plays.

The first installment of the *Saga*, *A Doll House* (2006), had three performances as part of the artists' own off-off-off-Ibsen-Festival in Oslo, Norway. The shows were staged at *Grusomhetens Teater* (Theatre of Cruelty), a performance space housed within *Hausmania*, an artist-run collective on the outskirts of the city. In an act of opposition and self-promotion, the "festival," which only featured Vinge/Müller's production, ran concurrent to Oslo's state-funded Ibsen festival, celebrating the centenary of the playwright's death. Unlike the productions in the city center, Vinge/Müller's show violently lashed out at the canonization of Ibsen and *A Doll House* by reimagining the play from the perspectives of Nora's abandoned children. Loosely structured in two parts, the first half's cartoon diorama staging of the Helmer family revealed an escalating series of domestic cruelties resulting in the murder or suicide of the characters. The second half began with the actual destruction of all the scenography, signaling the

²² Vinge, interview with author, July 6, 2010.

collapse of the theatrical illusion. Within the wreckage of the Helmer home an associative, open-ended performance takes place—part assault on the play and Ibsen’s role in society, part performance art Happening-cum-Nazi rally—that implicates Nora’s emancipation as the springboard to a range of historical and psychic crimes. Tickets were free and press were not invited to the shows; yet the extremity of the performances and word of mouth brought the duo national attention, leading to modest regional and international touring. Critic Therese Bjørneboe later speculated that the production was the “biggest over-night success ever on [Oslo’s] independent [theatre] scene.”²³ By the third night the theatre was filled beyond capacity.

Following the three-performance run, of *A Doll House*, Kari Saanum interviewed Vinge for *Norwegian Shakespeare and Theatre Journal*.²⁴ Standard material was covered in the discussion—Vinge/Müller’s aesthetics, history, working methods, and future plans—as well as the duo’s particular engagement with their source materials. Vinge notes the contemporaneity of Ibsen, stating that “everyone is Nora in our time. Ibsen manifests the values in our civilization [...] we’re a generation raised in the ruins of the *Doll’s House*.”²⁵ He goes on to draw a parallel between Ibsen’s uncompromising protagonists and contemporary pressures for “extreme [self] liberation and

²³ Therese Bjørneboe, “Teaterkritikerprisen 2007/2008 til Vegard Vinge og Ida Müller” (2007/2008 Theatre Critics Award for Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller) Norwegian Critics Association website, September 25, 2008, accessed June 2, 2014, http://www.kritikerlaget.no/nor/pages/355teaterkritikerprisen_20072008_til_vegard_vinge_og_ida_mller.

²⁴ Vegard Vinge, interviewed by Kari Saanum, “Intervju med Vegard Vinge” (Interview with Vegard Vinge), *Norsk Shakespeare og Teater Tidsskrift (Norwegian Shakespeare and Theatre Journal)* 3-5 (2006), accessed June 1, 2014, <http://www.shakespearetidsskrift.no/arkiv/3-42006/kari-saanum-intervju-med-vegard-vinge.html?L=0>.

²⁵ Ibid.

individualization in which one must fulfill his duty to himself.”²⁶ This individualistic drive of Ibsen’s protagonists is coupled with what Vinge calls the “big proposals” undergirding the universalizing appeals contained in both fascism and the works of Richard Wagner.²⁷ The dialectic between the individual and the universal recurs throughout the *Saga* with Ibsen and Wagner as the corresponding aesthetic referents. Yet the division between the two figures is fluid. As Vinge’s statement suggests, Ibsen’s prophetic vision of the individual makes him equally the Universalist, while Wagner’s call for the unification of the arts through the singular figure of the director makes him every bit the individualist. This duality is one of the *Saga*’s central dialectics.

In the year after its Oslo premiere, *A Doll House* toured to Stavanger, Norway; Berlin, Germany; Szczecin, Poland; and Scandicci, Italy. Critics favorably reviewed the first hour of the performance, championing the work’s visual and aural landscape, performance style, and unconventional approach to its source text. The second half of the performance, with its acts of real violence, body art, and destruction, divided critics, many of whom attest to the visceral impact of such scenes, but fail to see their purpose. Jan Inge Reilstad, writing about the 2007 Stavanger performances for *Kunstkritikk*, summarizes the divide, noting that “it was undoubtedly a case of radical aesthetic positions [...] the political positions were clear enough and worth all possible reflection, although the impression became total chaos [with] an hour of the most destructive chaos I

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Charles Leland, “‘The Irresistible Calling’: The Idea of Vocation in Ibsen,” *Modern Drama* 29, no. 2 (1986): 169-184.

have ever seen with my own eyes.”²⁸ Reilstad nonetheless goes on to wager that “Vegard Vinge will affect Norwegian art and theatre in the future.”²⁹ Kristin Aalen calls the same performance “the most powerful ever shown in Stavanger,” championing the stark juxtapositions of “the beautiful against the ugly, the grotesque against the comical, the dream of happiness against stark reality.”³⁰

Critics were split when the production premiered at Berlin’s *Hebbel-am-Ufer* in 2009. The show’s provocations were dubbed a superficial “scratching on the surface of a classic” by Doris Meierhenrich of the *Berliner Zeitung*. Meierhenrich, questioning the production’s methods and effect, argues that “even though [Vinge] does not go beyond mere dismantling, he still drills his radicalism into every wound of society, misunderstanding culture as simply a protective coat.”³¹ Volker Trauth, writing for *Deutschlandradio*, dismisses the production as “simply unappetizing and artistically unformed. The audience left in droves.”³² *Theater Heute* critic Christian Rakow conversely saw the Director’s transgressions as a logical extension of the production. Rakow argues that the second half is “the dramatic rebellion of a son against his mother.

²⁸ Jan Inge Reilstad, “*Et Dukkehjem* Exploded Version,” (*A Doll House*, Exploded Version) *Kunstkritikk*, March 14, 2007, accessed June 1, 2014,

<http://www.kunstkritikk.no/kritikk/et-dukkehjem-exploded-version/>.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Kristin Aalen, “*Dukkehjem*ets sammenbrudd på Tou Scene,” (*A Doll House* Breaks Down at *Tou Scene*) *Aftenbladet*, March 12, 2007, accessed June 3, 2014, http://www.aftenbladet.no/kultur/scene/article424447.ece#.U581YC_gVtE.

³¹ Doris Meierhenrich, “*Frostbeulen und ein zerkratzter Klassiker*,” (A Frostbitten and Scratched Classic) *Berliner Zeitung*, October 10, 2009 accessed June 1, 2014, <http://www.berliner-zeitung.de/archiv/nordwind-festival-im-hau-beginnt-mit-ibsen--puppenheim--frostbeulen-und-ein-zerkratzter-klassiker,10810590,10670424.html>.

³² Volker Trauth, “*Psychogramm einer Halt suchenden Generation*,” (Psychological profile of a Security-Seeking Generation) *Deutschlandradio*, October 5, 2009, accessed June 1, 2014, http://www.deutschlandradiokultur.de/psychogramm-einer-halt-suchenden-generation.1013.de.html?dram:article_id=169628.

Nora becomes the epitome of mediocrity, a liberalized, cultural life that at best knows sub-optimal functioning, but no longer knows personal resistance. Vinge demands this orgiastic resistance.”³³ Rakow is also the first critic to contextualize the *Saga*’s destruction and body art with the work of the Viennese Actionists, one of Vinge/Müller’s many acknowledged influences. Rakow goes on to echo Trauth’s surprise, however, that even at *Hebbel-am-Ufer*, one of Berlin’s many experimental theatres, two thirds of the audience walked out; one such person allegedly yelling, “That’s not theatre!,” as the Director “birthed” a baby doll from his anus.³⁴ In fact, the dissenting audience member was quite correct; much of what occurred in *A Doll House* and in the larger *Saga* is not “theatre”—if the term is meant to denote the representation of action—but the enactment of unmistakably real actions. These critical and anecdotal accolades and denouncements repeat over the next eight years, revealing the polarizing effect of the *Saga*’s juxtaposition of overt fiction and extreme reality. But, as Rakow and others will later suggest, although fiction and reality are held in sharp contrast in the *Saga*, both share the common function of exploring the limits of the theatre, its audiences, and performers.

The *Saga*’s next work, *Ghosts* (2007), was notable for its increased scale and new collaborators. The production was performed six times at Oslo’s Black Box Teater, the city’s premiere venue for national and international experimental performance. Trond Reinholdtsen joined the duo for the production and has since been the *Saga*’s resident sound designer and occasional performer. Residing in Oslo, Reinholdtsen is an experimental composer and theatre artist in his own right. Reinholdtsen’s Norwegian

³³ Christian Rakow, “*Das Ich hat die Vollmacht*,” (The Ego has the Power) *Theater Heute*, no. 11 (2009), 60.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Opra [sic] is an underground-puppet theatre that gives performances in the artist's apartment and publishes online manifestos and videos. The Norwegian Opra and the *Saga* share a similar palette of sound effects, pre-recorded vocal distortion, and a handmade, arts-and-crafts aesthetic. Reinholdtsen's works are, however, less aesthetically unified and menacing than the *Saga*'s. The Norwegian Opra's productions are often based on canonical texts and tend towards a low-budget, goofy eclecticism. The puppets, sets, and costumes are constructed from household materials like bed sheets, paper bags, markers, and glue. Reinholdtsen's frenetic performances and sophisticated soundscapes provide weightiness to the charm of the ramshackle designs.

With Reinholdtsen's help, *Ghosts* netted Vinge/Müller the Norwegian Theatre Critics' Award. The production was honored despite being largely ignored or derided by most of the country's mainstream press, few of whom stayed for the entirety of the over-six-hour performance. Oslo critic IdaLou Larsen, who deemed the production a "mildly unorthodox deconstruction," attributed Vinge/Müller's award to a "generational shift in the Norwegian critics [who have] a highly theoretical and thus extremely verbose perception of what is good theatre."³⁵ Therese Bjørneboe and Elin Hoyland's speeches, given at the awards ceremony, confirmed Larsen's claim. Bjørneboe and Hoyland contextualized the *Saga* with a host of theatrical and theoretical innovators and movements including Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud, Dadaism, Surrealism, German *Regietheater*, Frank Castorf, and various other artists associated with the *Volksbühne*.³⁶

³⁵ IdaLou Larsen, "*Et generasjonsskifte*," (A generational shift) *Idalou* (blog), March 10, 2008, accessed June 1, 2014 <http://www.idalou.no/pub/idalou/artikler/?aid=286>.

³⁶ Therese Bjørneboe and Elin Hoyland, "*Teaterkritikerprisen 2007/2008 til Vegard Vinge og Ida Müller*" (2007/2008 Theatre Critics Award for Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller) Norwegian Critics Association website, September 25, 2008, accessed June 2,

Hoyland lauded Vinge/Müller's engagement with Henrik Ibsen, claiming that their productions are both a "respectful homage to Ibsen's works [...] and acts of megalomaniacal parricide."³⁷ Bjørneboe emphasized the *Saga*'s relevance to the current theatrical landscape, citing the productions as "an important counterbalance to the new trend of documentary theatre" by offering "theatricality in abundance" and "problematiz[ing] the concept of authenticity."³⁸ Bjørneboe's contention, that the *Saga*'s overt fiction/theatricality and absence of subjectivity are rejoinders to documentary theatre's presumed truthfulness/authenticity, is vital to the contextualization of the *Saga* within the larger European theatre culture. It is, however, equally important to note that the extremity of the *Saga*'s real behaviors are as much a counterpoint to the reality of documentary theatre and other theatres of the real. The *Saga* exceeds the theatres of the real both in its embrace of illusion and its demonstration of a "hardcore" reality.

The criticism of *Ghosts*, as with the artists' previous work, centered on the show's challenging length and devolution into chaos. Following Oswald's death, the Director takes over the action. Dressed as the onstage Oswald and acting as his megalomaniacal double, the Director's actions become increasingly violent, real, and esoteric. Oswald's cheerful paintings of the sun, for example, are now carried out by the Director who—in a Syphilitic rage—creates the same images using a brush stuffed in his anus or by dragging Mrs. Alving's mutilated body through pools of yellow paint.

Elisabeth Leinslie, writing for *Scenekunst*, captures the ambivalence that the approach produces, namely that the production "strongly resonates with avant-garde traditions and

2014, http://www.kritikerlaget.no/nor/pages/355teaterkritikerprisen_20072008_til_vegard_vinge_og_ida_mller.

³⁷ Ibid., Hoyland.

³⁸ Ibid., Bjørneboe.

almost suffocates itself in the scream for a theatre revolution.”³⁹ The theatre industry was one of the primary targets of the show’s avant-gardist antagonisms. In a quiet, domestic scene, the play’s characters gather to discuss the current state of Norwegian theatre. Echoing the play’s conflict between truth and ideals, the performers bluntly state, “Norwegian theatre people have no ideals.”⁴⁰ Jørgen Alnæs, in his review entitled, “Vital and Boring,” notes that “there is no telling if they are ironizing their own rebellion or just bragging. Such meta-comments are always problematic because they can easily over explain the performance.”⁴¹ He concludes that overall the production “seems empty, the music is recycled, the ideas seem to be ill-considered and are not very interesting.”⁴² Alnæs’ review is notable for its critique of the production’s “over-explaining” and “ill-considered” ideas. Among the *Saga*’s many proposals is a visual, theoretical, and thematic didacticism that eschews both subtlety and conceptual sophistication. The approach is used uniformly from the visual and sound designs that underscore the objects and movements as overtly representational, to the shows’ clearly stated ideologies and themes. Vinge explains:

Why do words or things become banal? If I pee in my mouth people say that I’m infantile. And they say this as a negative thing; you’re just infantile and childish. What’s wrong with being infantile? ‘Didactic’ is a negative term, it has become very banal. [...] What’s wrong with being didactic, what’s wrong with being infantile? Why does today’s society try to blend these things out? I find it especially interesting for the political theatre because then they’re not able to be direct and political anymore. Then we’re not able to formulate something

³⁹ Elisabeth Leinslie, “*Menneskets og kulturens forfall*,” (The Decline of Humanity and Culture) *Scenekunst*, September 18, 2007, accessed June 5, 2014, http://arkiv.scenekunst.no/article_3894.nml.

⁴⁰ Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller’s *Ghosts*, quoted in Jørgen Alnæs, “*Vital og kjedsommelig*,” (Vital and Boring) *Dagsavisen*, September 17, 2009 <http://www.dagsavisen.no/kultur/article315016.ece>.

⁴¹ Alnæs, *ibid*.

⁴² *Ibid*.

anymore because it will be ‘banal’ and we are sitting in this deconstruction in which we cannot say anything anymore because it is ‘banal’ or not subtle.⁴³

Even though the *Saga*’s didacticism is, in Vinge’s words, an effort to “formulate” rather than “deconstruct,” these positions, as Alnæs points out, never amount to a larger, reasoned argument. Concepts are instead formed and deployed intuitively by the artists’ pursuit of their impulses, what Vinge calls their “fetishes.”⁴⁴ The *Saga*’s approach reveals an embrace of a theatrical didacticism reminiscent of Bertolt Brecht’s *Lehrstücke* and the irrationality of Dadaism. These influences, like the innumerable others, undergo a peculiar transformation within the *Saga*. They are presented straightforwardly in the form of direct quotations or caricatured recreations, yet the proliferation of references, or what Vinge calls “signs,” never cohere into a unified statement or position. The contradictory ideologies, impulses, and historical anachronisms of the references are left intact, but are still given a sense of continuity by the overarching visual and aural style of the Total Radical Fiction. The juxtaposition of contradictory references within the consistently revised content and structure of the performances renders their meaning indeterminate. The *Volksbühne*’s artistic director, Frank Castorf, addressed Vinge’s peculiar ability to simultaneously absorb and transform, claiming, “He’s like a pig that eats everything and what comes out is quite unique.”⁴⁵ Miriam Prestøy Lie’s review of *Ghosts* similarly addresses the confusion generated by the *Saga*’s proliferation of signs. She states that the “levels of meta [theatricality] gradually become so complex that it is

⁴³ Vinge, interview with author, July 6, 2010.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Frank Castorf, interviewed with Peter Laudenbach, “*Im Gespräch mit Frank Castorf über 20 Jahre Volksbühne*,” (In Conversation with Frank Castorf about his 20 years at the *Volksbühne*) *tip—berlin.de*, November 7, 2011, accessed June 4, 2014, <http://www.tip-berlin.de/kultur-und-freizeit-theater-und-buehne/im-gesprach-mit-frank-castorf-uber-20-jahre-volksbuehne>.

difficult to say whether Vinge is constantly reminding us that what is happening on stage already occurred in the seventies but that he has authority to do what he wants, or is intended as a real defense of his chosen [theatrical] means, or is a parody of a defense.”⁴⁶ To this end, the *Saga* functions something like a Rorschach test with each spectator making distinct connections from the array of ever changing references.

Vinge/Müller’s next production, *The Wild Duck* (2009-2011), was a turning point in the artists’ career. The production featured the *Saga*’s hallmark aesthetics and flexible structure on a much larger scale. Premiering at the Bergen International Festival, the show garnered international attention when the festival’s director, Per Boyne Hansen, interrupted its premiere mid-performance. Every night the performance exceeded the festival’s scheduled five-hour running time by nearly an additional five hours. Hansen, citing noise ordinances and labor contracts, was forced to intercede and stop the shows. These interruptions led to tense mid-performance standoffs between Vinge’s Director and the festival’s administration. Finn Bjørn Tønder’s *Aftenposten* article, “Had to stop the Theatre Scandal,” set the inflammatory tone of the discussion. The article quotes former Norwegian Culture Minister Ellen Horn saying that the production could only be called a “nationwide scandal,” while others interviewed attested to the uniqueness of the production.⁴⁷ Coupled with the *Saga*’s already salacious content, the “scandal” led media outlets throughout Europe to report on the production. The proliferation of decontextualized observations and provocative interviews with spectators proliferated—a

⁴⁶ Miriam Prestøy Lie, “*Livsglede i antibiotikaens tid*” (The Joy of Life in the Time of Antibiotics), *Kunstkritikk*, September 20, 2007, accessed June 3, 2014, <http://www.kunstkritikk.no/kritikk/livsglede-i-antibiotikaens-tid/>.

⁴⁷ Finn Bjørn Tønder, “*Måtte stoppe skandaleteater*” (Had to Stop the Scandal Theatre) *Aftenposten*, May 24, 2009, accessed May 16, 2014, <http://www.aftenposten.no/kultur/article3089125.ece>.

young woman telling TV 2 Norway that she fled the theatre to vomit—bringing the production and its artists valuable attention.⁴⁸ Hansen, equally caught in the crossfire, took responsibility for the conflicts, stating that “this is exciting theatre that knows no boundaries. But as organizers we should have had better control.”⁴⁹ Hansen’s statement reveals the festival’s failure to recognize that the *Saga*’s rejection of “boundaries” extends beyond aesthetics to include those limits established by theatrical institutions.

Therese Bjørneboe, writing for the *Klassenkampen*, attempted to contextualize the artists’ obstinacy. In a largely positive review she notes that the show is “one of the strongest political Ibsen productions I’ve seen. The politics relates not only to the literary interpretation, but to the aesthetics and to *The Wild Duck* as a theatre project.”⁵⁰

Bjørneboe goes on to argue that refusing to stop the performance was part of the *Saga*’s “attitude towards theatre in which all choices are political,” a quality evident from their first production in which tickets were free and the press were not invited.⁵¹ Much of the confusion over the politics of the show and its creators stemmed from the overlap of fictional and real elements. In a later article on the “scandal,” written for *Norwegian Shakespeare and Theatre Journal*, Bjørneboe suggests that Vinge and Hansen’s confrontations raised the question of “who controls the art, the institution or artist,” by

⁴⁸ Regine Forthun, interviewed by Asle Bentzen, “*Urin og avføring på teaterscene i Bergen*,” (Urine and feces on the stage of Bergen theater) *TV2 Norway*, May 29, 2009, accessed June 4, 2014 <http://www.tv2.no/a/2750953>.

⁴⁹ Per Boyne Hansen, *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Therese Bjørneboe, “*Ibsen er igjen skandaløs*” (Ibsen Remains Scandalous) *Klassenkampen*, May 29, 2009, accessed June 6, 2014, <http://www.klassekampen.no/56127/article/item/null/ibsen-er-igjen-skandalos>.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

“referring to a real conflict between institutions and artists.”⁵² She identifies Vinge’s “dual role” as the actual and fictional director of the performances “as a kind of transfer station between the fictional and the real [theatre] situation.”⁵³ At the start of the third performance, for example, the Director announced to the audience that “restrictions cannot stop our *Wild Duck* longing for the claim of the ideal.”⁵⁴ Using a line from the play’s uncompromising character Gregers (“the claim of the ideal”) to address the real-world conflict between Hansen and the production, the Director reframed the standoff as a “direct extension of Ibsen’s themes in *The Wild Duck*.”⁵⁵ This tactic recurs in all of the *Saga*’s productions and is the source of many of the works’ ensuing “scandals.” What makes the strategy so effective is that the artists of the *Saga* manifest the idealism and uncompromising spirit of Ibsen’s characters through their willingness to go to extreme measures. In doing so, the *Saga* collides with the real world by continually extending the parameters of its fiction through the actions of its artists and its excessively long performances.

Critical moralizing and muckraking aside, *The Wild Duck* was also criticized for its embrace of fascistic aesthetics and its confrontational stance towards audiences.

IdaLou Larsen considers the production’s “authoritarian aesthetics [...] problematic.”⁵⁶

Although Larsen found the use of fascism thematically effective—rendering Old Werle’s

⁵² Therese Bjørneboe, “Hjalmars Teater” (Hjalmar’s Theatre) *Norsk Shakespeare og Teater Tidsskrift (Norwegian Shakespeare and Theatre Journal)* 2 (2009), accessed June 5, 2014, <http://www.shakespearetidsskrift.no/arkiv/22009/vildanden-hjalmars-teater.html>.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Vinge, quoted in *ibid.*

⁵⁶ IdaLou Larsen, “*Tyrannosaurisk estetikk*” (Tyrannosauric Aesthetics) *Idalou* (blog), May 27, 2009, accessed June 1, 2014, <http://www.idalou.no/pub/idalou/kritikker/?aid=717>. Originally published in *Klassekampen* May 25, 2009.

company as a Nazi labor camp and Dr. Relling as the Auschwitz concentration camp's Dr. Mengele—"more doubtful is that [the artists] have a purpose and an understanding of their own fantasies. They seem so keen to play with theatrical aesthetics that this toy is prioritized over everything else."⁵⁷ The "everything else" to which Larsen refers is, presumably, the moral comfort and comprehension of the audience. In spite of its many strengths, Larsen suggests that the show's ideological aesthetic turns it against itself and its spectators. In addition to the unsavory destruction, violence, and excreta, the sound design is played at a "decibel level so violent that my eardrums are about to burst, and the theatre experience suddenly turns into—intentional—physical torture."⁵⁸ The *Saga*'s productions are often described in terms of the physical and psychic demands they place on their audiences: uncomfortable sound levels, nauseating images and actions, exhausting lengths, or prolonged tedium caused by seeming inaction. Larsen equates these tactics with an authoritarian ethics and the artists' own "masochistic delight."⁵⁹ I argue that these discomforting conditions are better contextualized by the *Saga*'s avant-garde ethos, which embraces provocation as an aesthetic tool. One of the *Saga*'s core provocations is the incorporation of elements that exceed even the broadest definitions of good taste, entertainment, reason, and coherence. It is equally important to note that the performers are also subjected to these conditions, as well as far greater physical demands. The endurance and sacrifice of the audiences and performers is a crucial component of the *Saga*. Vinge explains:

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ IdaLou Larsen, "Sceneorgier i sene nattetimer," (Late Night Stage Orgies) *Idalou* (blog), May 25, 2010, accessed June 1, 2014, <http://www.idalou.no/pub/idalou/kritikker/?aid=1252>.

I find that [theatre] people sacrifice too little. [...] We are trying to push ourselves and put everything into the piece. [...] The sublime and the willingness to sacrifice are beautiful to me. It's not that we are extreme or fanatic, these are just words being put on us because people are afraid of there being any alternatives. I don't expect anything more of the actors than I expect of myself.⁶⁰

Despite Vinge's claims, these aesthetics knowingly evoke—and often directly cite—those employed in Nazi Germany and summon the *Saga*'s authoritarian overtones. I contextualize the common experience of these conditions as a formative feature of the *Saga* that, even if politically dubious, generates the unpredictability and grandiosity for which the works are celebrated.

The Wild Duck was remounted in the spring of 2010 at Oslo's Black Box Teater with the tongue-in-cheek subtitle, *The Director's Cut, Part II*. The production received two Hedda Prize nominations for “Best Performance of the Year ” and “Special Artistic Achievement.”⁶¹ Although failing to win either award, the show earned the artists an invitation to work under the sponsorship of Berlin's *Volksbühne* at the theatre's smaller venue, the Prater. *The Wild Duck* was performed only three times in Oslo, but notably without any time restrictions. The employees of Black Box volunteered to staff the theatre for the entirety of the performances. The shows ranged from thirteen to seventeen and a half hours with considerable elements changed from night to night.

The confrontational atmosphere that plagued the Bergen run was replaced with a festive mood that Vinge equated with “a party.”⁶² Performers distributed food to spectators, administered a collective blessing, and whipped up dance parties between scenes. In one instance, the Director playfully enlisted a spectator to battle a rogue robot

⁶⁰ Vinge, interview with author, July 6, 2010.

⁶¹ “Past Awards 2010,” Hedda Award website, accessed June 3, 2014, <http://heddaprisen.no/pub/heddaprisen/archive/?aid=791>.

⁶² Vinge, interview with author, July 6, 2010.

to the enthusiastic support of the audience. The stage action, however, remained as challenging as ever with a renewed focus on attacking theatrical institutions. Audio recordings of Vinge's now-infamous arguments with Per Boyne Hansen were broadcast in the theatre between scenes. A taped conversation between a staff member of Norway's National Theatre and Vinge was also played. Vinge asserted that he would only work with the theatre if he was given complete control of the institution and allowed to stage *Emperor and Galilean*—easily Ibsen's longest and most difficult text—with a budget equivalent to that of the theatre's celebrated main-stage production of *Fanny and Alexander*. Vinge's outrageous request was met with cheers from the audience.

Without the shadow of a “scandal” clouding the proceedings, critics largely engaged the Oslo shows on aesthetic grounds. Therese Bjørneboe published two new articles on the production offering sustained insight into the group's aesthetics. Writing for *Aftenposten*, Bjørneboe defends the artists against accusations of empty provocation, claiming that their many confrontations stem from “a desire to investigate how far fiction extends, and what happens in the relationship between the actors and audience when they are in the same room over many hours.”⁶³ The *Saga*'s use of masks, mechanical gestures, and distorted voices are said to “discover a theatrical language beyond the human” and to “create an emotional vacuum that allows the audience to feel a fierce tenderness and urge to care for what remains invisible or un-articulated.”⁶⁴ In my own article on the production, the first English-language publication on the *Saga*, I make claims similar to those of Bjørneboe. I suggest that the aesthetic erasure of the human generates a

⁶³ Therese Bjørneboe, “Nyestetikerne. Müller og Vinges ideale fordring,” (The New Aestheticians: Müller and Vinge's Claims of the Ideal) *Aftenposten*, June 24, 210, accessed June 3, 2014, <http://www.aftenposten.no/kultur/anmeldelser/article3707471.ece>.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

surprising sense of empathy towards the performers and that the show's many provocations are always grounded in either Ibsen's themes or other theatrical precedents.⁶⁵ *Scenekunst's* editor, Chris Erichsen, furthered the discussion in his rebuttal of the media coverage of the Bergen episode. Erichsen contends that the criticism incorrectly focused on the production's faithlessness towards Ibsen's text. He suggests that the production and larger project of the *Saga* should instead be considered on its own terms as an "unprecedented artwork."⁶⁶ While I agree with Erichsen's sentiment and the need to take an expanded view of the production and project, I contend that the larger artwork and its references either stem from or respond to the ideas and themes of Ibsen's texts.

For their first work at their new home at Berlin's Prater theatre, Vinge/Müller and company staged a new version of *The Wild Duck* (2011). The performance, presented free of charge and only viewed like a peepshow through the lobby's windows, ran continuously, twenty-four hours a day for over two weeks. Performers slept on or back stage during the run. The staging was presented as a new installment of the artists' "off-off-off Ibsen Festival" and strategically corresponded to the *Theatertreffen*, Berlin's preeminent theatre festival. The production, which could hardly be viewed in totality, received praise from the *Berliner Zeitung's* Doris Meierhenrich, who concludes that "the staging is more of an exorcism than a performance because this *Wild Duck* breaks all

⁶⁵ Andrew Friedman, "Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller's *The Wild Duck* - Part 2 Director's Cut," *Western European Stages* 22, no. 2/3 (2010): 71-78.

⁶⁶ Chris Erichsen, "Feilfokusert kritikk," (Incorrectly-Focused Critique) *Scenekunst.no*, June 4, 2010, accessed June 6, 2014, http://arkiv.scenekunst.no/artikkel_7280.nml.

limits of time and perception that apply to the theatre.”⁶⁷ Marvin Carlson adds that the work represented “an approach to Ibsen so radical that even [Herbert] Fritsch’s highly unconventional *Nora* [running concurrently at the *Theatertreffen*] seemed traditional in comparison.”⁶⁸ The scale of the peepshow *Wild Duck* underscored a central conceptual element of the *Saga*: the performances are conceived as autonomous works of art that do not rely upon the presence of an audience to complete them. Such a notion is seemingly antithetical to the predominate conception of theatre as an exchange between spectator and performer. Nonetheless, given their prohibitive scale and ever-changing content, the productions challenge the idea that theatre be constructed as a consumable totality. From *The Wild Duck* onward, critics and scholars respond to the *Saga*’s scope by foregrounding their own subjective experiences of the performances, detailing how long they watched and comparing what they saw to other reports.

The *Saga*’s next installment, *John Gabriel Borkman* (2011-12), is the group’s most critically successful production to date. Opening at the Prater in the fall of 2011, the production was invited to the following year’s *Theatertreffen*. The high profile and exclusivity of the festival—selecting the year’s ten best German-language productions—ensured a new level of critical attention for the artists. The significant economic and technical resources that came with their residency at the Prater aided the production’s success. With the Prater entirely at their disposal, the artists had time to construct a detailed theatre within the auditorium that allowed the action to take place on all sides of

⁶⁷ Doris Meierhenrich, “*Die Versteinerung wird zerbröselt*,” (The Fossil Will Crumble) *Berliner Zeitung*, May 16, 2011, accessed June 5, 2014, <http://www.berliner-zeitung.de/archiv/vegard-vinge-und-inge-mueller-installieren-ibsen-wildente--hinter-den-prater-fenstern-die-versteinerung-wird-zerbroeselt,10810590,10787338.html>.

⁶⁸ Marvin Carlson, “Ibsen in Germany,” *Ibsen News and Comment* 31 (2011): 9.

the seating rake.⁶⁹ Following the success of *The Wild Duck* in 2010, Vinge/Müller received a subsidy of twelve million kroners (more than two million US dollars) from the Norwegian Arts Council. In an announcement of the funding, Council representative Egseth Elisabeth Hansen referred to the artists' production of *The Wild Duck* as “a watershed in Norwegian performing arts.”⁷⁰ Flush with financial and material resources, Vinge/Müller retained their previous collaborators and expanded their vision of the *Saga*. Most notable was the employment of seventy-eight collaborators for *John Gabriel Borkman*. The participants' names were listed alphabetically in the show's program without reference to their particular role or contribution. Among the new collaborators were famed *Volksbühne* actors Volker Spengler and Silva Rieger, who appeared without masks and read the parts of John Gabriel Borkman and Ella Rentheim. Casting these well-known performers—the only actors to appear “unmasked” in the *Saga*—referenced a lineage of German experimental filmmakers and stage directors for whom they worked, from Rainer Werner Fassbinder to the *Volksbühne*'s numerous directors to the *Ibsen-Saga*.⁷¹ Eva Behrendt's review for *Theater Heute* highlights the *Saga*'s evocation of the *Volksbühne*'s heritage of theatrical experimentation; she notes that “this exceptional co-production that builds on the old model of the artists' theatre.”⁷² Despite arguing that the production makes limited innovations in terms of Ibsen's text—a claim I will dispute—

⁶⁹ IdaLou Larsen, “*Basisfinansiering til Vegard Vinge og Ida Müller*,” (“Basic Financing for Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller: Norwegian Arts Council Press Release”), *Idalou* (blog), March 30, 2011, accessed May 2, 2014, www.idalou.no/pub/idalou/artikler/?aid=1661.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Spengler and Rieger most notably appeared in the works of *Volksbühne*'s directors Frank Castorf and Christoph Schlingensief.

⁷² Behrendt, “*Der Exzess kommt aus dem Norden ... und sieht doch sehr verschieden aus*,” (Excess Comes From the North but Looks Very Different), 18.

Behrendt celebrates the work as “nothing less than an always new, ever-expanding temporal and spatial work of art with a totalitarian ideal, that is coupled with the frightening and alluring aspects of irrationality and megalomania that come with the totalitarian.”⁷³ Even as critics increasingly focused on the *Saga*’s relationship to the totalitarianism and fascism, the *Saga*’s approach to Ibsen remained a continual point of inquiry.

Thomas Irmer, for example, praised the production as “the season’s highlight.”⁷⁴ Irmer importantly differentiates the *Saga* from the “television aesthetics” of Berlin-director Thomas Ostermeier’s series of Ibsen productions.⁷⁵ Conversely, Irmer sees the *Saga*’s “multi-layered” work as part of an “offensive struggle against tradition.”⁷⁶ *Taz* critic Anne Peter similarly attests to the layering of the assault yet notes that “this highly complex, technically sophisticated piece of art is far more than the sum of those scandalous moments.”⁷⁷ Peter contends that the aesthetic “inflate[s] Ibsen’s characters into the symbolically monstrous [and] their conflicts into the archetypal,” producing “associations and opportunities for interpretation that cannot by any means fit into a single thread.”⁷⁸ As I will demonstrate throughout, expansiveness and antagonism are indissolubly linked within the *Saga*.

Peter’s observation underlines the difficulty of distilling the *Saga* into a singular,

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Thomas Irmer, “*En djevelsk Ibsen*,” (A Devilish Ibsen), trans. Therese Bjørneboe, *Norsk Shakespeare og Teatre Tidsskrift (Norwegian Shakespeare and Theatre Journal)* no. 3/4 (2011), accessed May 2, 2014, <http://www.shakespearetidsskrift.no/arkiv/3-42011/borkman-i-berlin.html>.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Peter, “*Aus der Verdrängungshölle*,” (Driven out of Hell).

⁷⁸ Ibid.

coherent interpretation. Sascha Krieger, writing for the blog *Stage and Screen*, likewise wonders how one understands a work in which “everything is possible and everything fits.”⁷⁹ Krieger illustrates the point, noting that during one performance the entirety of a Champions League soccer match was broadcast live on the stage curtain, temporarily transforming the theatre into a sports bar. The inability to pin down the *Saga*’s meaning is well documented throughout the works’ many reviews. Although common themes emerge in conjunction with discernable aesthetic and theoretical lineages, the ultimate meaning/s of the productions is oblique. This ambiguity is intensified by the alteration and interruption of the performances, their abundant references, and tremendous lengths, all of which highlight the subjectivity of the viewing experience. It is not merely that every show is different, but that the breadth of their associations invites highly personalized interpretations founded on what one recognizes. This aspect of the *Saga* becomes increasingly clear as critics either contextualize their own viewing as much as the production (arrival and departure times, what they did in the intervals, what they ate and drank, what the people around them did or said, etc.) or in new attempts of documentation (attending multiple performances, tweeting from the performance, sketching images from the show, photographing the faces of spectators at the show’s end, and extensive discussions held in the comment section of online reviews). What this suggests is that the *Saga* requires a qualification, if not reconsideration, of standard watching and reviewing procedures. A central challenge the *Saga* poses is the simple fact that even when a production proceeds without interruption, it cannot be taken as an

⁷⁹ Sascha Krieger, “*Weltvision im 12-Sparten-Haus*,” (A Vision of the World in the *12-Spartenhaus*) *Stage and Screen* (blog), May 20, 2012, accessed June 18, 2014, <https://stagescreen.wordpress.com/2012/05/>.

ideal or complete performance.

The emphasis on *John Gabriel Borkman*'s multiple and unstable meanings stands as a corrective to the Berlin-based tabloid *Bild*'s dismissive review of the show, titled "the most perverse play in Berlin."⁸⁰ Unlike the prolonged debates that swirled around the Bergen production of *The Wild Duck*, Berlin's critics did not share the moralizing tone of *Bild*'s reviewers. Criticisms of *John Gabriel Borkman* instead focused on the ethical ambiguity proposed by the production's merging of fiction and reality. The extent to which the totalitarian/fascistic aspects of the production were fictional or real—namely the *Saga*'s recurring demand that all be sacrificed in the name of art—were central to these criticisms. Reviewers found the production's idealism to be double-edged, spawning the shows' impressive grandeur as well as its unapologetic brutality.

Doris Meierhenrich provided the most nuanced reading of the *Saga*'s authoritarianism. Writing for the *Berliner Zeitung*, Meierhenrich contextualizes the *Saga*'s interplay of fiction and reality with an analysis of the confrontations at the Bergen performances of *The Wild Duck*. She contends that the battles between Per Boyne Hansen and the show were over the boundaries between theatre and life. "Vinge's theatre," Meierhenrich argues, "only radically reverses the prospects: he wants to subject life to his theatre of excess, to force it to another reality. This practical conflict is at the heart of the radical aesthetics and is in fact the oldest dream of the artist."⁸¹ The extreme desire to disappear into art, for Meierhenrich, frames the *Saga*'s entire aesthetics,

⁸⁰ Brier and Biermann, "Das perverseste Theater-Stück Berlins" ("The Most Perverse Play in Berlin").

⁸¹ Doris Meierhenrich, "Wie viel Theater hält man aus?" (How Much Drama Can We Bear?) *Berliner Zeitung*, Dec 15, 2011, accessed June 5, 2014, <http://www.berliner-zeitung.de/theatertreffen/volksbuehnen-prater-wie-viel-theater-haelt-man-aus-,14999632,11308108.html>.

including their general principals of shunning interviews and explanatory comments about the work. Meierhenrich determines that the practice is equally profound and empty; “if you look closely you will find in this living-dead total theatre an answer to almost every question. Because what you experience during a night of *Borkman* is a seriously mad attempt to celebrate a kind of fascist-art perfection as well as its failure.”⁸² Although I agree with Meierhenrich’s assessment that the *Saga* aspires to consume reality with its fiction, it is, like its attempt at perfecting a fascist art, most compelling in its failure. That is to say, its celebration of fiction is felt most powerfully when it meets its own limits, whether they be a festival director, bodily injury, or time. The intention then, like Ibsen’s many occupational zealots, is to take on a losing battle. What the *Saga* offers in place of the *fictional* tragedy of Ibsen’s failed protagonists is the *real* tragedy of fiction’s inability to wholly transform the world. Or to rephrase Meierhenrich’s suggestion, the *Saga* enacts the impossibility of “the oldest dream of the artist.”⁸³ It is through the failure to fictionalize the world, not its imagined success, that the *Saga* becomes what Meierhenrich calls “theatre at the limits” or “the ghostly afterlife of ‘art.’”⁸⁴ Following the premier of *John Gabriel Borkman*, I contextualized these many dialectics in a *précis* of the *Ibsen-Saga* published in *Theater*. I argue that binaries—fiction/reality, aspiration/failure, etc.—are endemic to the *Saga*’s cosmos.

The *Saga*’s panache for limit testing was taken to new extremes in the six performances of *John Gabriel Borkman* at the 2012 *Theatertreffen*. According to the *Theatertreffen*’s website, “[i]n re-evaluating the basic questions of theatre—

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

representation, performance, fiction, dramatic master plans, and their frustration through performance—Vinge and his team cross all the theatre’s usual pain thresholds.”⁸⁵ Such thresholds included a character counting for an estimated six hours (reading from a dictionary on another night), the removal and destruction of the audience’s seats by the performers, and the offer of increasing sums of money for an audience member to urinate on a performer. Additionally, Vinge’s performance included numerous insults, accusations, and threats towards the *Theatertreffen* and its administrators. As the production’s provocations took new and varied forms, so too did the critical responses. William F. Condee and Thomas Irmer point out that, because of the show’s length and variation, “critics were frustrated that a regular review could not suffice.”⁸⁶ For example, the *Theatertreffen*’s team of bloggers attended and documented every performance of *John Gabriel Borkman*. In an attempt to get a firmer grasp on the production, these critics employed tweeting, sketching, and photography in what Miriam Rose Sherwood aptly titled her contribution as “a failed attempt to sum up *John Gabriel Borkman*.”⁸⁷ While never offering a totalizing picture, the vast number of tweets, blog posts, photographs, and comment threads discussing the *Saga* reveals the impressive variation between performances. These variations unsettle the authority of critics whose analysis of a single performance very well may not apply to the following one. In their *Theatertreffen* wrap-up for *Theatre Journal*, Condee and Irmer claim that despite having

⁸⁵ “*John Gabriel Borkman*. 4. Teil der Ibsen-Saga. Season 2 / Vorstellungen #20–25,” (*John Gabriel Borkman*. Part 4 of the *Ibsen-Saga*. Season 2, Presentations # 20-25) *Berliner Festspiel* website, accessed May 9, 2014, http://www.berlinerfestspiele.de/de/aktuell/festivals/theatertreffen/archiv_tt/archiv_tt12/tt12_programm_auswahl/tt12_veranstaltungsdetail_auswahl_37232.php.

⁸⁶ Condee and Irmer, “*Theatertreffen* (Review),” 267.

⁸⁷ See, 2012 *Theatertreffen* blog for all six articles, <http://www.theatertreffen-blog.de/tt12/category/john-gabriel-borkman/>.

“precious little Ibsen in the production,” the show “opened a new chapter for what Ibsen means in Germany, demonstrating that his work can be a resource for experimental theatre surpassing the well-known reinterpretations of German *Regietheater*.”⁸⁸ I agree that the production departs from interpretive strategies associated with German *Regietheater* that seek to contemporize a particular play’s themes or conditions.⁸⁹ I, however, argue, via Brian Johnston’s scholarship, that the *Saga* is notable not for its departure from Ibsen, but rather for its improbable fidelity to Ibsen’s ethos.

The role of the critic and audience was thematized in the *Saga*’s fifth production, *12-Spartenhaus* (2013), staged at the *Volksbühne*’s Prater Theatre. Based on Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People*, *12-Spartenhaus* transplanted the play’s action to a Nazi-era theatre that serves as the contaminated bathhouse of the original text. Inside the *12-Spartenhaus* theatre, scenes from *Hedda Gabler* are rehearsed alongside Giuseppe Verdi’s *Rigoletto* and *Aida*, and reenactments of other Ibsen texts, including *The Master Builder* and *Little Eyolf*, and films like *Psycho* (1960), *Salon Kitty* (1976), *The Shining* (1980), and the *Star Wars* trilogy (1977-83), among others. The show caused significant consternation when audiences were not permitted past the Prater’s lobby. Instead, spectators watched the daily, fictional operations of a theatre and its inhabitants on a series of screens and through windows that looked into the performance space. Critics were at odds over whether refusing the audience entrance into the opulent theatre that Vinge and company had created constituted a failure, a step too far, or even a brilliant provocation. In my review of the production, I claim that the “closure” of the theatre is a direct reference to

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Thomas Ostermeier’s Ibsen productions for Berlin’s *Schaubühne* are one such example.

the toxic, shuttered baths of *An Enemy of the People*.⁹⁰ While some other reviewers made similar connections, many were divided on the effectiveness and purpose of the gesture. *Berliner Zeitung* critic Dirk Pilz dubbed the performance “super-subversive, avant-garde, refusal-theatre” designed to antagonize its audience.⁹¹ Pilz contextualizes the *12-Spartenhaus*’s provocation with the high expectations generated by *John Gabriel Borkman*. Andreas Hartmann echoes the sentiment, arguing that for “the enfants terribles of the theatre scene [who] have set new standards in terms of scandalous theatre,” to do nothing for four hours, “is pretty shocking.”⁹² The website *Nachtkritik*, wagering that the theatre would eventually open, sent reviewers to seven performances.⁹³ While many of the reviews simply document the events and lengths of the performances, Matthias Weigel’s review took the production to task for the impact that the spatial conceits had on the overall aesthetics. Weigel claims that the effect of watching the action on a video feed ultimately leaves one disappointingly “safe and uninvolved” in the various stage provocations.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ Andrew Friedman, “Vegard Vinge, Ida Müller, and Trond Reinholdtsen’s *12-Spartenhaus* (Review),” *Theatre Journal* 66, no. 2 (2014): 262-63.

⁹¹ Pilz, “*Ich bin hier nur geschäftlich*,” (I’m only here on business).

⁹² Andreas Hartmann, “*Erwartungen hochschrauben*” (Screw the High Expectations), *Taz*, May 7, 2013, accessed June 1, 2014, <http://www.taz.de/1/berlin/tazplan-kultur/artikel/?dig=2013%2F05%2F07%2Fa0147&cHash=dd2b8a92f8419e30e17fa145d86d498a>).

⁹³ The theatre was, in fact, twice breached, once late in the evening when Vinge allowed the few remaining spectators a quick peek beyond the foyer. In a second instance, two audience members, mid-performance, “broke into” the theatre with powertools. As Vinge relayed to me, the two intruders lost their nerve and turned back when no one stopped them.

⁹⁴ Matthias Weigel, “*Die Aura des kopräsenten Kackens*” (The Aura of the Co-presence of Shit) *Nachtkritik*, May 16, 2013, accessed June 1, 2014, http://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8061%3A12-spartenhaus-ida-mueller-und-vegard-vinge-halten-die-tueren-fest-verschlossen&catid=42%3Avolksbuehne-berlin&Itemid=60.

The biggest talking point of the production, however, occurred well into the run when the Director discharged a fire extinguisher into the theatre's lobby and allegedly injured Andreas Speichert, one of the theatre's technicians. The next performance was cancelled because, according to Vinge, the *Volksbühne*'s technicians called in sick as a form of protest.⁹⁵ Characteristically, Vinge incorporated these real events into the drama of the performance, before declaring that the production was cancelled. The story gained significant traction in the Berlin press with the *Volksbühne* ultimately declaring its support for the production and need to protect its employees.⁹⁶ Nonetheless, the final performances took on the pall of a protest. Following what the artists saw as the technical staff's sabotage of their project, Vinge/Müller ended their official working relationship with the *Volksbühne*.⁹⁷ The previously scheduled fall 2013 reopening of *12-Spartenhaus* was cancelled without further notice. The artists finished the final year of their residency working on a new project, but never reopened the venue to audiences.

Literature Review: Modernism/Modernity

What is the relationship between the *Ibsen-Saga*'s performances and broader notions of modernism? I contend that the respective ideologies, theories, and practices of Ibsen, Wagner, and the historical avant-gardes share a distinctly modernist ethos captured in the themes of idealism, autonomy, opposition, and the *Saga*'s undergirding temporal structures. While the *Saga* draws on many different and even contemporary art forms, the underlying ideology and practices of Vinge/Müller's work stem from modernist

⁹⁵ Vegard Vinge, interview with author. Internet videophone call. Jersey City, NJ and Berlin, Germany, October 31, 2013.

⁹⁶ Ibid. Vinge insists that Speichert was uninjured and that he spent two hours drinking with Speichert and Müller the night of the incident.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

conceptions of art and artists. What I trace here and throughout, therefore, is a generalized notion of modernism in accordance with the *Saga*'s own practices and which follows Boris Groys' claims that, "[i]n the modern period, to make art has meant to protest against what previous generations did."⁹⁸ The "previous generations," with respect to the *Saga*, are the postdramatic theatre, theatres of the real, and other theatrical forms that depart from Vinge/Müller's broad modernist ideology. Aesthetic modernism rather than historical modernity, therefore, will be my focus. While impossible to wholly separate the two, my emphasis will be on the forms and legacy of cultural objects and ideas rather than the conditions that define or engender them. A generalized understanding of modernism nonetheless has its own critical history. Rather than parse the whole of this expansive field of literature, I map below the salient threads that comprise my conception of modernism as an oppositional ideology and practice of art.

My reading of modernism limits itself to scholarly works that correspond to Vinge/Müller's engagement with particular artists and movements. That is to say, it is purposefully Euro-centric and Western in its models and sources. This is especially true with respect to modernism and the historical avant-gardes, which are in the midst of an ongoing critical reevaluation as global, hybrid, and in many cases non-European in origin.⁹⁹ In *Theatre Journal*'s special issue dedicated to thinking beyond standard European models of modernism, editor Penny Farfan points out that the publication "reflects the increasingly transnational focus of modernist studies, bringing this

⁹⁸ Boris Groys, *In The Flow* (New York: Verso, 2016), 24.

⁹⁹ See, for example, James M. Harding and John Rouse, eds., *Not the Other Avant-Garde: Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance* (University of Michigan Press, 2006); and Laura Doyle and Laura Wynkiel, eds., *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, and Modernity* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2005).

expansive geopolitical dimension to bear on traditional canons of modern drama and established accounts of theatre history.”¹⁰⁰ Henrik Ibsen, as Farfan notes, is one such modernist figure that has recently experienced such rethinking in the work of Toril Moi and Erika Fischer-Lichte.¹⁰¹ My attention to European models of modernism is not to discredit or ignore these interventions, but rather to explore modernist forms and ideas as they influence the *Ibsen-Saga*. This limited view highlights one of the *Saga*’s key provocations, its ambiguous position towards realizing the problematic ideologies drawn from its modern inspirers: fascism, Euro-centrism, totalitarianism, imperialism, and cultural elitism, among others. The investment in these ideologies is in keeping with another of modernism’s central qualities that, according to Groys, “modern artistic thought has acknowledged as a manifestation of the human much of what was previously considered evil, cruel, and inhuman.”¹⁰² The resurrection of these blighted ideologies reveals the *Ibsen-Saga*’s disinterest in art’s progressive social or political utility. In an extension of the modernist desire for aesthetic autonomy, the *Saga* claims a moral autonomy with respect to its sources. Coupled with the avant-garde’s proclivity towards confrontation, Vinge/Müller’s theatre offers extreme experiences, antagonism, provocation, and discomfort: a place where the worst of culture and the self can be exhibited.

With a qualified, European focus, I follow the genealogy of Matei Calinescu’s

¹⁰⁰ Penny Farfan, “Editorial Comment: ‘Modernism,’” *Theatre Journal* 65, no. 4 (2013): xiii.

¹⁰¹ See, Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Erika Fischer-Lichte, Barbara Gronau, and Christel Weiler, eds., *Global Ibsen: Performing Multiple Modernities* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

¹⁰² Groys, *In The Flow*, 72.

The Five Faces of Modernity (1977) that locates the genesis of aesthetic modernity within romanticism's reaction against classicism.¹⁰³ Despite its standard starting point, the value of Calinescu's conception of modernity lies in his linking romanticism to four ensuing cultural developments: the avant-garde, decadence, kitsch, and postmodernism.

Although this dissertation will almost exclusively concern itself with the first of those developments, Calinescu is applicable for his suggestion of a continuous modernity tethering various cultural forms by their shared refusal of perceived classical models.

These forms overlap in that they all "reflect intellectual attitudes that are directly related to the problem of time."¹⁰⁴ Calinescu, thereby, stakes out this dissertation's two main thematic concerns: modernism's stance of opposition and relation to temporality or, as defined by Calinescu, "the sense of history as experienced and valued culturally."¹⁰⁵

Raymond Williams offers a similar argument in *The Politics of Modernity: Against the New Conformists* (1989), in which he locates modernism as a specific development brought on by the growth of the metropolis between 1890 and 1940.¹⁰⁶ Williams defines modernism by another duality, claiming it "can be clearly identified as a distinctive movement, in its deliberate distance from and challenge to more traditional forms of art and thought, [but] it is also strongly characterized by its internal diversity of methods and emphases."¹⁰⁷ Aesthetic modernism (seen in Ibsen and Wagner) and the avant-gardes, despite their varied aesthetics and theories, are united through three shared

¹⁰³ Matei Calinescu, *The Five Faces of Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 2.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernity: Against The New Conformists* (New York: Verso, 1989), 32.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

qualities: an emphasis on creativity; a rejection of tradition; and claiming to be anti-bourgeois.¹⁰⁸ The distinction between the two movements, according to Williams, is that while modernism was born of an impulse towards radical experimentation, the avant-gardes sought to antagonize and attack structures and institutions.¹⁰⁹ The two are further distinguished temporally in so far as modernists sought a break with the past to illuminate a new present, while the avant-garde maintained quasi-utopian aspirations, seeing “itself as the breakthrough to the future.”¹¹⁰ These distinctions, which Williams considers to be geographically and temporally specific, underwent a process of universalization, producing the indistinct and sweeping categories of modernism and the avant-gardes.¹¹¹ The *Ibsen-Saga* makes use of these generalizing movements. The *Saga*’s trans-historical sweep perpetuates the universalization of modernism’s experimentation and the avant-gardes’ oppositionality by linking them to an assortment of decontextualized references. Although the approach produces a specious history, it also generates provocative alignments, most notably situating Ibsen as the forbearer of artistic antagonism.

Fredric Jameson’s *A Singular Modernity* (2002) critiques the imprecision of the universalize modernism identified by Williams. Rather than parse and categorize the range of cultural production occurring within modernity, Jameson argues, “[m]odernity is not a concept, philosophical or otherwise, but a narrative category.”¹¹² Jameson contends that the narrative of modernity employs artistic qualities, which are not unique to it, in

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 53.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 50-51.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹¹² Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (New York: Verso, 2002), 40.

service of declaring a break with the past that allegedly marks a paradigm shift.¹¹³ The “electrical charge” produced by the declaration of a rupture with the past registers temporally, as “it seems to concentrate a promise within a present of time and to offer a way of possessing the future more immediately within that present itself.”¹¹⁴ The “charge” that stems from the various “ruptures” produces modernism’s ideology of innovation, which, according to Jameson, is manifest retroactively by historians and critics like Clement Greenberg.¹¹⁵ As a consequence, postmodern art’s fascination with the ‘new’ forges it to the ideology of modernism and reveals the stubborn continuity of the modernist narrative.¹¹⁶

Peter Osborne addresses the aforementioned ambiguities and generalizations of modernism through questions of temporality in *The Politics of Time: Modernity and the Avant-Garde* (1995). By tracing philosophic treatises on time, temporality, and modernity, Osborne contends that modernity/modernism’s celebration of both rupture and the present moment introduces a new temporal logic. Modernity, according to Osborne, is notable for totalizing history from the standpoint of the present and, thereby, distinguishing the time of its own period from that of others.¹¹⁷ This quantitative and qualitative gesture produces an overarching history that is “abstract from the concrete multiplicity of differential times co-existing in the global ‘now’ a single differential [...] through which to mark the time of the present.”¹¹⁸ Like Jameson’s “narrative,” the

¹¹³ Ibid., 35.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 167.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 5.

¹¹⁷ Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (New York: Verso, 1995), 16.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 28.

temporality of modernity, present in modernism, produces a container with which to define it, leading Osborne to conclude that, “modernity is *not*, as such, a project, but merely its form.”¹¹⁹ This empty form and time, therefore, can be filled and extended into the present by the return to art and ideas representative of modernism.

The structures of Jameson’s narrative and Osborne’s temporality of history are expanded and given content in Alain Badiou’s *The Century* (2005). Concerned with diagnosing how the twentieth century conceives of itself, Badiou attempts to distill the “subjectivity of the century” by creating a thematic, historical totalization drawn from cultural artifacts. What constitutes the thinking of the twentieth century, according to Badiou, is a “passion for the real [which] is always a passion for the new.”¹²⁰

Identification of the real and new, however, is chiefly determined through acts of destruction in which the actual can be differentiated from the fake. This method of differentiation leads to the twentieth century’s long list of brutalities as well as its artistic and political fascination with what Badiou calls “cruelties.”¹²¹ The historical avant-gardes’ “passion for the real,” for example, is manifested through “the provocative intervention of the group, which alone ensures the salvation of the instant and the ephemeral against the instituted and established.”¹²² Badiou’s assessment identifies oppositionality and a present-centered temporality as the fundamental characteristics of modernism still coursing through the twentieth century.

I borrow features from each of these theories to define my understanding of the

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 23. Italics in the original.

¹²⁰ Alain Badiou, *The Century* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005), trans. Alberto Tascano (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2007).

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 134.

Ibsen-Saga's modernism. Following Groys, Calinescu, Williams, and Badiou, I consider modernism to be foremost concerned with breaking with tradition, a rupture that ranges from embracing the creation of the "new" to antagonism towards what is perceived as "old." For the *Saga*, tradition is the contemporary experimental theatre's institutions, beliefs, and artists—most notably postdramatic theatre and theatres of the real—and the popular forms of canonization to which Ibsen, Wagner, and the avant-gardes have been subjected. Jameson and Osborne's interrelated contentions that modernity is essentially a form to be filled with narrative or historical content is crucial to my understanding of the *Saga*'s construction of a trans-historical modernism. The array of supertextual references that the *Saga* employs in its expansion of Ibsen's dramas constitutes its own modernist narrative. In addition to narratives of artistic idealism, autonomy, and oppositionality, the *Saga*'s anarchic performances retain what Groys sees as modernity's defining quality as being, "a time of permanent longing for the revolution—for the revolutionary moment of pure presence between the historical past and repetitive future."¹²³ Where the *Saga* intends its revolution to lead is to greater freedom and autonomy for theatre and artists. But as Groys points out and the *Saga* dramatizes, the realization of this artistic revolution is impossible, leaving instead the longing for something unattainable. In the following chapters, I bring the *Saga*'s performance of modernism's impossibilities—idealism, autonomy, and oppositionality—into clearer focus.

¹²³ Groys, *In The Flow*, 142.

Chapter Summaries

Each of the following five chapters employs an organizational structure in which a particular aspect of the *Ibsen-Saga* is considered in relationship to its specific, historical antecedent. Organized chronologically, these chapters track Vinge/Müller's artistic trajectory by analyzing all five installments of the *Ibsen-Saga* with a different production featured in each chapter.

In chapter one, I analyze the *Saga*'s inaugural production, *A Doll House (Et Dukkehjem*, 2006). Examining this performance, I distinguish the *Saga* from two widespread developments within contemporary experimental performance: postdramatic theatre and theatres of the real. Whereas those forms celebrate theatre's capacity to produce what Hans-Thies Lehmann terms "indecidability" through the mixture of fictional and real elements, the *Saga* juxtaposes the overtly fictional and real to produce a sense of certitude, a form of aesthetic didacticism that rejects the conflation of art and reality.¹²⁴ The *Saga*'s didacticism is compared to the work of other prominent experimental theatre makers in Europe, the United States, and Australia: Rimini Protokoll, Gob Squad, Christoph Schlingensiefel, Società Raffaello Sanzio, 600 Highwaymen, and Back to Back Theatre. I argue that these artists destabilize the division between reality and fiction through two forms of extra-theatrical subjectivity: non-professional actors and participants who are socially marginalized due to a perceived cultural, political, physical, or behavioral abnormality. In both instances, subjectivity itself—in the form of the extra-theatrical subject—produces the aesthetic sense of indecidability. In contrast, the *Saga* renders its performers anonymous through the

¹²⁴ Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 101.

artifice of the “Total Radical Fiction.” In doing so, subjectivity is banished from the *Saga* to assert the division between fiction and reality. This division is a vital gesture in the effort for artistic autonomy.

I expand upon the tension between fiction and reality in chapter two, where I analyze the *Saga*'s use of Henrik Ibsen's texts in Vinge/Müller's second production, *Ghosts* (*Gengangere*, 2007). I show that the *Saga* resuscitates two underappreciated aspects of Ibsen's work: the playwright's use of what Brian Johnston calls a “supertext” and the plays' depictions of idealism. Here the debate is not between the effects of imaginary and real actions, but the realistic and poetic realms of art. I argue that the *Saga*'s performances are faithful to Ibsen's conflation of the past and future into a present time, populated by fictional, historical, and contemporary characters and narratives. Following the research of Johnston, Ibsen's works are constructed from a “supertext” of Western cultural references, composed of “mythic, archetypal, cultural, and historical content and ‘quotation,’ deriving from this larger history of the [human] race.”¹²⁵ The *Saga* explores and expands Ibsen's dramas through their own supertext of associative connections, integrating narratives and characters from the expanse of art, popular culture, and world history.

Exposing and expanding Ibsen's supertextual dramaturgy, the *Saga* inverts Ibsen's realist works to emphasize their romantic and idealist underpinnings. The *Saga*'s supertext reshapes Ibsen's narratives to foreground and champion the plays' idealistic children, artists, and ideologues. These figures—typically maligned or marginal in production—are valorized and embody the *Saga*'s refashioning of Ibsen's idealism. In

¹²⁵ Johnston, *Text and Supertext in Ibsen's Drama*, 78.

the *Saga*, art does not support idealism's utopian drives; art is the lone utopian form. Highlighting the idealist underpinnings of its namesake, the *Saga* imagines Ibsen and his ideologues as the forbearers of the modernism's artistic antagonisms of autonomy and oppositionality. I compare the *Saga*'s idealist and supertextual efforts to the productions of director Thomas Ostermeier, arguably the twenty-first century's most prolific and successful adaptor of Ibsen's plays. I show that despite their contemporaneity, Ostermeier's works are emblematic of how realist readings of Ibsen's texts traditionally instrumentalize the playwright as a social critic. In comparison, the *Saga* stands as an unprecedented meditation on two rarely staged aspects of Ibsen's realistic dramas.

In chapter three, I consider the *Saga*'s relationship to artistic totality and autonomy through the productions' use of Richard Wagner's theory of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and artistic legacy as a precursor to fascism. I examine these aspects in a study of the *Saga*'s third installment, *The Wild Duck* (*Vildanden*, 2009-10). I contend that the *Saga* is conceived of as a *Gesamtkunstwerk* in its aspirations for artistic totality and autonomy. The *Saga* performs totality's impossibility through the impositions of reality upon a fictional universe, underscoring the dialectical tensions inherent to the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The opposing forces contained within Wagner's theory are examined through the scholarship of Matthew Wilson Smith and other Wagnerians. These studies support the notion that the *Saga*'s tension between fiction and reality echoes the co-presence of the organic and technological, or what Smith terms the "iconic" and "crystalline" forms of *Gesamtkunstwerk*.¹²⁶

¹²⁶ Smith, *The Total Work of Art: From Bayreuth to Cyberspace*, 4.

More than strive to create a total work of art, the *Saga* manifests Wagner's spirit. This is evident in Vinge's performance as the Director of the *Saga*'s productions. The character wears a Wagner t-shirt during performance, drawing the composer and director into a single figure. The joint sign of Wagner (the composer) and Vinge's Director are merged with a third reference, Gustav Wagner, the Nazi concentration camp guard. Vinge's Director is a figure of grandiose artistry and malice, producing images and acts of beauty and atrocity. Fusing the *ur-director*/dictator with the performances' *actual* director raises unsettling questions about the extent to which the *Saga* plays at or actually produces fascist ideology in performance. This conflation resonates with Wagner's own doubled-edged legacy—he is at once a groundbreaking artist with incalculable influence, and a subsequent artistic emblem for the rise of fascism throughout Europe. I consider this twofold legacy through the analyses of Alain Badiou and Theodor Adorno, both of whom interrogate Wagner's centrality to questions of art's impact on culture and society. I contend that Wagner's duality within the *Saga* captures the contradictory nature of aesthetic autonomy and the mobilization of artistic idealism in service of 'real world' politics. On the one hand, Richard Wagner champions art's capacity to change the world through its formal totality. Gustav Wagner, on the other hand, underscores art's rootedness in society through its capacity to carry ideology.

Chapter four examines the relationship between the *Saga*'s temporal dramaturgy and avant-gardist oppositionality. Focusing on the *Saga*'s fourth production, *John Gabriel Borkman* (2011-12), I consider the effects of Vinge/Müller's temporal dramaturgy, in which the real-time subjective experience of the artists' determines the length and content of the performance. I argue that within the context of theatrical

institutions, like the *Volksbühne* where Vinge/Müller were in residency from 2010 to 2015, this temporal unpredictability is a form of avant-gardist provocation. Given the theatrical institution's responsibility and function of regulating and organizing time, the *Saga*'s temporal dramaturgy creates conflicts between the artists and the institution, evoking the oppositionality endemic to the historical avant-gardes. I highlight the *Saga*'s unique use of time through the numerous standoffs between the *Saga*'s artists and the *Volksbühne*'s employees. While the former believe their art to be dictated by the desires and impulses of artistic passion, the latter understand their time to be regulated by institutional regulations. This divide is contextualized by studies of the complex relationships between avant-garde art and institutions.

I argue that the historical avant-gardes' future orientated temporality—most notably in Futurism—offers a precursor to the *Saga*'s use of time as a weapon against contemporary conditions. Drawing on Kimberly Jannarone's studies of the historical avant-gardes' entanglement with the art and ideology of fascism and totalitarianism, I unmoor the *Saga* from false conceptions that artistic experimentation is synonymous with progressive politics. The *Saga*, therefore, offers a counterpoint to discussions of the avant-gardes' death and political utility. Drawing on the work of Martin Puchner, Mike Sell, and James Harding, I contend that the impossibility of a contemporary avant-garde stems from—among other things—a preoccupation with innovation and progressivism. Instead, I follow Sell's suggestion that avant-gardism is first and foremost an act of “minoritarian” self-positing that seeks to challenge positions of power.¹²⁷ I use these definitions to contextualize both the *Saga*'s dismissal of innovation in favor of the

¹²⁷ Mike Sell, *The Avant-Garde: Race, Religion, War* (New York: Seagull Books, 2011).

repetition of past vanguard practices and their self-conception as outsiders within the institution.

In the fifth and concluding chapter, I analyze the limits of the *Saga*'s provocations during their last production at the *Volksbühne, 12-Spartenhaus* (2013). Attending to the mounting tensions between the *Saga*'s artists and the rules and regulations of the theatre, I examine Vinge's performance of dangerous stunts and scatological actions, which resulted in the injury of a *Volksbühne* employee and the premature cancellation of the production. Rather than offer conclusions, I foreground the *Saga*'s many contradictions as a means of thinking through the artistic and institutional conditions of contemporary experimental theatre. In particular, I examine the lengths to which a theatre founded on identifying and transgressing limits must go to within an artistically permissive culture. I then speculate more broadly about the lack of similar types of contradictory provocations within contemporary performance and its critique within theatre scholarship.

Chapter 1
The End of Ambiguity:
The *Ibsen-Saga*'s Return to the Real As Such

Cahiers du Cinéma: "There is a good deal of blood in *Pierrot [le fou]*."
Jean-Luc Godard: "Not blood, red."¹²⁸

In the sixth hour of Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller's *John Gabriel Borkman* (2012), the cast unfurls a huge canvas on the stage. The Director lies on his back, drops his pants, inserts a squeeze-bottle into his anus and fills his rectum with paint. In a quasi-quotation of Chris Boadwee's "Purple Squirt" (1995) and a perverse reimagining of Cavaradossi's painting in Giacomo Puccini's *Tosca*, the Director ejects the paint from his body in explosive arcs of color. The show's near-constant sound track of pre-recorded opera music and sound effects is silenced, so each expulsion and splatter of paint is heard with grotesque clarity. As the painting progresses, the Director strips naked except for a rubber facemask, sneakers, and the cast encasing his right hand, which he broke in an earlier performance while smashing the scenography with his fist. The Director pauses, looks to the audience and dribbles bright-yellow paint from his penis in mimed urination. As the audience chuckles, the Director begins to urinate through the stream of paint. The two liquids spatter and separate in competing swirls of the representational and actual, the fictional and the real. We see the difference between "blood" and "red."

In this chapter I differentiate Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller's *Ibsen-Saga* from current modes of theatre practice, most notably postdramatic theatre and theatre of the real, by interrogating the relationship between the *Saga*'s artifice and real actions. Rather

¹²⁸ Jean-Luc Godard interview with Jean-Louis Comolli, Michel Delahaye, Jean-André Fieschi, and Gérard Guégan, "Let's Talk About *Pierrot*: An Interview with Jean-Luc Godard," *Cahiers du Cinéma*, October, 1965.

than parse the two in search of innovation, I am concerned with the interdependence of the *Saga*'s aesthetics of fiction and reality and how they relate to the larger field of current theatre production. Each of the *Ibsen-Saga*'s five productions feature scenes in which the group's overtly artificial aesthetic is juxtaposed with the destructive power of real actions measured by their material effects. Oscillating decisively between representational and actual behaviors, the *Saga* produces a theatre of aesthetic certitude. One is always aware of what is fictional and what is real. This claim runs counter to the predominant assertion, articulated by Nicholas Ridout, that theatre "condemns all reality to duplication, inversion and deceit. In the theatre, it's all make-believe."¹²⁹ As the postdramatic theatre illustrates, the theatrical apparatus renders divisions between fact and fiction porous. The *Saga* meanwhile depicts concrete reality and circumspect illusion held in a state of dialectical tension. Key to this effort is the erasure of their performers' subjectivity, which is central to producing ambiguity in the postdramatic theatre. To illuminate this distinction, I track the aesthetic legacies and ideological underpinnings of these two divergent aesthetics of the real: the *Saga*'s conjuring of the real through *actions* and the use of real *subjectivities* in postdramatic works. To do so, I draw upon the works of Rimini Protokoll, Gob Squad, Società Raffaello Sanzio, and Christoph Schlingensief, among others. In contrast to these theatres, the *Saga* employs a style of reality that Hans-Thies Lehmann calls "the real as such," which emphasizes actuality instead of ambiguity.¹³⁰ The *Saga*'s "real as such" signals a departure from

¹²⁹ Nicholas Ridout, "Make-believe: Società Raffaello Sanzio do theatre," in *Contemporary Theatres in Europe: A Critical Companion*, ed. Joseph Kelleher and Nicholas Ridout (New York: Routledge, 2006), 183.

¹³⁰ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (New York: Routledge, 2006), 103.

postdramatic theatre's cultivation of ambiguity through the real of extra-aesthetic subjects.

The demonstration of the real through actions marks a tactical shift in addressing a central preoccupation of European experimental theatre in the twenty-first century: producing spectatorial uncertainty through the interplay of fiction and reality. If, as Lehmann argues, “postdramatic theatre is the first to turn the level of the real explicitly into a ‘co-player’” with the fiction of drama and performance, what constitutes this reality?¹³¹ As I will demonstrate, postdramatic theatre's impulse to make reality a “co-player” has taken on a standardized application since the time of Lehmann's diagnosis. In current experimental theatre practice, the real is demonstrated through particularized subjects—often considered extra-aesthetic—whose unique “real” subjectivities or narratives are offered in contrast to the artifice of the theatre and expertise of its professionals. In practice, foregrounding the specificity of the subject highlights the common currency between postdramatic theatre and postmodern theory. As Jean-François Lyotard famously posited, postmodernism displays “incredulity towards grand narratives.”¹³² This philosophical development, according to Lehmann, directly influences the postdramatic theatre in which “the disintegration of ideological certainties represents no longer a problem of metaphysical anguish but a cultural given.”¹³³ Chief among the master narratives addressed in the performing arts, according to Amelia Jones, is the destabilization of the unified and disembodied subject of Cartesian modernism.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 100.

¹³² Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University Of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

¹³³ Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 54.

Theatre and performance challenges this unified and autonomous subject through the production of intersubjective relationships, central to the spectator/performer exchange.¹³⁴ With this development, particularized subjectivities have come to the fore within theatre and performance. The question of whom or what is properly theatrical/extra-theatrical necessarily follows. Moving back and forth across the demarcating line of amateur/professional and aesthetic/extra-aesthetic the experimental theatre signals its contemporaneity with current aesthetic and theoretical preoccupations.

The *Ibsen-Saga*, conversely, reasserts the categorical separation of fiction and reality. In an effort to communicate concretely, even didactically, fiction and reality are displayed as certainties rather than destabilizing ambiguities. This aesthetic separation is achieved by materializing the real in *actions* rather than *subjectivities*—the real is constituted by what subjects do, not who or what they are. Through risky stunts, the biological functions of the body, and the destruction of sets, props, and costumes, the performers' actions register as real by virtue of their material impact within the productions. These real actions juxtapose the *Saga*'s overtly fictional and totalizing *mise-en-scène*. The contrast between the reality of the performers' actions and the artificiality of the *Saga*'s aesthetic helps to highlight the gap between the fictional and real. The performers, who function as human puppets, are critical to demonstrating the division between reality and fiction. The performers wear full-cover rubber facemasks at all times and enact a full-bodied lip-synching to sound effects and heavily distorted vocal tracks. At no time is the human face seen or an undistorted voice heard in the *Saga*. The

¹³⁴ Amelia Jones, *Body Art / Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

real actions of the body temporarily shatter this over-arching artifice. Once an outbreak of action subsides, the fiction is reconstituted amidst the material consequences of the performers' behaviors, allowing the remnants of the actual to exist alongside the representational.

The *Saga*'s proposal responds to aesthetic and theoretical developments brought about by postdramatic and theatres of the real. If postdramatic theatre illustrates the theatrical apparatus' elision of fact and fiction, the *Saga* proposes that the theatre can return a sense of belief to the real and circumspection to illusion. This aim undergirds the *Ibsen-Saga*'s reanimation of an aesthetic idealism they consider central to artistic experimentation. The relativism that postdramatic theatre casts on aesthetic categories is seen as a direct threat to avant-gardist idealism. The *Saga* attempts to hold relativism at bay by keeping the aesthetics of fiction and reality in a state of constant, overt, dialectical tension. By doing so, the *Saga* counters experimental theatre's predilection for indecidability with a claim of empirical certainty.

More than a rebuff to postdramatic innovations, the *Saga* reclaims an aesthetic ideology of idealism that can be traced to what Alain Badiou has theorized as "the passion of the real" and Boris Groys' has posited as the "heroic body."¹³⁵ In both Badiou and Groys' formulations, the materiality of the body functions as the measurement of the real. Through this distinction, the *Saga* aligns itself with an array of models and theories that range from Ibsen's protagonists to Adolph Hitler's theory of the heroic to the Viennese Actionists' treatment of the body as an object. The *Saga* mines these

¹³⁵ Alain Badiou, *The Century* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005), trans. Alberto Tascano (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2007) and Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008).

ideologies and their aesthetic representation for their latent idealism that drives towards concretizing abstractions. The *Saga* conjures idealism's inherent belief in the new, the grand, and the exceptional. Yet, as their productions make evident, the aspirations of an idealist ideology can never be untangled from their historical legacy of horror. Instead, the theatre, as a space of fiction—the sole condition under which the real can be seen—allows these ideologies to take on their full aesthetic power. The specific character of these ideologies, manifest in the works of Ibsen, Wagner, and the historical avant-gardes, are addressed in the following chapters. To consider the *Saga*'s contribution to the aesthetics of the real necessitates an overview of the real's theorization within postdramatic theatre and what Carol Martin defines as the “theatre of the real.”¹³⁶

Distinguishing between the *Saga*'s use of the real in the *Saga* and its application in other works of experimental theatre requires an examination of the real's practical and theoretical application within current experimental theatrical practice. A full-scale investigation into the multiple conceptions and the rich history of “reality” on stage is outside the scope of this chapter. The distinctions between demonstrating the real as *action* and the real as *subject*—as grasped through the *Saga*'s relationship to other works of the real—nonetheless offers an initial step towards complicating and historicizing the aesthetics of the theatrical real and its varying ideological utilities. The real, as considered here, is neither an objective, ontological category nor, as Jacques Lacan

¹³⁶ Carol Martin, *Theatre of the Real* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2013). See also, Liz Tomlin, *Acts and Apparitions: Discourses on the real in performance practice and theory, 1990-2010* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013) and José A. Sánchez *Practising the Real on the Contemporary Stage* (Chicago: Intellect, 2014).

famously declared, the unknowable realm outside the structuring confines of language.¹³⁷ Rather, I am concerned with the real as a widely employed theatrical aesthetic, resulting in what Andrew Quick calls “reality effects.”¹³⁸ Quick measures “reality effects” by their ability to seemingly “vitiating the representational apparatus.”¹³⁹ The impact of reality effects are neither permanent nor long lasting, according to Quick, but “at best there may be a flickering between these two states.”¹⁴⁰ What the *Ibsen-Saga* illustrates is not the lack or existence of the real, but its interdependence with fiction. Polarizing these modes—extreme fiction and extreme reality—the *Saga* stages a powerful standoff between the two. One never replaces the other, but the force with which each is brought into play can temporarily dispel its binary partner, bringing itself into what might appear to be a state of clarity—a state of totalized fiction or total reality. The co-dependency of these states is at the heart of Alain Badiou’s claim that the real is only measurable by its proximity to semblance.

Theories of the Reals

Although the manifestation of the real in the initial and ensuing generations of postdramatic theatre—roughly 1970 to the present— is the focus of this chapter, the real has always appeared within the theatrical event. The deliberate acknowledgement of the always-existent realities of the theatrical experience is, for Lehmann, what distinguishes the postdramatic from the dramatic. Bert States, however, provides an earlier, useful

¹³⁷ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, 1964*, Jacques-Alain Miller ed., trans. Alan Sheridan. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1977).

¹³⁸ Andrew Quick, “Approaching the Real: Reality effects and the Play of Fiction,” *Performance Research* 1, no. 3 (1996): 17.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

theorization of the theatrical real, noting that, “some things, by virtue of their nature retain an exceptional degree of self-givenness on a stage.”¹⁴¹ This “self-givenness” is not an objective category for States, but contingent upon a thing’s newness to the theatrical event. Citing Montigny’s introduction of real furniture to the early nineteenth-century stage, States contends that the perceived realness of objects and subjects corresponds to their novelty, and diminishes with familiarity. Montigny’s table set before the prompter’s box, once an explosive “reality,” becomes initiated into theatrical convention through repetition. Nonetheless, upon first introduction, the real, evokes what States calls a “preconventional shock: the alteration of the [theatrical] ‘ceremony’ by the intrusion of something with little or no aesthetic history.”¹⁴² Anything new to the theatre, therefore, threatens to announce its realness, provided it appears, or seems to appear, without an aesthetic history. The preconventional, in States’ claim, explicitly addresses objects and subjects—tables, animals, and children—leaving the real of action untheorized. The real’s production of “preconventional shock,” nonetheless, links States conception to the postdramatic, a form of theatre dependent upon the appearance of the preconventional real.

Since Hans-Thies Lehmann’s attempt to define the postdramatic in 1999, the term has expanded to encompass an ever-widening array of dramatic texts and theatrical performances. Defining such works through particular aesthetic characteristics—what Lehmann terms “postdramatic theatrical signs”—rather than a singular proscriptive

¹⁴¹ Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 30.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 42.

definition aids the proliferation of the postdramatic.¹⁴³ Artists ranging from Robert Wilson to Sarah Kane, Rimini Protokoll to Young Jean Lee, Back to Back Theatre to Elevator Repair Service and the *Ibsen-Saga* have employed some if not all of Lehmann's "theatrical signs." The varieties of work that now constitute the category speak to the postdramatic theatre's global development in both theoretical and practical circles. Initially considered a break with dialogic drama and narrative form, the postdramatic is increasingly understood to co-exist and frequently overlap with previous dramatic forms.¹⁴⁴

Despite their eclecticism, works grouped under the term postdramatic are unified by their disregard of what Lehmann identified as drama's "fictive cosmos." This imaginary world emerges when "the play on stage is understood as diegesis of a separated and 'framed' reality governed by its own laws and by an internal coherence of its elements and which is marked off against its environment as a separate 'made up' reality."¹⁴⁵ In postdramatic theatre, the world of the drama is supplanted by a refocused attention to the totality of the performance, what Lehmann terms the theatrical "event/situation."¹⁴⁶ Postdramatic works foreground their own processes through a host of aesthetic signs—parataxis, simultaneity, and musicalization, among others—enabling the theatre's "capacity to be not only an exceptional kind of event but a provocative

¹⁴³ Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 82.

¹⁴⁴ For example, the 2013 American Society for Theatre Research conference featured a working session designed to interrogate the relationship between text and postdramatic forms: "Postdramatic Theatre: Away from Drama?" Also see Ivan Medencia ed., *Dramatic and Postdramatic Theater Ten Years After: Conference Proceedings*, Belgrade: Faculty of Dramatic Arts, 2011.

¹⁴⁵ Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 100.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 104.

situation for all participants.”¹⁴⁷ These signs draw attention to the interchange between audience and production, highlighting the co-construction of the event. Theatrical conventions, like the aside to the audience, are excluded as their operation is standardized within the theatrical apparatus. What constitutes an aspect that illuminates the mutuality of the event, therefore, is something that exceeds the standards and customs of the theatrical experience, what Lehmann calls “the extra-aesthetic *in* the aesthetic,” or to return to States’ formulation, the preconventional.¹⁴⁸

A common and effective means of destabilizing drama’s fiction is the “irruption of the real.”¹⁴⁹ For Lehmann, like States, the real is ever present in the theatre due to the material actuality of people and objects on stage, and always threatens to emerge from behind the theatrical artifice. In production, the real appears frequently enough by way of miscues, accidents, and unplanned intervention.¹⁵⁰ In this respect, the well publicized accidents and technical malfunctions that plagued the ill-fated Broadway production of *Spiderman: Turn Off the Dark* (2011) are notable as a one of the highest-profile, *unintentional* irruptions of the real seen in this young century. Yet the emergence of the real as a cultivated aesthetic instrument—a “co-player” in the theatrical event—constitutes the critical shift from the dramatic to the postdramatic. The postdramatic no longer suppresses the tension between fiction and reality but deploys it as an element of

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. 106.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 103.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 99.

¹⁵⁰ Nicholas Ridout and Sara Jane Bailes have demonstrated that these tensions, once avoided at all costs, are since the advent of postdramatic theatre at the core of many theatrical experiences and of particular interest to many current practitioners. See Nicholas Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006) and Sarah Jane Bailes, *Performance Theatre and the Poetics of Failure* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

the theatrical design. As Lehmann explains, “The main point is not the assertion of the real as such (as is the case in the mentioned sensationalist products of the porn industry) but the unsettling that occurs through the *indecidability* whether one is dealing with reality or fiction.”¹⁵¹ Uncertainty bridges the aesthetic and ethical for Lehmann. The blurring of fiction and reality prompts audiences to “wonder whether they should react to the events on stage as fiction (i.e. aesthetically) or as reality (for example, morally),” and thus brings the certainty of the spectatorial practice into question.¹⁵² The process nonetheless serves a broader aesthetic function:

it is not the occurrence of anything “real” as such but its *self-reflexive* use that characterizes the aesthetic of postdramatic theatre. This self-referentiality allows us to contemplate the value, the inner necessity and the significance of the extra-aesthetic *in* the aesthetic and thus the displacement of the concept of the latter. The aesthetic cannot be understood through a determination of content (beauty, truth, sentiments, anthropomorphizing mirroring, etc.) but solely – as the theatre of the real shows – by “treading the borderline,” by permanently switching, not between form and content, but between ‘real’ contiguity (connection with reality) and “staged” construct. It is in this sense that postdramatic theatre means: theatre of the real.¹⁵³

Lehmann’s description lays bare the centrality of the real to the fabric of the postdramatic. If the real were to go unacknowledged, the “fictive cosmos” would presumably retain. The irruption of the real therefore does the double duty of destabilizing the sealed fiction of traditional dramatic presentation—the aesthetic—and producing an experiential aesthetic/ethical ambiguity caused by the “extra-aesthetic.”

Clarifying as Lehmann’s description is, it notably restricts the real of the postdramatic to that which is used “self-reflexively” and not simply “anything real as

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 101. Italics in the original.

¹⁵² Ibid., 103

¹⁵³ Ibid. Italics in the original.

such.”¹⁵⁴ The exclusivity of Lehmann’s definition limits its applicability to the *Saga*, which self-reflexively deploys the sensationalism of the “real as such” to enable distinctions between reality and fiction. The incompatibility stems from Lehmann’s qualification that reality for its own sake, the depiction of “reality as such,” is not the concern of the postdramatic theatre. To define the “real as such,” Lehmann points to pornography and cites Richard Schechner’s condemnation of “[p]eople who want to make ‘everything real,’ including killing animals, the ‘art’ of self-mutilation, or ‘snuff films.”¹⁵⁵ Schechner protests that these acts fail to conjure the real, and remain “as symbolic and make-believe as anything else on stage,” but, as a result, “living beings are reified into symbolic agents.”¹⁵⁶ While these acts transform the subject into a symbol, Schechner’s conflation of killing people and animals with self-mutilation, which leads to Lehmann’s broader inclusion of pornography, fails to account for the agency, or lack of agency of those involved in the acts. The collapse of categories would suggest that there is only a single, disempowered mode of rendering the subject symbolic. Furthermore, the very condemnation of these acts bolsters the claim that they do in fact exceed symbolism—why else would they need to be dismissed? These exemptions, however, excise from consideration far more than pornography or body art. As anyone passingly familiar with postdramatic theatre will recognize, it is not the sexual content, lack of characters, plot, artistry, or an uninterrupted fictive cosmos that separates pornography from theatre. Rather pornography and other acts that render the subject a “symbolic agent” are exempted because what they depict is no different than what occurs. While

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, Revised and Expanded Edition (New York: Routledge, 2003), 191.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

pleasure or pain may be feigned, the actions certainly are not. The matter-of-factness of pornography, its “reality as such” produces a sense of *certitude* rather than *indecidability*. Pornography’s deliberate foregrounding of the material consequences of bodily actions, choreographed to highlight their veracity, links the *Ibsen-Saga* with Lehmann’s notion of pornography and excludes the two from the category of the postdramatic.

What Lehmann leaves unanswered, however, are the terms that constitutes the aesthetic differences between the “extra-aesthetic” of the postdramatic real and the aesthetics of “the real as such.” If reality and fiction are always co-present within the theatre, what occurs to foreground particular aspects as an “extra-aesthetic” real and others as “real as such?” Lehmann makes clear that the “extra-aesthetic,” distinct from the medium’s conventions, must be non-normative to the theatrical experience. Or, in States’ formulation, the real must be “preconventional” to provide its shock. So, what constitutes the “extra-aesthetic,” “preconventional” real of current experimental theatre practice?

Subjectivity of the Real

The following survey of preeminent postdramatic theatre artists suggests that the real is synonymous with the aesthetics of subjectivity, the demonstration of a singular, extra-aesthetic self. While the “real” is a key aspect of both the dramatic and postdramatic theatre, it also constitutes its own theatrical genre. According to Carol Martin, theatres of the real encompass a broad range of works, including “documentary theatre, verbatim theatre, reality-based theatre, theatre-of-fact, theatre of witness, tribunal theatre, nonfiction theatre, restored village performances, war and battle reenactments,

and autobiographical theatre.”¹⁵⁷ Within these forms artistic aims range from provocation to documentation to advocacy, as Martin points out that “social justice” is one of the genre’s chief concerns.¹⁵⁸ The umbrella term gathers productions that aspire to render a qualified version of truth, what Martin calls “the world where truth is championed even as we experience our failure to ever know it with absolute finality.”¹⁵⁹ Despite the fact that the postdramatic does not share in the theatre of the real’s assertion of truths, the two forms overlap in their shared implementation of extra-aesthetic materials—the real. Martin seconds Lehmann’s claim that reality in the theatre produces uncertainty, noting that even in works concerned with veracity, theatres of the real “collapse the boundaries between the real and the fictional in ways that create confusion and disruption or lead to splendid unplanned harmonies in the service of the creation of meaning.”¹⁶⁰ The theoretical and dramaturgical underpinnings of the theatres of the real share common ground with what Martin identifies as postmodernism’s “particularization of subjectivity, the rejection of universality, the acknowledgement of the contradictions of staging the real within the frame of the fictional, and a questioning of the relationship between facts and truth.”¹⁶¹ Lehmann, while distinguishing the periodizing-term “postmodern” from the aesthetic category of “postdramatic,” likewise observes the overlap between postmodern theory’s challenge to grand narratives and postdramatic theatre’s use of the real as a disruptive force. As theatrical as the reality in question may be, Lehmann’s aesthetically minded postdramatic theatre and Martin’s socially conscious

¹⁵⁷ Martin, *Theatre of The Real*, 5.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁵⁹ Carol Martin, “Introduction,” Carol Martin ed. *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage* (New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2010), 3.

¹⁶⁰ Martin, *Theatre of The Real*, 10.

¹⁶¹ Martin, “Introduction,” *Dramaturgy of the Real on the World Stage*, 3.

theatres of the real both rely on the introduction of the real to unsettle the division between fiction and reality.

The inclusion of reality onstage has become an aesthetic preoccupation in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Despite its current popularity, Lehmann is quick to see art's preoccupation with the real emerging from the historical avant-gardes' ambition to erode distinctions between life and art. Marcel Duchamp's "Fountain" (1917) and subsequent "ready-mades"—found objects displayed within the context of a gallery or museum—typify the transition towards the real, as they are, according to Lehmann, an otherwise ordinary object that “functions as a trigger, catalyst and frame for a process on the part of the viewer.”¹⁶² The exact influence of the avant-gardes' elision of the boundaries between art and life, the preconventional and the conventional is hard to overestimate. Boris Groys contends that the works of the historical and neo avant-gardes, disseminated and reified through educational and art institutions, form the dominant paradigm within contemporary art practice.¹⁶³ The postdramatic and theatres of the real likewise have emerged through institutional forces. The Institute for Applied Theatre Studies at the Justus-Liebig University in Gießen, where Lehmann taught, did much to cement the practical importance of the real to postdramatic theatre. Florian Malzacher notes that the program's ethos was that “[t]he trap of representation (and that was essentially the whole of the German theatre landscape) was to be avoided at any price, and was considered at Giessen, more than anywhere else, the primary cause of all

¹⁶² Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 106.

¹⁶³ Boris Groys, “The Weak Universalism,” *e-flux* no. 15 (2010), accessed September 20, 2014, <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/the-weak-universalism/>.

theatrical ills.”¹⁶⁴ The program’s alumni—Rimini Protokoll, Gob Squad, Réne Pollesch, and She-She Pop, among others—are European luminaries in the application of the real within theatre and performance.

Once the purview of works following in the avant-garde tradition, the application of the real is now shared across theatrical genres. The unannounced appearance of a real, live puppy in Simon Stephens’ West End and Broadway stage adaptation of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* is described by the author in terms reminiscent of Lehmann’s: “it’s the one moment where the audience and [the play’s protagonist] Christopher experience the same emotional condition. They see one thing in the world the same way at the same time, it’s euphoric.”¹⁶⁵ Stephens engineered a similar moment for his 2012 adaptation of *A Doll’s House*, in which a real infant “playing” baby Emmy was conspicuously displayed center stage, who, according to Jesse Green, “steals the show with his/her total commitment to naturalism.”¹⁶⁶ Yet, as Nicholas Ridout suggests, the theatrical rarity of animals and children delivers an additional “reality effect” through their invocation of “excess, expense and inconvenience” with respect to the offstage legal and financial apparatus that ensures the care and welfare of such participants.¹⁶⁷ The

¹⁶⁴ Florian Malzacher, “Dramaturgies of care and insecurity: The story of Rimini Protokoll,” in Miriam Dreysse and Florian Malzacher, eds. *Experts of The Everyday: The Theatre of Rimini Protokoll*, trans. Daniel Belasco Rogers, Ehren Fordyce, Geoffrey Garrison, Mat Hand, Sophia New, and Walter Suttcliffe (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2008), 16.

¹⁶⁵ Simon Stephens interview with Chris Cox, “A Chat With Simon Stephens, Playwright of *The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night-Time*,” *The Huffington Post*, March 11, 2013, accessed September 4, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/chris-cox/curious-incident-dog-night-time_b_2791095.html.

¹⁶⁶ Jesse Green, “*A Doll’s House*, Blessedly Un-Reinvented,” *New York Magazine*, February 27, 2014, accessed September 7, 2014, <http://www.vulture.com/2014/02/theater-review-a-dolls-house.html>.

¹⁶⁷ Ridout, *Stage Fright, Animals, and Other Theatrical Problems*, 106.

spectator's knowledge of these material and financial realities causes the child/animal performer to register as palpably "real."

The paradox of the subject is among the most common means of demonstrating the ambiguity of the real. Fredric Jameson asserts that the postmodern subject is at once particular and inevitably rendered partial through representation. This contradiction, according to Jameson, results from the fact that "we have no way of talking about subjectivity or consciousness that is not already somehow figural [...] a figure is always necessarily a substitute, a second-best, an admission of linguistic and expressive defeat."¹⁶⁸ That is to say, the actual particularity that defines the subject—their realness—is inevitably mediated by its depiction, which in the following cases emerges through theatrical representation. The figure of the subject is at once specific and an illusion—the merger of a reality and a fiction that produces ambiguity. Theatre, operating simultaneously as material actuality and representation, is well suited to express the fleetingness of this reality. Peggy Phelan reminds that, using a Lacanian understanding of the Real, "the common desire to look to representation to confirm one's reality is never satisfied; for representation cannot produce the Real."¹⁶⁹ The extra-aesthetic subject who embodies both a concrete particularity and unrepresentable real is, therefore, an ideal tool to deliver the ambiguity that Lehmann and Martin find at the heart of their respective theatres.

Current experimental theatre practitioners have notably employed the extra-theatrical subject as an instrument for producing the ambiguity associated with the real.

¹⁶⁸ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (New York: Verso, 2002), 55-56.

¹⁶⁹ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 172.

Prominent European, North and South American as well as Australian experimental theatre groups and artists engage with the real on biographical, representational, and aesthetic levels.¹⁷⁰ Sean Patten, a member of the postdramatic-German/English-collective Gob Squad, notes that in 2012 “this fascination with reality and how to put that onstage, how to frame that within art, seems to be something happening right now.”¹⁷¹ Gob Squad and other postdramatic artists offer two closely related modes of the real. Meg Mumford’s dichotomous description of Rimini Protokoll’s work accurately summarizes the dual manifestations of the real currently operating throughout the larger field of experimental theatre. The real appears, “firstly, [as] strangers to the stage, people who do not usually perform their everyday activities and labour within a theatre context; and secondly, [as] people who are perceived by the participants in the theatre event as cultural strangers – as different, foreign or insufficiently known, due to their occupational, class and ethnic background.”¹⁷² The real is, therefore, demonstrated by staging real stories or real people—typically non-professional actors—who portray themselves or segments of history that directly intersect with their lives or the lives of other “real” people (e.g., Lola Arias, Vivi Tellas, Rimini Protokoll, Gob Squad, She-She Pop, 600 Highwaymen, Nature Theatre of Oklahoma, Pascal Rambert, and Mammalian Diving Reflex). Additionally, the real is depicted through participants who are not only

¹⁷⁰ Rimini Protokoll, Gob Squad, She-She Pop, René Pollesch, Christoph Schlingensiefel, Societàs Raffaello Sanzio, Rabih Mroué, 600 Highwaymen, Nature Theatre of Oklahoma, Mammalian Diving Reflex, The New York City Players, and Back to Back Theatre, Lola Arias, Vivi Tellas, and Lear deBessonnet, are a few among many.

¹⁷¹ Sean Patten, interview with Michael Shane Boyle, “Revolution, Then and Now: Gob Squad’s Sean Patten and Bastian Trost,” *Theater* 42, no. 3 (2012): 36.

¹⁷² Meg Mumford, “Rimini Protokoll’s Reality Theatre and Intercultural Encounter: Towards an Ethical Art of Partial Proximity” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 23, no. 2 (2013): 153.

theatrically untrained, but also socially marginalized due to a perceived cultural, political, physical, or behavioral abnormality (e.g., Societas Raffaello Sanzio, Back to Back Theatre, Christoph Schlingensiefel, and Rabih Mroué, among others). Rimini Protokoll and Societas Raffaello Sanzio are arguably the most well known representatives of these two applications of the real and provide useful models for how these aesthetics of the real commonly operate.

Rimini Protokoll, the Germany-based theatre collective of Helgard Haug, Stefan Kaegi, and Daniel Wetzel, is emblematic of current theatrical applications of the real. The group's internationally celebrated works use theatre to show aspects of reality through three interrelated strategies: the use of non-actors; the use of actual public or private spaces—not theatres; and the framing of non-theatrical events as theatre. According to Miriam Dreysse, Protokoll's "relationship to reality outside of the theatre is not representational, but one in which reality is brought into the theatre."¹⁷³ Most often, reality appears through the non-actor-participants' lack of theatrical training and the actuality of their narratives. Rimini Protokoll calls these participants "experts of the everyday."¹⁷⁴ The coinage underscores the group's distance from the dramatic conventions of a "fictive cosmos" and emphasizes that theatrical expertise or knowledge are not required for participation in the theatre. Florian Malzacher attests that what draws one to work with the company "is not a particular interest in new, contemporary forms of theatre; not an interest in art, but rather in being able to tell your story."¹⁷⁵ This

¹⁷³ Miriam Dreysse, "The Performance is Starting Now: On the Relationship Between Reality and Fiction," in *Experts of The Everyday: The Theatre of Rimini Protokoll*, 84.

¹⁷⁴ See, Dreysse and Florian Malzacher, eds. *Experts of The Everyday: The Theatre of Rimini Protokoll*.

¹⁷⁵ Florian Malzacher, "Dramaturgies of Care and Insecurity," in *ibid.*, 27.

storytelling is achieved through acts of “self-presentation” rather than representation, which according to Jens Roselt, suggest that, “acting is both an aesthetic and an ethical activity.”¹⁷⁶ As “experts” of their own lives—“the everyday”—participants need only be themselves. Patten similarly summarizes Gob Squad’s work, which mixes professional and amateur participants, stating that “[e]veryone is fundamentally themselves—we don’t try to pretend that we are anywhere else except here and now.”¹⁷⁷ Both Rimini Protokoll and Gob Squad manifest the actuality of the event in numerous ways, but this is achieved most simply through the use of the participants’ real names. What constitutes the real in these works is the presentation of a particular type of non-theatrical subjectivity. “The everyday” is understood as an extra-aesthetic reality that typically escapes our spectatorial perception; it is unexceptional, ordinary life. Reframed by the theatrical apparatus, these quotidian elements and private lives become not only more perceptible, but also more complex and artful.

In the case of Rimini Protokoll and like-minded artists, the extra-aesthetic character of the subject is made evident through the self-presentation of their social functions. Art historian Claire Bishop has dubbed such works “delegated performance,” in which artists hire people “to perform *their own socioeconomic category*, be this on the basis of gender, class, ethnicity, age, disability, or (more rarely) profession.”¹⁷⁸ The fact that Bishop’s examples are drawn from performance and installation art makes them no less applicable to similar presentations within the theatre. Bishop contends that

¹⁷⁶ Jens Roselt, “Making an Appearance: On the performance practice of self-presentation,” in *ibid.*, 63.

¹⁷⁷ Patten, interview with Michael Shane Boyle, “Revolution, Then and Now,” 33.

¹⁷⁸ Claire Bishop, “Delegated Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity,” *October* 120 (2012), 91. Italics in the original.

“delegated performance” is frequently used to highlight labor practices, but more specifically addresses art’s quest towards authenticity. Within the visual arts, Bishop argues that

[b]y relocating sovereign and self-constituting authenticity *away* from the singular artist (who is naked, masturbates, is shot in the arm, etc.) and onto the collective presence of the performers, who metonymically signify a solidly sociopolitical issue (homelessness, race, immigration, disability, etc.), the artist outsources authenticity and relies on his performers to supply this more vividly, without the disruptive filter of celebrity.¹⁷⁹

In addition to producing authenticity, Bishop claims the use of amateurs interrupts “the seamless character of professional acting, and keeps open a space of risk and ambiguity.”¹⁸⁰ A similar function is at play within theatre that employs the extra-aesthetic subject to replace the trained actor. With few exceptions, the celebrity of actors in experimental theatre is minimal, but audiences may very well be acquainted with specific performers, especially those who regularly work with a company. While this may not amount to celebrity *per se*, such familiarity, to return to States’ argument, counteracts the force of the “preconventional”/real. The shift is, therefore, from the conventional subject of the artist/actor to a preconventional subject with a less defined aesthetic history. As the following examples demonstrate, and Lehmann attests, the ambiguity produced by the non-professional actors is a key marker of the real’s presence.

In Rimini Protokoll’s *100%*, one of the group’s best known and most widely produced shows, a cross-section of a host city (Berlin, San Diego, and Oslo are a few among the twenty-four locales used thus far) is manifest onstage through one hundred of the city’s inhabitants. These citizens stand in for and answer questions on behalf of the

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 110. Italics in the original.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 111.

larger population. Metonymy *not* representation is the goal. The real emerges through the participants' self-identification as extra-theatrical subjects whose careers and interests are not practically or thematically affiliated with theatre. In this respect, the performers function like Montigny's table; the participants appear more real by virtue of their novelty. Protokoll's co-director Daniel Wetzel is careful to point out that their work does not produce verifiable truths, noting that "[i]n the end we really are not interested in whether someone is telling the truth, but rather in how he presents himself and what role he is playing."¹⁸¹ The participants are instead offered, as Dreyse neatly summarizes, as "the subjects of their own biographies."¹⁸² The ambiguity of the real is manifest through the juxtaposition of the participants' expertise of their own lives and their theatrical inexperience. Dreyse contends that by presenting their own biographies, the participants' bodies foreground this juxtaposition, in which "the individuality, rawness and errors of the untrained voice grate and become audible as an incursion of the real."¹⁸³ In this sense, the ambiguity of representing the subject is compounded by an inability to separate fact and fiction within the "experts'" own self-presentation and the 'truthfulness' of inexperience. The pre-conventional real of the participants, therefore, highlights the ambiguity between fact and fiction as a product of the proliferation of their singular, subjective truths.

A similar approach to the real can be seen in the work of the Brooklyn-based company 600 Highwaymen. Their productions regularly employ non-professionals who

¹⁸¹ Daniel Wetzel, quoted in Florian Malzacher, "Dramaturgies of Care and Insecurity," in *Experts of The Everyday: The Theatre of Rimini Protokoll*, 38.

¹⁸² Dreyse, "The Performance is Starting Now: On the Relationship Between Reality and Fiction," in *ibid.*, 97.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 86.

act as themselves. In *The Record* (2014), for example, participants follow their own unique physical score, which they learned in isolation from the other performers. The performance is comprised of participants wordlessly carrying out their choreography together for the first time. Dressed in what appears to be their own clothing, the non-professional's enactment of simple choreography provides a physical example akin to Protokoll's staging of the opinions and beliefs of extra-aesthetic participants. The effect of *The Record* is the demonstration of the real's appearance by way of moving the extra-aesthetic body through space. As the conveners of a *PAJ* roundtable on the 2013-14 New York season of experimental theatre glibly, but accurately note, *The Record* could have been alternatively titled, "*Look at All the People*."¹⁸⁴ Ryan Hatch concludes that *The Record* was one of many productions encountered throughout the year that "uses the non-professional as a sign of some kind of authenticity."¹⁸⁵

Related to this model is one in which the real is foregrounded through the non-normative bodies of performers rather than their social roles or biographies. The theatre of Società Raffaello Sanzio and select works by Christoph Schlingensiefel stage theatrical subjects, whose distinct physiognomies, physical limitations, or medical ailments register as an extra-aesthetic material reality. Lehmann has characterized such participants as exhibiting a "*deviant body*," [which] "deviates from the norm and causes an 'amoral' fascination, unease or fear."¹⁸⁶ This definition is, of course, predicated upon ableist, classist, and sexist assumptions about subjects, but also theatre's longstanding

¹⁸⁴ Joseph Cermatori, Miriam Felton-Dansky, and Ryan Anthony Hatch. "Community Theatre: The New York Season 2013-2014," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 36, no. 3 (2014): 18.

¹⁸⁵ Hatch, *ibid.*, 21.

¹⁸⁶ Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 95. Italics in the original.

assumption that to act one must be able to do—one must be conventionally able-bodied. In this regard, the theatrical preconventionality of these participants echoes larger social/cultural conventions of what constitutes a normative body.

For Italian theatre company Società Raffaello Sanzio, non-normative bodies are used to underscore the overarching themes of their productions. In the group's production of Shakespeare's *Giulio Cesare* (1997) the role of Mark Anthony is performed by a man with a laryngotomy, while two anorexic women played Brutus and Cassius, and a man weighing over five hundred pounds performed the role of Cicero. Like Rimini Protokoll, Società Raffaello Sanzio's performers are not asked to represent their characters, but are rather offered metonymically. The performers' physicality corresponds to character-specific themes or concepts. Casting such a large man to play Cicero, for example, is necessary according to the company's director, Romeo Castellucci, because he is the character who "drives forward Shakespeare's text the most, who has the most weight because he inspires the conspiracy."¹⁸⁷ Società Raffaello Sanzio's non-normative actors appear alongside other preconventional performers, namely animals, children, and machines that constitute what Castellucci has called the "Dis-human and Dis-Real."¹⁸⁸

Matthew Causey suggests that the categories of the Dis-Human and the Dis-real, are "a performative strategy [...] which acts as an erasure of traditional constructions of human-ness and identification on stage [and] suggest new ways of perceiving

¹⁸⁷ Romeo Castellucci, interview with Valentina Valentini, Bonnie Marranta, Jane House,

PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art 26, no. 2 (2004): 21.

¹⁸⁸ Romeo Castellucci quoted in, Matthew Causey, "Stealing from God: The Crisis of Creation in Società Raffaello Sanzio's *Genesi* and Eduardo Kac's *Genesis*," *Theatre Research International* 26, no. 2 (2001): 202.

contemporary subjectivity within the space of advanced scientific and visualization technologies.”¹⁸⁹ Through these bodies, Causey suggests, “the ‘real’ itself can be fully brought to presence.”¹⁹⁰ The real in question, like its effects in Rimini Protokoll’s works, emerges by virtue of extra-aesthetic entities. Castellucci notes that these “dis-human and dis-real” participants are preferable, because in the trained actor “[t]here is no journey. There is no madness. There is no authentic beauty or ugliness.”¹⁹¹ The trained actors’ failure stems from their expertise, what Castellucci calls, their “honest conviction of being the master of the stage.”¹⁹² Castellucci elsewhere elaborates on the effect of the pre-conventional body, explaining that, “the truth of the body becomes inscribed quite precisely in the fiction of the spectacle [...] the body and its truths, which is the most concise form of communication possible and also the most disconcerting, the most pointed.”¹⁹³ Helena Grehan suggests that the unique materiality of these bodies “generate conditions within which spectators are involved intimately, bodily and through the senses.”¹⁹⁴ This type of non-linguistic, empirical experience echoes Lacan’s notion of encountering the Real, but for Grehan raises questions of how one might respond ethically to such experiences, which left her “with the feeling of radical ambivalence.”¹⁹⁵ Grehan’s ambivalence echoes Lehmann’s claim that the “*deviant body*” fosters “an

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 203.

¹⁹¹ Romeo Castellucci, “The Iconoclasm of the Stage and the Return of the Body: *The Carnal Power of Theater*,” trans. by Gloria Pastorino, *Theater* 37, no. 3 (2007): 43.

¹⁹² Ibid., 42.

¹⁹³ Romeo Castellucci, “The Universal: The Simplest Place Possible,” 20.

¹⁹⁴ Helena Grehan, *Performance, Ethics and Spectatorship in a Global Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 42.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

‘amoral’ fascination, unease or fear,” but more importantly, that they produce an ambiguity that is the hallmark of the real.¹⁹⁶

Despite the experiential power offered by the dis-human and dis-real bodies, their claim to reality has been readily challenged. Joe Kelleher succinctly points out in his analysis of *Giulio Cesare* that the “ostensibly real bodies [...] are always, at the same time, returned to a certain distanced fiction” of the theatrical experience.¹⁹⁷ Nicholas Ridout argues that “the ‘real’ in the work of Societas Raffaello Sanzio is in fact an effect of the success of their theatrical pretending.”¹⁹⁸ The productions’ interplay of pretending and what Castellucci perceives as a self-evident, bodily truth blur the boundary between fiction and reality. And as Rimini Protokoll’s work underscores, even when participants appear as themselves the real remains illusive. Furthermore, Ridout claims that the critical recourse to the “real” to describe Societas Raffaello Sanzio’s work stems from the extent to which the artists take the “imitation game so seriously.”¹⁹⁹ In the end, however, the effects of the real are the product of artists “doing good old-fashioned theatre, in which representation is absolutely the central concern.”²⁰⁰ What distinguishes Societas Raffaello Sanzio’s work with regard to the relationship between the representational and the real is the extent and intensity with which they populate their stages with the pre-conventional. The conjuring of the real, however clouded by representation it may be, remains rooted in subjectivity as seen through the dis-human and dis-real figures.

¹⁹⁶ Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 95. Italics in the original.

¹⁹⁷ Joe Kelleher, “It’s so beautiful here. Come, you come too,” *Theater* 37, no. 3 (2007): 20.

¹⁹⁸ Ridout, “Make-believe: Societas Raffaello Sanzio do theatre,” in *Contemporary Theatres in Europe*, 177.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

German director Christoph Schlingensief (1960—2010) similarly employed preconventional bodies of amateur, disabled, terminally ill, and politically marginalized performers for his productions. Florian Malzacher suggests that the presence of these non-actors “creates an incursion of reality that brings us back to theatre’s most basic principle: being in a space together with other—real—people, with the possibility of mistakes, failure, malfunction and, as Heiner Müller emphasized, even the possible death of an actor or fellow viewer.”²⁰¹ Or, as Schlingensief tells Malzacher, “[T]he so-called lay people play themselves rather than roles on stage. It is always exciting to watch them and they are also a challenge for the so-called profis [professionals]. There are professional actors who can’t stand being together with lay people on stage. It plunges them deep into self-doubt.”²⁰² The “doubt” of the professional actor is caused by the non-theatrical, non-normative subject’s ability to unsettle a host of binaries operating within and without the theatre: fiction/reality, amateur/professional, talented/talentless, political/aesthetic, able/unable, acting/being. Keen to destabilize politically operative binaries as much as aesthetic divisions, Schlingensief regularly employed socially marginalized participants in his productions. Neo-Nazis, disabled adults, and asylum seekers populated his productions, in which the destabilization of aesthetic hierarchies simultaneously shook social and political divisions. Schlingensief’s efforts produce the real’s customary ambiguity by exposing the theatricality of reality and the real within fiction. This tact is evident in Schlingensief’s best-known work *Bitte Liebt Österreich!*

²⁰¹ Florian Malzacher, “Citizen of the Other Place: A Trilogy of Fear and Hope,” in *Christoph Schlingensief: Art Without Borders*, eds. Tara Forrest and Anna Teresa Scheer (Chicago: Intellect, 2010), 188.

²⁰² Christoph Schlingensief interviewed by Florian Malzacher, “Blurring Boundaries/Changing Perspectives: An Interview with Christoph Schlingensief,” in *Christoph Schlingensief: Art Without Borders*, 215.

(*Please Love Austria!* 2000), in which the artist enlisted twelve “asylum seekers” to participate in a Big Brother style popularity contest. Staged inside a shipping container placed outside the Vienna opera house as part of the *Wiener Festwochen*, the theatricalization of a pressing political issue lead to public debate, confusion, protest, and confrontation. As Thomas Irmer summarizes, “nobody really understood to what extent everything was staged, so the boundaries between aesthetics (the container game) and reality (the German and Austrian political situation) could be explored only by destroying the entire project.”²⁰³ Theron Schmidt argues that Schlingensief’s overt theatricalization of Vienna’s political concerns blurs reality and fiction to reveal a “‘politics of appearance,’ in which the conditions of representation are not regarded as that which must be overcome for a meaningful politics to emerge, but are themselves the domain of politics.”²⁰⁴ Nonetheless, “meaningful politics” emerge by engaging the ambiguous divisions between fiction and reality through the subjectivities of the productions’ participants. It was the presumed facticity of the performers’ identity as asylum seekers subject to deportation or assimilation that instigated the confused and spectacular response.

The function of the non-normative body within postdramatic theatre is not, however, uniformly seen as a bearer of reality. Theron Schmidt convincingly links postdramatic theatre’s production of indecidability to the ways in which the extra-aesthetic body operates within the politics of appearance. He sees the work of Back to Back Theatre, an Australian company comprised of performers with perceived

²⁰³ Thomas Irmer, “Out with the right! Or, let’s not let them in again,” *Theater* 32, no. 3 (2002): 63.

²⁰⁴ Theron Schmidt, “Christoph Schlingensief and the Bad Spectacle,” *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts* 16, no. 4 (2011): 31.

intellectual disabilities, as emblematic of this intersection. In his analysis of the company's production *Food Court* (2008), Schmidt disputes the notion that the company's disabled performers constitute the 'real,' claiming instead "when a disabled person appears on stage and begins to speak, then, it is not the reality of his or her disability that appears, but the way that disability is already a representation."²⁰⁵

Schmidt's claim, echoing Phelan and Ridout's suspicion of theatre's ability to deliver the real, also addresses the fact that appearance *outside* the theatre equally fails to produce a truthful representation, especially for subjects who are culturally coded by virtue of their appearance. The postdramatic theatre, therefore, offers an opportunity to reconsider how non-normativity is already an issue of appearance. In Schmidt's words, "[W]hat remains when you remove the 'drama' from theatre – when you remove the attempt to create illusions of self-contained worlds of plot and action – is not reality (nor nothingness), but the mechanism of theatre itself."²⁰⁶ Foregrounding the theatricality—rather than fiction—of theatre, holds political potential for Schmidt, "as a place to stage dynamics from the world outside the theatre, which are already theatrical problems."²⁰⁷ Utilizing postdramatic dynamics, *Back to Back Theatre* is able to highlight and trouble the theatrical problem of appearing as it pertains to disability. Yet, this representation, as Schmidt himself notes, is accompanied by the performers' distinct physiognomies that announce, "*These people are really disabled. This is what disabled people really look*

²⁰⁵ Theron Schmidt, "Acting, Disabled: Back to Back Theatre and the Politics of Appearance," in Karen Jürs-Munby, Jerome Carroll, and Steve Giles, eds. *Postdramatic Theatre and the Political: International Perspectives on Contemporary Performance* (New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2014), 204.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 194.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 195.

*like.*²⁰⁸ Staged within a series of overtly aesthetic frames—theatrical entrances, choreography, and postdramatic aspects like parataxis—the performer ultimately “emphasizes that disability is a matter of appearance: it is a matter of how we see these people.”²⁰⁹ Yet Schmidt’s conclusion rests upon the notion that the ambiguity of theatricality is enough to unsettle the seeming empiricism of bodily appearance.

Seen through States’ definition of the real, what Schmidt addresses is not a matter of appearance alone, but also an issue of preconventionality. Schmidt’s proposition is, presumably, that the theatrical apparatus that enables appearances is also capable of making things appear differently or highlight the unreliability of appearance as such. Yet what of the performers’ bodies that not only signal the appearance of their disability but also, due to their material reality, seem to exceed the realm of representation or, rather, seem to remain stuck in their reality? Schmidt sees the performers operating a dual function: “neither identifiable as themselves, nor as an abstraction, but occupying a specific and contingent representational function within a framework of appearance.”²¹⁰ The question remains, however, that given our current regime of appearances, can the actors appear other than disabled? This is not to solidify or support the existing prejudices’ reliance on appearance, but rather to move towards what in fact is meant by the real, a category that is neither stable nor empirical, but operative. That is to say, the real—within the context of theatrical production—is determined in relation to its extra-theatricality by virtue of its preconventionality. Back to Back’s use of professional actors with perceived disabilities offers opportunities for considering the politics of perception

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 198. Italics in the original

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 205.

and appearance. Political utility notwithstanding, Back to Back Theatre retains the generalized markers of the real, if only because physical disability has yet to lose its preconventionality. If it had, Schmidt's essay would be redundant. But as Jameson, Phelan, and Schmidt have argued, the real, when couched in subjects, is always only an appearance. That is, of course, unless it is an action.

Return to the Real as Such

The *Ibsen-Saga*'s inaugural production, *A Doll House* (2006) presented at Oslo, Norway's independent black box theatre *Hausamania* (Theatre of Cruelty) demonstrates the artists' production of reality effects through action. An hour into the production, the aesthetic suddenly changes. Thus far the events have unfolded in the *Saga*'s standard artificial gestures and actions choreographed to corresponding sound effects. In the production's now-conventional sequence of the children retaliating against their parents, Ivar decapitates his mother, Nora, with a chainsaw. Nora's infant son, Bob, played by Vinge in an adult-sized diaper, crawls into the room exhibiting mechanized movements to a score of small, squeaky steps. Once Bob discovers his mother, whose head sits a short distance from her body in a pool of blood, he stops. The final musical number of Giacomo Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* (1904), *Con ono muore* ("To die with honor") accompanies the scene.²¹¹ The thematic parallels between the texts of Puccini and Ibsen—women trapped by the social conditions of their culture and time, and the implications for their lives and those of their children—are clear enough. Yet this intertextuality is pretext to the *Saga*'s preeminent concern with the relationship between

²¹¹ The music thematically weds the two productions. "To die with honor" closes Puccini's piece in which Butterfly's son, the silent Dolore, sits blindfolded while his mother commits *jigai*—female ritual suicide by knife or sword.

fiction and reality. As Butterfly's aria swells, Bob begins to eat feces from his diaper to the pre-recorded cries of an infant. Initially, it is unclear if what is happening is real, as a slight change has taken place. No sound effects accompany the coprophagia and the pace at which Bob consumes his waste steadily increases, shedding the mechanical rhythms of all of the show's previous actions. The shift marks the transition from the representational to the actual collapse of the Helmers' home, from the fictional to the real.

Bob suddenly stands erect, rips the slouching diaper from his body and walks off the stage, where he turns on the theatre's work lights. The pop color of the set loses its rich atmosphere, turning pale and sickly beneath the florescent illumination. Bob reappears on stage, tees-up Nora's decapitated head and punts it across the room before destroying the entire set. Norwegian critic Jan Inge Reilstad called the scene "an hour of the most destructive chaos I have ever seen with my own eyes."²¹² Furniture is overturned, props launched across the room, and the wall paper shredded to expose the simple wood framing of the once beautifully designed work of art that was the Helmers' home. During a performance in Poland, Bob took a real chainsaw to the set's wood frame and cardboard props. Bob continues his rampage even after Butterfly's aria concludes. Without the hypnotic and overwhelming artifice of the sound design a new musicality emerges. Bob's actual footfalls, effortful grunts, labored breathing, and smashing of the set are the first natural sounds heard in the performance; meanwhile his flailing assault and heaving chest, punches, kicks, and head-first dives into the rubble are

²¹² Jan Inge Reilstad, "Et Dukkehjem Exploded Version," (*A Doll House, Exploded Version*) *Kunstkritikk*, March 14, 2007, accessed June 1, 2014, <http://www.kunstkritikk.no/kritikk/et-dukkehjem-exploded-version/>.

the first sights of the body operating outside the parameters of the *Saga*'s artifice. Amid this, Bob lazily tosses a cardboard brick over his shoulder that lands to the pre-recorded sound of breaking glass. The audience laughs, the journey from fantasy to stark reality coming full circle with the sound design's reanimation of the fiction. Bob again leaves the stage and shuts off the house lights. Under the theatre lights, the wreckage is reanimated. What moments ago looked like tornado-thrown debris is reestablished as scenography. Theatre is reinstated, but not before reality—action that produces a material and legible trace of its occurrence—howled through the room.

In the aforementioned postdramatic works, the real functions to create a sense of uncertainty between representation and reality, artifice and actuality. In the *Saga*, fiction and reality are deployed to solidify the divisions between the two categories. The actual sounds of destruction are displayed alongside gestures theatricalized as destruction through synchronized sound effects; the representation of urine in the form of paint is juxtaposed with the actual production of body waste. Given the ambiguity produced by the paradox of the subject, the *Saga*'s attempt to differentiate between fiction and reality necessarily addresses subjectivity itself.

Despite their real actions, the subjectivities of the *Saga*'s performers remain fictionalized beneath their masks and distorted voices. The face and voice are key components in establishing and demonstrating subjectivity. Affect theorist Silvan Tomkins noted that the face is the body's "dominant organ and the most likely seat of 'self'-consciousness," whereas Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari bemoaned the influence

of the “faciality machine” in defining the self.²¹³ The face is, nonetheless, so symbolically central to Western conceptions of subjectivity, that political philosopher Adrianna Cavarero maintains, “what is at stake [in its disfigurement] is not the end of a human life but the human condition itself.”²¹⁴ The voice does not hold the ranking that the face does, but is equally vital to the demonstration of the real of the subject. For Miriam Dreysse, participants of postdramatic and theatres of the real who speak in their actual, non-theatrical voice, exhibit an “individuality” that testifies to their realness.²¹⁵ The de-subjectification of the performers extends to the documentation of the performances in which participants are listed alphabetically without reference to the character/s they play, thus making it unclear who is behind which mask.²¹⁶ Vinge explains that “taking away these faces, these personalities, is one of the most important things. Because then the face has to be an icon. That’s why it’s important that the aesthetic keeps my own personality away.”²¹⁷ The attention the *Saga* has received makes total anonymity impossible, yet the group’s refusal to discuss their projects with the media or consent to published interviews (the author’s interviews notwithstanding) can be seen as a continuation of their effort to eliminate subjectivity from their works. By

²¹³ Silvan Tompkin, *Affect Imagery Consciousness: The Complete Edition*. (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2008), 115. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 167.

²¹⁴ Adrianna Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 12.

²¹⁵ Miriam Dreysse, “The Performance is Starting Now: On the Relationship Between Reality and Fiction,” in *Experts of the everyday: The Theatre of Rimini Protokoll*, 97.

²¹⁶ Vinge and Müller are the exception to this rule. By repeatedly casting themselves in particular roles—Vinge as the Director and Müller as the young children—they are identifiable despite being uncredited and wearing masks.

²¹⁷ Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller, interview with author. Internet videophone call. Jersey City, NJ and Berlin, Germany, July 6, 2010.

eliminating the defining features of the face and voice, *The Ibsen-Saga* produces de-subjectified performers, human puppets, who rely on gestures of risk, exposure, and effort to demonstrate the real.

The performers' behaviors are thematized within the *Saga* as acts of artistic heroism and self-sacrifice that affirm idealistic and romantic narratives of the artist as a social outlier and cultural provocateur. Characters respond to the fictional limitations contained within the shows' narratives and the actual institutional constraints placed on their productions with real actions. In the *Saga*'s second version of the *Wild Duck: The Director's Cut, Part II* (2010), Old Werle reacts to Gregers' refusal to join his company by repeatedly throwing himself from the second floor of the set onto a pile of cardboard boxes. Other than the boxes, which crumple and give way, no safety precautions are taken. During a performance of *John Gabriel Borkman* (2013), the cast removed the audience's bench seats, threw them on stage, and chopped them to pieces with an axe. The behavior was prompted by the *Volksbühne-im-Prater* adding an additional row of seats to the theatre to accommodate more ticket sales.²¹⁸ These idealistic actions—cribbed from the works of Henrik Ibsen, Richard Wagner, and the historical avant-gardes, which I address in the following chapters—run counter to the postdramatic theatre's critique of universalisms.

The performers' de-subjectified real actions evoke what Boris Groys calls the “heroic body,” which “manifests itself directly [...] when it explodes the shell of the

²¹⁸ Anecdote was recalled by Vegard Vinge. Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller, interview with author. Internet videophone call. Jersey City, NJ and Berlin, Germany, October 31, 2013.

social roles it usually plays.”²¹⁹ Based on the heroes of antiquity, who were “seized by an unbridled passion and were ready to destroy or be destroyed,” through bodily intensity, athleticism, commitment, or self-sacrifice, “the heroic act transforms the hero's body from a medium into a message.”²²⁰ Crucial to the transference from medium to message is the shedding “of the social roles [the body] usually plays,” a task that the *Saga* achieves through the erasure of the performers’ subjectivities. Groys links the aestheticization of the heroic body to Adolph Hitler and German Fascism’s proposed biological distinctions between races.²²¹ The certainty of race, for Hitler, was demonstrated through the heroic character of the German people. Relying on the actions of the body to produce the real, the *Saga* adopts the legacy of fascist aesthetics in the twenty-first century.

The *Saga*’s embrace of a fascistic aestheticization of the body reclaims an earlier conception of the real, what Alain Badiou has theorized as “the passion for the real.”²²² Derived from Lacan’s notion of the Real, Badiou’s model is useful for its emphasis on the effects caused by the passion for the real rather than speculation on its existence. This zealotry for the real emerges through “what is immediately practicable, here and now,” placing emphasis on action as a means of manifestation.²²³ For Badiou, the twentieth century is defined by a swell of artistic and political attempts to produce the real. Focused on how the century thinks of itself, Badiou offers a broad set of temporal markers in which the period stretches roughly from 1880 to 1989. Developing out of the

²¹⁹ Groys, *Art Power*, 131.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Ibid., 132.

²²² Badiou, *The Century*, 32.

²²³ Ibid., 58

European political fervor of the nineteenth century and mobilized through the brutality of twentieth-century military exploits and political extremism, “the passion for the real” strives to concretize the division between reality and fiction through the construction of the “new man.”²²⁴ The search for the real is the source of the period’s “horror and enthusiasm, simultaneously lethal and creative” that emerges from a need to shape, conduct, and force history towards a new beginning.²²⁵ Passion for the real is the ideological tether between the period’s unprecedented atrocities, artistic innovation, and by the fact that there exists no “formal criteria [...] to distinguish the real from semblance”; therefore the real must be measured by its relation to the artificial.²²⁶ The interdependence renders the real perpetually suspect, thus “[s]howing the gap between the factitious and the real becomes the principal concern of facticity.”²²⁷ Whether through the racialized rhetoric of German Fascism or Communist purges following the Russian revolution, the body becomes the testing ground for the real. The material limits of the body—its potential for finitude—become the most accurate measurement of the distance between semblance and the real. As Badiou bleakly asserts, “It is impossible to seem to die. This is why our century, aroused by the passion for the real, has in all sorts of ways—and not just in politics—been the century of destruction.”²²⁸ The *Saga*’s maxim is far tamer than Badiou’s, but no less adamantly aligned with the material truths of the body. In the context of *Saga*’s artificial landscapes, *it is impossible to seem to urinate or smash a wall.*

²²⁴ Ibid., 32.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Ibid., 54.

²²⁷ Ibid., 50.

²²⁸ Ibid., 54.

The *Ibsen-Saga* shares in the century's measurement of the real through the finality of material destruction and the demonstration of the body's corporeal limits. The *Saga's* real likewise operates in conjunction with a passion for "semblance" or what the artists call fiction. The reality effects of micturition or demolition grow in impact through their relationship to the artifice. By switching between extreme modes of artistry and actuality, the *Saga* achieves more than Andrew Quick's "flicker" of effects. The *Saga* turns the destabilizing apparatus of the theatre against itself to forcibly widen the gap between reality and fiction. Distinct from the indecidability of postdramatic theatre, the passion for an unambiguous real inspires the *Ibsen-Saga's* ideological aesthetics. Despite the concern over the *Saga's* fascistic overtones, it is important to remember that while the actions are real, the subjectivities remain fictional. The origins of these characters and the aesthetic ideologies they stand in for are explored in the following chapters.

Chapter 2
Return to the Ideal:
The *Ibsen-Saga*'s Supertextual Interpretation of Henrik Ibsen

“Idealism does not represent a superfluous expression of emotion, but in truth it has been, is, and will be, the premise for what we designate as human culture.”
—Adolph Hitler²²⁹

The cast of George Lucas' *Star Wars* trilogy is conspicuously present in the *Ibsen-Saga*'s production of *Ghosts* (2007).²³⁰ Oswald, munching popcorn and watching TV, stumbles upon *Return of the Jedi* (1983), the third installment of Lucas' film series. As the trilogy's leitmotif and title card recede, an actor dressed as Darth Vader emerges from the TV to confront Oswald. In response, Oswald brandishes a light-saber and takes on Luke Skywalker's role in the film. The dialogue is excerpted from the penultimate scene of the movie in which Vader (Skywalker's biological and vilified father) attempts to sway his son to “the dark side” while threatening Skywalker's sister, Princess Leah (represented by Oswald's sister Regina). As the battle unfolds, Mrs. Alving, speaking in the voice of the film's evil Emperor Palpatine, encourages Skywalker to kill his father and join him/her. Skywalker/Oswald rejects the evil advances of the Emperor/Mrs. Alving, declaring, “I'll never turn to the dark side. You failed, your highness, I'm a Jedi,

²²⁹ Adolph Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Boston: Houghton and Mifflin, 1998), 299.

²³⁰ Commissioned and presented at Oslo's Black Box Teater, *Ghosts* expanded the *Saga*'s pre-existing aesthetic. The production featured more elaborate sets, masks, and new company member Trond Reinholdtsen's hyper-realistic sound designs. *Ghosts*' running time stretched to over six hours and was given only six performances. These showings—which saw audiences dissipate over the course of the evening—were largely ignored or derided by the country's mainstream press, few of whom stayed for the entirety of the performance. *Ghosts* nonetheless netted Vinge and Müller the Norwegian Theatre Critics' Award.

like my father before me.”²³¹ In his refusal, Skywalker aligns himself with his father/Vader’s younger self who was once a virtuous Jedi before being corrupted by the Emperor’s ways. This short vignette reproduces a central conflict of Ibsen’s text: Mrs. Alving’s/Emperor’s failing attempt to coax Oswald/Skywalker away from Captain Alving/Darth Vader, replete with a secondary role for Regina as Princess Leah. The antithetical world-views of Ibsen’s characters—Oswald and Captain Alving’s shared “joy of life,” and Mrs. Alving’s dutiful, Christian piety—are reconfigured and expressed through the central binary of the *Star Wars* films: the virtues of Jedi-hood (Joy-of-Life) against the villainy of the “dark side” (Christian piety/duty).²³²

The relationship between Ibsen’s plays and the *Saga*’s intertexts is a point of persistent critical speculation. The *Saga*’s anachronistic correlations led Oslo critic IdaLou Larsen to deem the production “an interesting and sometimes stimulating deconstruction [that] unfortunately developed into a three-hour long uninhibited and rather pointless ego-trip performance that did not have anything to do with *Ghosts*.”²³³ Even the production’s champions, like Miriam Prestøy Lie, conclude that the images, references, and rants produce a “meta-level so gradually complex,” that it is difficult to discern their meaning, but “nevertheless established a cornucopia of surreal theatrical

²³¹ *Return of the Jedi*, DVD, directed by Richard Marquand (1983; Beverly Hills, CA: 20th Century Fox, 2004).

²³² Henrik Ibsen, *Ghosts*, trans. Rolf Fjelde, *Ibsen: Four Major Plays, Vol. II* (New York, Signet Classics, 1970), 61.

²³³ IdaLou Larsen, “Teateråret 2007–II” (Theatre Year 2007-II) *Idalou* (blog), January 15, 2008, accessed June 1, 2014 http://idalou.orgdot.no/pub/idalou/2008_1_11_9.56.47.shtml?cat=artikler. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

fireworks.”²³⁴ *Ghosts*’ arsenal featured “a wealth of cinematic and pop culture references, musical and visual intertextuality,” including “[performance artist] Paul McCarthy and [Michel] Foucault, [Edvard] Grieg and [the pop band] A-ha, [the 1981 horror film] *Cannibal Ferox* and [the cartoon] bear Colargol.”²³⁵ Reviewing the *Saga*’s *John Gabriel Borkman* (2011) six years later, William F. Condee and Thomas Irmer note “appreciation of the event required checking your Ibsen at the door—or accepting that images, snippets of dialogue, and radically reduced monologues could stand in for whole scenes.”²³⁶ Nonetheless, they claim that, with “precious little Ibsen in the production,” the show demonstrates that Ibsen’s texts “can be a resource for experimental theatre surpassing the well-known reinterpretations of German *Regietheater*.”²³⁷ The *Saga*, as Condee and Irmer suggest, departs from the interpretative strategies of a “Director’s Theatre” that seeks to contemporize or deconstruct a play’s themes or conditions. The ramifications of the *Saga*’s approach, however, exceed the currents of German theatre to impact the Ibsen’s broader stage history. The *Saga* is not notable for its deviations from Ibsen’s texts, as critical responses suggest, but rather for its fidelity to underappreciated attributes of the playwright’s works. Through its intertexts, the *Saga* explores a key dramaturgical feature of Ibsen’s works that Brian Johnston calls the playwright’s use of a “supertext:” a shared Western culture composed of “mythic, archetypal, cultural, and historical content and ‘quotation,’ deriving from this larger history of the [human]

²³⁴ Miriam Prestøy Lie, “Livsglede i antibiotikaens tid” (Joy-of-Life in the time of Antibiotics) *Kunstkritikk* (online), September 20, 2007, accessed June 19, 2014 <http://www.kunstkritikk.no/kritikk/livsglede-i-antibiotikaens-tid/>.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*

²³⁶ William F. Condee and Thomas Irmer, “*Theatertreffen* (Review),” *Theatre Journal* 65, no. 2 (2013): 267.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

race.”²³⁸ By shading his plots and characters with the outlines of a collective knowledge, Ibsen sought align his own dramas with the pantheon of Western cultural history.

In this chapter, I argue that the *Saga*'s depiction of Ibsen's plays creates a supertext composed of fictive, historical, and contemporary characters and narratives. Utilizing intertexts from across time, the *Saga* eliminates the temporal gaps between the past, present, and future to create a present time, a *now*, flush with references that bridge the gap between the ancient and modern, the popular and archetypal. Like Ibsen, the *Saga* uses these cultural symbols to deliver its proposed universal truths to audiences. While Ibsen concealed his supertextual signs within realistic milieus to imbue his characters with archetypal resonances, Vinge/Müller construct their milieus and characters from overtly displayed archetypal images and narratives. This reverses Ibsen's accepted artistic trajectory from romantic poet to social critic, where, in E.M. Forster's words, “[w]e pass from the epic to the domestic.”²³⁹ Ibsen's development, according to Johnston, occurs “because the ‘larger’ gestures of Romantic drama, although they indicated the same realities he was determined to express, belonged to a condition of mind too innocent of the historical process.”²⁴⁰ The romantic aspects of Ibsen's realist plays are, therefore, submerged and offset by withering critiques of the idealist ideology that accompanies romantic narratives and images. Toril Moi defines this ideology as “fusing aesthetics with ethics and religion, [through which] the idealist program holds out

²³⁸ Brian Johnston, *Text and Supertext in Ibsen's Drama* (University Park: Pennsylvania University Press, 1989), 78.

²³⁹ E.M. Forster, “Ibsen the Romantic,” in *Ibsen's Selected Plays*, ed. Brian Johnston (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 2004), 546. First published in 1940 by Edward Arnold.

²⁴⁰ Brian Johnston, *The Ibsen-Cycle* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1975), 13.

to us all an optimistic utopian vision of human perfection.”²⁴¹ Critics and artists alike have championed Ibsen’s presumed refutation of idealism as evidence of the plays’ social utility and larger cultural value.

The *Saga* reverses this course thematically and ideologically. Depicting Ibsen’s realist plays through supertextual references, the *Saga* foregrounds and celebrates the idealist aspects of the works. Critically, the *Saga* reframes the idealist program: art is no longer an instrument for the improvement of humanity; art is humanity’s highest achievement. This reformulation of idealism brings the concept in line with Adolph Hitler’s contention, quoted at the start of this chapter, that idealism is the underlying “premise for what we designate human culture. It alone created the concept of the ‘human being.’”²⁴² Hitler went on to define “true idealism” as “nothing but the subordination of the interests and life of the individual to the community.”²⁴³ Propagandistic and bloodthirsty as Hitler’s pronouncements may have been—crafted as a means of denigrating Jews for their presumed lack of idealism—the linkage of idealism and self-sacrifice is integral to both Ibsen and the *Saga*’s depictions of idealism. Whereas Hitler sought idealists to sacrifice on behalf of community in the form of the Third Reich, Ibsen’s idealists sacrifice themselves (or frequently those around them) for what Charles Leland identifies as the “calling of the vocation,” which must be heeded at all costs.²⁴⁴ This calling in Ibsen is, often enough, aesthetic. The *Saga* elevates the idealist figures of Ibsen’s plays to visionaries zealously struggling on behalf of art’s

²⁴¹ Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 73.

²⁴² Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 298-299.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 299.

²⁴⁴ Charles Leland, “‘The Irresistible Calling’: The Idea of Vocation in Ibsen,” *Modern Drama* 29, no. 2 (1986): 169-84.

utopian promise. These idealist missions also inspire the *Ibsen-Saga* itself. Notorious for its uncompromising and antagonistic approach towards institutions, fellow-artists, audiences, the press, and its own participants, the *Saga*'s performances are the demonstration of sacrificing the material for the aesthetic. While dramatized through Ibsen's texts, the *Saga*'s manifestation of itself as an idealist project—through real world acts of risk—aligns their performances with Hitler's call to embody the ideal through self-sacrifice. Through its supertext and ideology, the *Saga* establishes itself as the torchbearer of Ibsen's dramatic ethos of antagonistic, artistic idealism.

The *Saga*'s supertextual approach makes two interventions in the history of staging the playwright's works. First, the *Saga*'s supertextual method illuminates the mythopoetic aspects of Ibsen's works often ignored in production. Emphasizing these undercurrents meanwhile repudiates the instrumentalization of Ibsen as a social critic. To illustrate this point, I contrast the *Saga* with the Ibsen productions of Thomas Ostermeier whose contemporary style is achieved at the expense of the plays' supertextual elements. Despite their reported relevance to the twenty-first century, Ostermeier's productions are a continuation of what Frederick J. and Lise-Lone Marker identify as the "preoccupation with material reality—indisputably rooted though it may be in Ibsen's own directions—[that] nevertheless constricts and ultimately reduces a work whose vision extends far beyond the realistic or social plane."²⁴⁵ To foreground the plays' supertextual poetics is to deinstrumentalize their social utility.

²⁴⁵ Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker, "Ibsen and the Twentieth-Century Stage," in *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*, ed. James McFarlane (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 190.

Second, I contend that the *Saga*'s supertext has a twofold impact on Ibsen's plays; it celebrates an idealist ideology and transforms the linear temporality of the plays to a host of anachronistic times known as "contemporaneity." Like other modernists, Johnston points out, Ibsen "distrusted Romanticism's rhetoric [but] did not intend to relinquish its audacious claims for art and the artist."²⁴⁶ The *Saga*'s supertextual productions amplify the zealotry underpinning Ibsen's idealism. The latent romanticism/idealism of Ibsen's realist plays is contextualized by Errol Durbach's study of the playwright's romantic themes and Toril Moi's claim that Ibsen's realism repudiates the aesthetics of idealism. Highlighting Ibsen's idealism over his realism, the *Saga* repositions Ibsen as the forefather of artistic oppositionality. The *Saga* takes its oppositional stance from what Raymond Williams distills as Ibsen's core theme: "the struggle of individual desire, in a false and compromising situation, to break free and know itself."²⁴⁷ The *Saga* manifests the embattled pursuit of individual desire through its supertextual references while embodying these themes in equally idealistic and uncompromising performances.

The trans-historical scope of the *Saga*'s supertext also transforms the temporality of Ibsen's plays. Ranging from the dawn of time to the present day, the *Saga*'s supertext ruptures what Richard Hornby identifies as realism's temporal "[c]ontinuity, or direct connectedness."²⁴⁸ The trans-historical supertext creates a unique temporality

²⁴⁶ Johnston, *The Ibsen Cycle*, 363.

²⁴⁷ Raymond Williams, *Modern Tragedy* (Ontario: Broadview Press, 2006), 126.

²⁴⁸ Richard Hornby, *Patterns in Ibsen's Middle Plays* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1981), 40.

synonymous with what Peter Osborne calls “contemporaneity.”²⁴⁹ Marked by a refusal to distinguish between historical and fictional times and narratives, “contemporaneity” organizes multiple and conflicting temporalities and histories into “a single historical time of the present, as a living present.”²⁵⁰ Galvanizing its anachronistic references through the unified artifice of the “Total Radical Fiction,” the *Ibsen-Saga* produces the temporal experience of cohesion and dissonance characteristic of contemporaneity.

In stressing the idealist underpinnings of its namesake, the *Ibsen-Saga* is the twenty-first century’s torchbearer of Ibsen’s modernist antagonisms. In fact, the *Saga* is the first series of Ibsen productions to create the sense of scandal, confusion, and social critique that met the playwright’s infamous débuts of *A Doll House* (1879) and *Ghosts* (1881) more than a century ago. Casting Ibsen as the prophet of artistic provocation, the *Saga* reimagines the father of modern drama as a playwright through whom conflicts between personal aspiration (art) and worldly obstacles can be staged. Inverting Ibsen’s realist works through a supertext, the *Saga* restores an oppositional ethos that has been leeched from the playwright by decades of academic instrumentalization and realist production.

Ibsen’s Supertext

While Ibsen’s oppositionality is rarely a concern of theatrical production it is regularly a question of academic inquiry. No scholar has made a more concerted effort to complicate the polite image of Ibsen than Brian Johnston. In *The Ibsen-Cycle* (1975), *To The Third Empire* (1980), and *Text and Supertext in Ibsen’s Drama* (1989), Johnston’s

²⁴⁹ Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (New York: Verso, 2013).

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

Hegelian reading, according to Gerald Dugan, “totally demolishes” the popular impression of Ibsen as a socially engaged playwright who dramatized topical concerns through everyday personages.²⁵¹ In Johnston’s scholarship, the perception of Ibsen as a documentarian of nineteenth-century domestic life obscures the playwright’s grander aspiration to chart the evolutionary process of human existence. This ambition is evident in what Johnston calls the twelve realist works from *The Pillars of Society* (1877) to *When We Dead Awaken* (1899), which form a “single cyclical structure” dramatizing “the evolution of human consciousness” as outlined in Hegel’s *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807).²⁵² The “cycle” is structured in three groups of four plays with each segment focused on a particular dialectical development that evolves into the next grouping. The plays move from objective, Hellenistic concerns to subjective, Christian preoccupations and finally into an “archetypal or religious level of consciousness” in which spirituality and history are comprehend in their intertwined totality.²⁵³ Johnston’s thesis is not without its skeptics. As early as 1977, Asbjørn Aarseth noted that establishing an exact correspondence between the two authors requires sidestepping the fact that both Ibsen and “Hegel’s work entails some even more excessive interpretational problems.”²⁵⁴ More than prove a correlation between Hegel’s philosophy and Ibsen’s realist plays, Johnston illuminates a system of metaphoric images, themes, figures, narratives, and symbols

²⁵¹ Gerald Dugan, “The Cycle Returns: Brian Johnston’s Ibsen Cycle,” *Modern Drama* 37, no. 4 (1994): 666.

²⁵² Johnston, *The Ibsen Cycle*, 1.

²⁵³ *Ibid.*, 139.

²⁵⁴ Asbjørn Aarseth, “Brian Johnston: The Ibsen Cycle.” *Edda* 3 (1977). Quoted in Helge Salemonsens, “A Perspective on *A Doll’s House*, *Ghosts* and *An Enemy of the People*,” Ibsen Voyages website, accessed February 8, 2015, <http://web.archive.org/web/20141019204833/http://ibsenvoyages.com/e-texts/sophocles-hegel-and-ibsen/>.

within the playwright's texts. It is this aspect of Ibsen's work, what Johnston calls a "supertext," that concerns the *Saga*.²⁵⁵

Johnston defines the "supertext" as "a pattern of references, a conscious 'intertextuality,' linked *to* an existing, inherited cultural and ideological 'argument' continually evoked and exploited by art."²⁵⁶ The term is adapted from Charles Segal's notion of a "megatext," which, in Segal's words, is "an artificial construct, necessarily invisible and unconscious to the society whose exemplary narratives and symbolic projections of what reality is are located within that system."²⁵⁷ Johnston updates the name, but retains the sense of Segal's definition. These intertexts, according to Johnston, "release onto the stage the forces of this larger, universal drama—a drama 'built into' our modern identity."²⁵⁸ Ibsen's use of supertextual content is an outgrowth of literary modernism's dissatisfaction with modernity itself. According to Johnston, modernist artists constructed "counter discourses" to modernity using cultural history, which "must be reordered into a new esthetic unity as an autonomous artwork that stands apart from the immediate present and its conflicts."²⁵⁹ James Joyce's systematic use of complex allusions to tell otherwise simple stories in *Ulysses* (1918) and *Finnegans Wake* (1939) epitomizes the supertextual approach in literary modernism. It is therefore unsurprising that the latter of Joyce's two novels is suffused with references to Ibsen's *oeuvre*, ranging from the cryptic to the unconcealed.²⁶⁰ Johnston places Ibsen's "realist cycle," with its

²⁵⁵ Johnston, *Text and Supertext in Ibsen's Drama*.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 51. Italics in the original.

²⁵⁷ Charles Segal, quoted in Johnston, *Text and Supertext in Ibsen's Drama*, 6.

²⁵⁸ Johnston, *Text and Supertext in Ibsen's Drama*, 90.

²⁵⁹ Johnston, *The Ibsen Cycle*, 355-56.

²⁶⁰ See for example, Marvin Carlson, "Henrik Ibsen and *Finnegans Wake*," *Comparative Literature* 12, no. 2 (1960): 133-41.

supertext and Hegelian framing, at the forefront of this modernist tradition. In Johnston's account, the surreptitious embrace of idealist concerns for art defines Ibsen's modernity.

Plausibly braiding supertextual material into modern action represents a foundational dramaturgy of Ibsen's works. The dramatist's recurring themes, aesthetics, and temporality depict the co-existence of the past and present in what Johnston calls "a recollection and reliving, at every moment, of our total past, both as individual and as species."²⁶¹ Ibsen's characters and situations are at once modern and archetypal, operating as symbols that link the historical, the contemporary, and the universal. Johnston's analyses offer a vision of the author and his works that balances their "realistic" representation of society with a more abstract and ambitious supertext, rich with expansive concerns. Johnston's findings offer a rebuke to what he asserts is the

extraordinary metamorphosis of Ibsen, in academic interpretation, from the anarchist who scandalized all of Europe and who was fiercely denounced in the publications of the respectable bourgeoisie, into the sturdy champion of bourgeois values who saw his main function as a dramatic artist as that of sniffing out deviations and abnormalities that might disturb the even tenor of middle-class life.²⁶²

While never expressly stated, Johnston's corrective locates Ibsen at the forefront of modernism's history of artistic antagonism and autonomy.

Despite the attention Johnston brings to these elements and diversity of Ibsen productions documented in collections like *Global Ibsen* (2011) and *Ibsen in Practice* (2015), supertextual productions of Ibsen have yet to be staged.²⁶³ Even Michael Zelenak

²⁶¹ Johnston, *The Ibsen Cycle*, 80.

²⁶² Johnston, *Text and Supertext in Ibsen's Drama*, 64.

²⁶³ Erika Fischer-Lichte, Barbara Gronau, and Christel Weiler, eds., *Global Ibsen: Performing Multiple Modernities* (New York: Routledge, 2011) and Frode Helland *Ibsen in Practice: Relational Readings of Performance, Cultural Encounters and Power* (New York: Methuen Drama, 2015).

and Rick Davis' short-lived American Ibsen Theatre (1983-86), an institution inspired by Johnston and Rolf Fjelde's anti-realist visions of Ibsen, failed to manifest such ideas in production.²⁶⁴ Johnston laments that, "[i]t might be objected that playing a dramatist's larger intensions does not 'work' in the theatre. But until this is seriously attempted with Ibsen's plays, how can we know?"²⁶⁵ The chief obstacles to supertextual productions are, paradoxically, hallmarks of staging Ibsen: the plays' presumed social critiques, material conditions of the events, and their singular, linear temporality. Before demonstrating how the *Saga* counters these characteristics in productions, I first illustrate the use of these aspects in the Ibsen productions of Thomas Ostermeier. I argue that limited notions of social critique and temporality within the playwright's works—epitomized by Ostermeier's productions—enforce what James Hurt calls "the traditional emphasis upon Ibsen's 'realism.'"²⁶⁶

Staging Ibsen's Realism

Theatrical realism is far from a unified aesthetic, making summary statements about its effects problematic, if not impossible. Toril Moi, nonetheless, offers a useful definition in which "realism is neither a specific style nor a specific historical period, but rather an aspect or feature of all kinds of texts."²⁶⁷ One central element of Ibsen's realistic texts is the depiction of the characters as products of realistic social conditions. This detail need not be depicted through the aesthetics of nineteenth-century realism. Ibsen's works are regularly subject to the non-realist innovations of theatrical production

²⁶⁴ Walter Bilderback, "Beyond Teacups and Wallpaper: The American Ibsen Theater," *Theater* 16, no. 3 (1985): 22-28.

²⁶⁵ Johnston, *The Ibsen-Cycle*, 14.

²⁶⁶ James Hurt, *Cataline's Dream* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1972), 5.

²⁶⁷ Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and The Birth of Modernism*, 31.

and theory, from Aurélien Marie Lugne-Poë's symbolist Ibsen productions of the 1890s to the advent of postmodern thought and staging practice. Numerous "experimental," "contemporary," and "postdramatic" productions have sought to reimagine the playwright. Jacob Gallagher-Ross, surveying twelve theatre artists from around the globe staging Ibsen, summarizes that "radicals and realists alike have been mining the plays with redoubled vigor for lapidary social, political, and theatrical insights."²⁶⁸ Frode Helland echoes Ibsen's global diversity, noting that "there is no essentially Western way of doing a theatre classic like Ibsen, as there is no characteristically Asian, African or Latin American practice of his plays."²⁶⁹ Marvin Carlson, meanwhile, points out the particular variety to be found in Germany, where "[i]t would be a mistake to assume that a general style, or indeed any style, can be taken as typical of Ibsen production in Germany, as the style of psychological realism can be taken as the typical style of modern Ibsen production in the United States."²⁷⁰ Carlson's point is illustrated by Erika Fischer-Lichte's tracking of the adaptability of Ibsen's work through a brief history of German approaches to *Ghosts*. She concludes that the text "proves to be a play for all theatre concepts."²⁷¹ Yet exploring a play with a concept, as Fischer-Lichte contends is the case with Sebastian Hartmann's "postmodern" *Ghosts* (1999), does not necessarily constitute a "new reading of the play," as it may only achieve relevance "by allusions to topical themes, subjects, problems, and materials taken from contemporary pop and

²⁶⁸ Jacob Gallagher-Ross, "Ibsen Our Contemporary: Contemporary Directors on the Playwright's Centenary," *Theater* 37, no. 3 (2007): 87.

²⁶⁹ Frode Helland, *Ibsen in Practice: Relational Readings of Performance, Cultural Encounters and Power* (New York: Methuen Drama, 2015), 6.

²⁷⁰ Marvin Carlson, "'Unser Ibsen': Ibsen on the Contemporary German Stage," *Ibsen Studies* 4, no. 1 (2004): 55.

²⁷¹ Erika Fischer-Lichte, "'Ibsen's *Ghosts*—A Play for all Theatre Concepts?': Some Remarks on Its Performance History in Germany," *Ibsen Studies* 7, no. 1 (2007): 76.

subcultures.”²⁷² Whether or not a production’s cultural relevance constitutes a “new reading” of the text, most continue to target the social aspects of Ibsen’s works, if not his realist aesthetic, for revision and updating. This is unsurprising since, as Fischer-Lichte suggests in her introduction to *Global Ibsen*, “Ibsen’s plays address problems modern or modernizing societies all over the world were and are still facing.”²⁷³ And while Fischer-Lichte is quick to observe that theatre aesthetics are among the modern issues Ibsen dramatized, this aspect of the works—their aesthetics—takes second billing to their contemporary or historical social import.

Helland’s *Ibsen in Practice: Relational Readings of Performance, Cultural Encounters and Power* (2015) is endemic of academia’s role in reinforcing the playwright’s social utility. In Ibsen productions ranging from China to Germany to Zimbabwe to Chile, Helland offers a series of “relational readings” that “show how cultural, economic, ideological, political and social interests influence and motivate the practice of Ibsen.”²⁷⁴ Valid and valuable, Helland’s approach is, nonetheless, consistent with the image of Ibsen that Johnston and the *Saga* reject. Namely, that the playwright’s primary concerns are material, social conditions or, as Helland writes, the “dramatisation of the lies and sufferings of a Norwegian bourgeoisie living through a transitional phase of history.”²⁷⁵ This limited vision of the playwright’s intentions is allied with contemporary practitioners’ attempts to address more recent social conditions through Ibsen’s plays.

²⁷² Ibid., 76.

²⁷³ Fischer-Lichte, *Global Ibsen*, 1.

²⁷⁴ Helland, *Ibsen in Practice*, 3.

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 1.

This contemporizing impulse within the twenty-first century is fundamental to the work of German director Thomas Ostermeier. Beginning with *Nora* (2002), Ostermeier's six Ibsen productions make him the foremost director of the playwright.²⁷⁶ His Ibsen works received accolades in Germany—where *Nora* and *Hedda Gabler* (2005) were invited to the *Theatertreffen*—and abroad where his shows continue to tour across Europe, Asian, North and South America.²⁷⁷ Helland tabulates that, as of 2014, “Ostermeier's *Schaubühne* Ibsens have been performed 644 times, to an estimated audience of 462,000 people.”²⁷⁸ Ostermeier's global reach is evidence of his status as Ibsen's chief interpreter. Carlson notes that, for example, Ostermeier's *Nora*, which transferred to the Brooklyn Academy of Music in 2004, “was the first major German-language production to be presented in this city [New York City] in more than 40 years.”²⁷⁹ BAM is one of the thirty-eight different venues around the world at which *Nora* was performed.²⁸⁰

The global success of Ostermeier's productions is predicated on their ability to ingeniously adapt Ibsen's social criticism into a contemporary parlance. Or, as Helland

²⁷⁶ *Nora* (Schaubühne, Berlin, 2002); *The Master Builder* (Burgtheater, Vienna, 2004); *Hedda Gabler* (Schaubühne, Berlin, 2005); *John Gabriel Borkmann* (Schaubühne, Berlin, 2008); *Ghosts* (at Stadsschouwburg, Amsterdam in 2011, and in 2013 at Théâtre Vidy, Lausanne) and *An Enemy of the People* (Schaubühne, Berlin, 2012).

²⁷⁷ Ostermeier's *Nora* (2002) and *Hedda Gabler* (2005) were invited to the 2003 and 2006 *Theatertreffen* festivals in Berlin; *Nora* was awarded Austria's Nestroy Prize and Politika Prize; *Hedda Gabler* received the 2006 *Theatergemeinde's* audience award; *John Gabriel Borkman* won France's *Grand Prix de la Critique* in 2009. See Thomas Ostermeier's biography, Schaubühne website, https://www.schaubuehne.de/en/people/thomas-ostermeier.html/ID_Taetigkeit=5, accessed, March 5, 2015.

²⁷⁸ Helland, *Ibsen in Practice*, 12.

²⁷⁹ Marvin Carlson, *Theatre is More Beautiful Than War: German Stage Directing in the Late Twentieth Century* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009), 171.

²⁸⁰ Helland, *Ibsen in Practice*, 12.

argues of Ostermeier's productions, "Their indisputable artistic merit notwithstanding, they deserve attention because they represent highly ambitious attempts to make Ibsen our contemporary in political and social terms."²⁸¹ The shows are noticeably contemporized, featuring current attitudes, fashion, music, and technology situated in high-gloss domestic environments designed by Jan Pappelbaum. As with the work of Sarah Kane, Mark Ravenhill, and other playwrights of the 1990s with whom Ostermeier famously launched his career, the director's vision of Ibsen is suffused with an overt, hyper-realistic sexuality and violence characteristic of Hollywood cinema. Peter Boenisch, Ostermeier's most-recognized English-language chronicler, claims that "instead of infusing a given text with present-day material, that contemporary context in fact became the main text, and the scripted characters and narratives essentially served as the context in which to articulate an urgent analysis of contemporary moral and mental situations."²⁸² The emphasis on material and social conditions is made explicit with the repurposing of the characters and narratives as context for contemporary concerns.

Ostermeier's approach is apparent in his Ibsen productions, which Boenisch claims constitute the director's "most prominent and resonant reworkings of classic plays."²⁸³ Ostermeier's revised ending of *Nora* epitomizes his contemporizing technique. In place of the title character's iconic exit, Nora murders Torvald with a handgun, unloading a clip of ammunition into her husband that sends his body into an enormous onstage fish tank. Designed to restore a visceral power to an ending whose shock has

²⁸¹ Ibid., 15. Emphasis added.

²⁸² Peter M. Boenisch, "Thomas Ostermeier: Mission neo(n)realism and a theatre of actors and authors" in *Contemporary European Theatre Directors*, eds. Maria M Delgado and Dan Rebellato (New York: Routledge, 2010), 347.

²⁸³ Ibid.

diminished with its growth in historical importance, Ostermeier follows in a long lineage of provocative adaptations of *A Doll House* and Ibsen in general.²⁸⁴ These methods, according to Carlson, “do not seek to diminish or destroy the original [...] but rather to reinscribe some of the most important and fundamental concerns of that original in unexpected but at the same time theatrically (and perhaps politically) extremely powerful ways.”²⁸⁵ Yet, as I will show, what is characteristically highlighted as “fundamental” to Ibsen is at the expense of his supertextual themes and structures.

For Ostermeier, Ibsen’s “fundamental concerns” are what he believes to be the playwright’s economic preoccupations. The director enumerates this point in the essay “Reading and Staging Ibsen,” in which he suggests “the characters are under huge economic pressure and that Ibsen always uses this economic pressure as the motor of the play. And for me this is the link to today’s time, which makes this writer so contemporary.”²⁸⁶ With this in mind, Ostermeier renders Ibsen’s conflicts in economic terms, spurred by neo-liberalism’s rampant monetization of the world. Or, as Charles Isherwood notes of *Nora*, Ostermeier offers “the view that virtually all human interaction in bourgeois society can be reduced to a sexual or financial transaction.”²⁸⁷ Ostermeier’s depictions of monetized, contemporary life extends from his “‘sociological theatre’: theatre as a laboratory to observe human behaviour.”²⁸⁸ Eschewing postmodern and

²⁸⁴ The *Ibsen-Saga*, for example, resolved Nora’s famed exit with an equally outrageous act of violence in which her son Ivar decapitates his mother with a chainsaw.

²⁸⁵ Carlson, “Unser Ibsen’: Ibsen on the Contemporary German Stage,” 69.

²⁸⁶ Thomas Ostermeier, “Reading and Staging Ibsen,” *Ibsen Studies* 10, no. 2 (2010): 69.

²⁸⁷ Charles Isherwood, “A Nora Who Goes Beyond Closing Her Prison’s Door,” *The New York Times*, November 11, 2004, accessed March 8, 2015, <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/11/theater/reviews/11nora.html>.

²⁸⁸ Thomas Ostermeier and Peter M. Boenisch, “‘The More Political We Are, the Better We Sell’: A Conversation about the Political Potential of Directing Classical Drama and

postdramatic effects, Ostermeier's "sociological theatre" attempts, in Boenisch's estimation, to "offer opportunities for identification, for experiencing coherence, and comforting familiarity."²⁸⁹ To that end, Ostermeier directs Ibsen's texts to reflect an exacerbated version of the material conditions and economic constraints of his audiences.

Despite Ostermeier's "old school Marxist" reservation "that any political event could [ever] take place in the theatre," he champions the medium's capacity to depict current social and political conditions.²⁹⁰ This is evident in Ostermeier's production of *An Enemy of the People* (2012). During Dr. Stockmann's famed fourth-act speech, in which he calls for autocratic rule in the face of his community's cowardice, the performers break the fourth wall and cast the audience as the townspeople Stockmann addresses. It is an invitation to a real-time debate about the hero's anti-democratic rhetoric. The gesture, according to Michael Billington, "brings Ibsen's play into our world" of political frustration, attesting to why this "play once regarded as one of Ibsen's lesser works has gained new traction in today's discontented world."²⁹¹ The whistleblowing plot of the play was likewise marketed as pertinent. A London preview-interview with directors Simon McBurney and Ostermeier, titled "Ibsen meets Snowden," evoked Edward Snowden, the U.S. fugitive who exposed military secrets, as a

the Nasty Traps of Today's Cultural Industry," *Performance Paradigm* 10 (2014): 17-27, 22.

²⁸⁹ Boenisch, "Thomas Ostermeier: Mission neo(n)realism and a theatre of actors and authors," 345.

²⁹⁰ Ostermeier and Boenisch, "'The More Political We Are, the Better We Sell,'" 22.

²⁹¹ Michael Billington, "An Enemy of the People five-star review: Like a rowdy version of Question Time," *The Guardian*, September 25, 2014, accessed March 11, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/sep/25/an-enemy-of-the-people-review-michael-billington>.

contemporary corollary of Doctor Stockmann.²⁹² McBurney praises the production observing that, “far from being just a psychological drama about courage and moral rectitude, we are forced to consider the urgency of its social context, how people live in a society that privileges economic relations above personal ones.”²⁹³ What McBurney characterizes as the binary of psychological drama and social context has, however, historically operated in conjunction, producing the dogged interpretation of Ibsen as a realist, social critic of the modern subject.

In this light, the success of Ostermeier’s laboratory theatre must be contextualized as a continuation of a tradition that Bjørn Hemmer claims reduces Ibsen to a “realistic commentator on contemporary life.”²⁹⁴ Thomas Irmer similarly summarizes Ostermeier’s “Ibsen trilogy” (*Nora*, *Hedda Gabler*, and *John Gabriel Borkmann*) as employing a “style that draws towards a television aesthetic—without *Verfremdung*—a contemporary reinstatement of Ibsen’s realism.”²⁹⁵ The sociological and identificatory potential of theatrical realism—which Ibsen is often credited with popularizing and which Johnston adamantly protests—is made explicit in Ostermeier’s productions. Boenisch maintains that Ostermeier’s leap from Ibsen’s texts to the present day is managed by an adherence to “the playwright’s central analysis: even while we claim to

²⁹² Thomas Ostermeier, interviewed by Simon McBurney, “Ibsen meets Snowden: Thomas Ostermeier on *An Enemy of the People*,” *The Guardian*, September 24, 2014, accessed March 9, 2015, <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/sep/24/thomas-ostermeier-interview-theatre-ibsen-enemy-of-the-people>.

²⁹³ Ibid.

²⁹⁴ Bjørn Hemmer, “Ibsen and the Realistic Problem Drama,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*, ed. James McFarlane (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 70.

²⁹⁵ Thomas Irmer, “*En djevelsk Ibsen*,” (A Devilish Ibsen), trans. Therese Bjørneboe, *Norsk Shakespeare og Teatre Tidsskrift*, (*Norwegian Shakespeare and Theatre Journal*) no. 3/4 (2011), accessed May 2, 2014, <http://www.shakespearetidsskrift.no/arkiv/3-42011/borkman-i-berlin.html>.

have left the taboos of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie behind, [...] the pressures from which modern life was suppose to liberate us have in fact multiplied.”²⁹⁶ The haunting of the past is thematically central to all of Ibsen’s works, but the content and origin of this past is less concrete.

For Ostermeier, Ibsen’s haunting is material and monetary in nature, situated within a definitive historical period. The twenty-first century, like the nineteenth, is ripe with material and social conditions. Ostermeier’s productions are structured around establishing corollaries between the economic realities and social taboos of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries through what Gallagher-Ross calls a series of “calculated transpositions and revisions.”²⁹⁷ It is this strident materialism, however, that Johnston and other Ibsen scholars caution is part and parcel of the instrumentalization of the playwright’s texts towards social aims. Raymond Williams enumerates, for example, the metaphoric breadth encapsulated within Ibsen’s financial terms: “debt is received experience and received institutions: as embodied in others but active also in its own inevitable inheritance.”²⁹⁸ Ibsen’s themes of debt, inheritance, and taboo do not simply correspond to financial or sexual systems of representation, but operate fluidly through the interplay of the material and metaphoric, social and spiritual.

That is not to say Ostermeier’s productions proceed without metaphor. His shows are rife with allusions to contemporary life that amplify Ibsen’s thematic concerns while ignoring their supertextual correspondences. In *Nora*, for example, the heroine’s

²⁹⁶ Boenisch, “Thomas Ostermeier: Mission neo(n)realism and a theatre of actors and authors,” 348.

²⁹⁷ Gallagher-Ross, “Ibsen Our Contemporary: Contemporary Directors on the Playwright’s Centenary,” 87.

²⁹⁸ Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 34.

tarantella costume is replaced with the attire of Lara Croft, the English archeologist of the *Tomb Raider* video games, comic books, and film franchise. Following the critical and commercial success of her video game debut, Croft, not unlike Nora, was heralded as a character that “broke the traditional, male-dominated hero mold in a *big way*.”²⁹⁹ An updating of Torvald’s costumed-fantasy of his wife, the gun-toting Croft perhaps signals Nora’s feminism and cleverly foreshadows the violent ending. Nora’s turn as Croft more explicitly situates the production’s historical period. 2002, the year of Ostermeier’s *Nora*, followed the 2001 release of *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*. Starring Angelina Jolie, the movie “broke the opening-weekend record for films featuring a female protagonist [and was] the second most-successful video-game adaptation worldwide.”³⁰⁰

Constructing Torvald’s desire, and perhaps Nora’s violent inspiration, from such an immediate cultural product reflects Ostermeier’s materialist approach. Given Croft’s global popularity at the time of *Nora*’s premiere, her presence clearly marks the milieu of 2002. A roster of temporally specific references, including digital technology and N.E.R.D.’s song “Rock Star” (2001) support the period-specific marker of Croft. In his review of *Hedda Gabler*, *Theatre Heute* critic Robin Detje skewers the domesticating effect of Ostermeier’s contemporizing impulse: “Hedda Gabler in a tracksuit is like us, the artists, and we artists are like her, our generation, whose music we play to make the point and celebrate Communion. We all belong together, and we are good, and we will medicate Ibsen until there is nothing foreign about him, and he belongs entirely to us and

²⁹⁹Rick Marshall, “History of Tomb Raider: Blowing the dust off 17 years of Lara Croft,” *Digital Trends*, March 9, 2013, accessed April 2, 2015, <http://www.digitaltrends.com/gaming/the-history-of-tomb-raider/>. Italics in original.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

dances to the music on our own iPods.”³⁰¹ Whether read as cloying or clever, Ostermeier’s objective is to recast Ibsen’s narratives as contemporary occurrences. In doing so, Ibsen’s suspicion towards the spiritual is replaced with a strident secularism. In the process, Nora and Torvald’s debts, just as Dr. Rank’s illness, are stripped of their sense of cultural legacy and replaced with the impersonal calculations of finance and clinical pathology.

Staging Ibsen’s Supertext

If Ostermeier’s strategy delimits Ibsen by acclimatizing his conflicts and characters to the tastes and milieus of twenty-first century spectators, the *Ibsen-Saga*’s references are part of a different tact. The staging of popular characters, like those of the *Star Wars* films, is complicated by a host of competing, anachronistic references that neither locate the work in an historical period, nor clarify the material conditions of the play’s characters. The *Saga*’s trans-historical references open the plays into the realm of the fantastical, allowing for thematic analogs across cultural history. Ostermeier’s productions, meanwhile, demonstrate realism’s need to foreclose temporal anachronism or the suggestion of a realm beyond the immediate material reality. It is in this sense that Isherwood’s appraisal of Ostermeier’s *Nora* rightly concludes that the “production commendably translates the play’s social dimensions. But it also violates its spiritual ones.”³⁰² For Isherwood, the spiritual dimensions are Nora’s personal revelations. Read

³⁰¹ Robin Detje, “Phänomen Abstieg,” (Phenomenon Descending) *Theater Heute*, Yearbook (2006): 44-54, 53-54, trans. and quoted in Boenisch, “Thomas Ostermeier: Mission neo(n)realism and a theatre of actors and authors,” 356.

³⁰² Isherwood, “A Nora Who Goes Beyond Closing Her Prison’s Door,” <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/11/11/theater/reviews/11nora.html>.

through Johnston's claim of a supertext, any such awakenings are rooted in greater, fictional/historical revelations that are demonstrated by, but exceed the individual.

Social conditions notwithstanding, supertextual productions of Ibsen's realist texts are equally limited by the dominant temporal logic of realism. Foregrounding the supertext requires depicting multiple temporalities while realist plays typically present an outwardly singular, linear temporality. Benjamin Bennett refers to this dramatic effect in Ibsen's works as "temporal perspectivism," which "gives the impression of a temporal continuum extending beyond the limits of what is performed," namely a past, present, and future.³⁰³ Although the "depth" of Ibsen's temporal perspective shifts from play to play, Bennett argues that temporally speaking, Ibsen "remains much closer to the cohesively mimetic" than his expressionistic counterpart, Strindberg.³⁰⁴ The turn towards Expressionism, in Bennett's accounting, is simply "the elaboration of the symbolic at the expense of the mimetic," and, consequently, a linear temporality.³⁰⁵ Ibsen's supertext is the symbolic concealed within the mimetic, offering the suggestion of broader meanings while preserving the linearity of realism.

Richard Hornby helps to contextualize the dual temporalities of Ibsen's plays in his theorizing of the relationship between dramatic time and narrative. Hornby argues that dramatic works can be separated into both "external," formal elements, and "internal," thematic content. He contends that "[c]ontinuity, or direct connectedness, is thus the unifying principle for dramatic realism in the external sense."³⁰⁶ A coherent,

³⁰³ Benjamin Bennett, "Strindberg and Ibsen: Toward a Cubism of Time in Drama," *Modern Drama* 26, no. 3 (1983): 263.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 266.

³⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 267.

³⁰⁶ Richard Hornby, *Patterns in Ibsen's Middle Plays*, 40.

linear sense of time provides the realistic theatre with what Hans-Thies Lehmann calls the “[w]holeness, illusion and world representation [that] are inherent in the model ‘drama.’”³⁰⁷ Ibsen’s “wholeness” in the realist plays is manufactured by a temporal consistency commensurate with a depiction of contemporary life that Hemmer points out is “accepted as one of the defining characteristics of realism.”³⁰⁸ Internally, however, Hornby continues, the realist plays “maintain the convention of Ibsen’s earlier Romantic style.”³⁰⁹ The submersion of the supertext is necessary to the preservation of the image of a contemporary, realist world. The degree to which Ibsen does foreground his archetypes is the extent to which his works are typically called symbolist. Hermann Weigand, tracing the aesthetic transition between the “realist” plays and *The Master Builder* (1892), contends that in his latter plays, Ibsen “retreated to the twilight zone of mysticism, [...] responding to psychological laws that have no counterpart in the real world.”³¹⁰ As Johnston, Hurt, and Hornby among many others have shown, the forces identified by Weigand were always present in Ibsen’s works. Exposing the archetypes, however, conflates the past with the present, disrupting the temporal frame. The playwright’s aesthetic modes, therefore, come to be defined, in part, by the distinct temporal laws that govern and separate the “real” and “mystical” worlds.

By depicting the supertext, the *Ibsen-Saga* fractures realism’s linear temporality, allowing for the co-presence of fictive, historical, and contemporary characters and narratives. In staging the trans-historical temporality undergirding Ibsen’s plays, the

³⁰⁷ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (New York: Routledge, 2006), 22.

³⁰⁸ Hemmer, “Ibsen and the Realistic Problem Drama,” 71.

³⁰⁹ Hornby, *Patterns in Ibsen’s Middle Plays*, 44.

³¹⁰ Hermann Weigand, *The Modern Ibsen* (New Hampshire: Ayer Company Publishers, 1984), 274.

Saga represents the first attempt to manifest what Johnston claims are Ibsen's "larger intentions," offering a vital contribution to theoretical and practical considerations of the playwright's works. This is not to suggest that the artists of the *Saga* have read or are even familiar with the writings or theories of Johnston. Vinge/Müller's own readings of Ibsen's texts have made them aware of the playwright's numerous recurrences and references. What Johnston calls Ibsen's "supertext," Vinge/Müller refer to as the playwright's "fetishes:" the repeated figures, themes, images, and narratives that distinguish Ibsen's work from that of other artists.³¹¹ The artists' exploration and connection of Ibsen's "fetishes" with their own produces a supertext that ranges from the Big Bang to the latest Hollywood blockbuster. More than a rampant eclecticism, the *Saga*'s supertext charts Ibsen's thematic preoccupations with idealism across historical and imagined time.

Unconventional as the *Ibsen-Saga* may be, it is faithful to Ibsen's plays in its conflation of the past and future into a present time, comprised of fictional, historical, and contemporary characters and narratives. Uncovering the references embedded in Ibsen's plays is secondary to Vinge/Müller's desire to interpret, recreate, and extend Ibsen's supertext. To illustrate the continuity of Ibsen's themes throughout time, the plays are

³¹¹ Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller, interview with author. Internet videophone call. Jersey City, NJ and Berlin, Germany, July 6, 2010. "Fetish," as used by the artists, has no relation to Sigmund Freud's use of the word or any other psychoanalytic usage. It instead denotes what the artists call a "necessity" or desire for a particular image or narrative over another. These "fetishes," which Vinge notes draw them to the work of David Lynch (with his recurring red curtains) and Paul McCarthy (with his food and masks), are importantly intuitive, un-theorized, and non-conceptual (at least by the artists in question). The spectator may not be able to fully understand or uncover their meaning, but it is evident that they are of great importance to the artist. The "fetish" is another manifestation of the romantic myth in which artistic production gains merit through its emotional or spiritual correspondence with the broader world. The *Saga*'s artists understand this approach as operating in direct opposition to conceptual art.

staged using characters and narratives lifted from TV, politics, opera, film, theatre, pop music, literature, and popular culture. Despite their eclecticism, each reference has its origin in the author's texts and is conspicuously presented. "In *Ghosts*," Vinge explains, "the character transforms into Darth Vader, which is banal, but it is [about] this chain of associations connected with them, even the banal ones. That's why I use these icons, they open up the connections."³¹² Given the objective of creating connections, the process necessitates the overt presentation of the "icons." To that end, all references are baldly displayed alongside corresponding images, sounds, and texts that help to illustrate the correlation. Because the supertextual allusions illustrate aspects of the same point, it is unnecessary to recognize every reference. The characters' didactic actions and phrases, caricatured voices and movements help to ground potentially obscure references. Cultural icons establish connections between the productions' idealist content and audiences while tracking Ibsen's idealist/oppositional themes through the century of cultural production following his death. The anachronisms produced by foregrounding the supertext are, meanwhile, normalized within the artifice of the "Total Radical Fiction," rendering all times—fictional and historical—contemporaneous and present.

The co-presence of distinct temporalities that erode divisions between past, present, and future is synonymous with notions of "contemporaneity." Peter Osborne theorizes contemporaneity as an artificial construct manifest through "indifference between historical and fictional narrative."³¹³ Osborne's definition addresses art historian Terry Smith's caution that, in conceptualizing the present, "[w]e cannot speak of contemporary time, as that would presume a fictive unity. Multiple yet incommensurable

³¹² Ibid.

³¹³ Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 23.

temporalities are the rule these days, and their conceptions of historical development move in multifarious directions.”³¹⁴ Osborne therefore describes “contemporaneity” as the *fictional* organization of the world’s multiple temporalities and histories into “a single historical time of the present, as a living present.”³¹⁵ As a critical concept, contemporaneity attempts to express the temporality of the current global, historical moment. It also marks a distrust of postmodernism’s capacity to express the temporal diversity of the twenty-first century.³¹⁶ If postmodernism is a critical, historicizing assessment of modernism and its associated ideologies, narratives, and aesthetics, what is its utility when lived experience is marked not by the governance or rejection of a singular critical concept—postmodernism, modernism—but rather the multiplicity of experiences located in the particular? If the contemporary’s competing times and experiences are only intelligible through a fictive unity, the “Total Radical Fiction’s,” structuring of temporal diversity through a unified aesthetic is the theatrical equivalent of contemporaneity’s paradoxical experience of continuity and disjointedness.

One of the *Saga*’s contemporaneous temporalities is expressed through what might be called a traditional supertext, featuring references familiar to Ibsen himself. Biblical allusions, for example, which Ibsen regularly employed, recur throughout the *Saga*. The Oslo production of *The Wild Duck* (2009) begins with a video of two Neanderthals’ chopping-down trees in a depleted forest. The figures suggest Werle and Old Ekdal’s work in the Northern Høydal forests. The characters take on new resonance when one bludgeons the other to death with a stone. The scene rematerializes when the

³¹⁴ Terry Smith, *What is Contemporary Art?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 198.

³¹⁵ Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All*, 24.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

two figures from the video walk onto stage and battle as the Director character coats them and the walls with buckets of fake blood. After some thirty minutes of combat, the audience is led into an adjoining theatre where the action begins, as it does in the play, at the Werle home. The prologue, like all elements in the *Saga*, portrays the story supertextually. Werle's crimes against Old Ekdal, typically recounted through Ibsen's exposition, are literalized. Recast in an archetypal light, Werle and Old Ekdal play-out Cain's original sin of murder against his brother Abel. Accompanied by a loop of Popol Vuh's "Wehe Khorazin," featured in Werner Herzog's film *Fitzcarraldo* (1982), the battling figures duly evoke the archetypal contest between "man and nature" central to Herzog's film and Ibsen's plays. In doing so, Vinge/Müller link the injustices of the play to a larger lineage of crimes and conflicts.

Cultural references from Ibsen's own historical period are commonly woven through contemporary citations. Popular film references are frequently used, creating links between the modern and contemporary periods.³¹⁷ In *Ghosts*, Captain Alving—

³¹⁷ Film quotations are a prevalent means of linking Ibsen's themes to later points in cultural history. The *Saga*'s citations range from obscure art films to Hollywood blockbusters and are always conspicuously accompanied with the films' music or characters. The use of *Star Wars* to illustrate familial relationships/father-son conflicts, as seen in *Ghosts*, is reprised in *John Gabriel Borkman*. This time, Erhart doubles as Luke Skywalker while Borkman embodies Darth Vader. Hedvig's birth, staged during *The Wild Duck*, is imagined as the emergence of the chest-busting creature from Ridley Scott's *Alien* film franchise (1979-), emphasizing her status as an aberration of Werle and Gina's adulterous relationship. In *A Doll House*, Torvald's outrage at Nora's growing independence is staged as a scene from *King Kong* (1933), with the possessive husband transforming into a jealous Kong who takes his frustration out on a Barbie doll *qua* Fay Wray *qua* Nora. The *Saga*'s fifth production, *12-Spartenhaus* (2013), based on *An Enemy of the People*, uses a host of filmic allusions to expand the connections between the contaminated baths and other infamous locales. The setting is at once the Weimar sex club of Tinto Brass' *Salon Kitty* (1976)—featuring the film's title painted above the set—and the maze-like haunted house of Stanley Kubrick's *The Shining* (1980) with Vinge enacting Jack Nicholson's routine of opening doors with an axe.

after bursting from an onstage grave to the soundtrack of George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968)—morphs into the Flying Dutchman of Richard Wagner's opera. *The Flying Dutchman's* (1843) narrative mirrors the Alvings' marriage, with Mrs. Alving playing the ill-fated Senta to the Captain's Flying Dutchman. The nautical connection between the pair is expanded to connect Mrs. Alving's (domestic) and Senta's (mythic) sacrificial gestures. To underscore the correspondences, the characters are accompanied by loops of the opera's overture as a portion of the set transforms into a storm-tossed ship commandeered by Captain Alving that sails offstage. An interlude depicting the Alvings' early courtship carries the nautical theme forward in time through the backing track of Celine's Dion's "My Heart Will Go On" (1997). Made famous as the theme to James Cameron's film *Titanic* (1997), the Alvings now evoke the movie's ill-fated, nautical lovers, Jack and Rose. The Dutchman/Jack/Captain's haunting of Senta/Rose/Helene, in both Wagner and Cameron's depictions, echoes the play and playwright's theme of the pervasive influence of the past on the present.

The *Saga's* references are equally taken from historical events. In *John Gabriel Borkman*, Gunhild Borkman and Ella Rentheim's struggle over the fate of their son/nephew Erhart Borkman spurs a succession of military conflicts ranging from WWI to the archetypal. As the sisters' feud grows from a verbal argument to a physical altercation, armored tanks begin to prowl the street outside the Borkman home. Emblazoned with Iron Crosses, the tanks invoke German military actions of the first and second World Wars. Soon a fleet of cardboard UH-1 "Huey"-style helicopters descends on the home. Icons of the Vietnam War, the pervasive use of these machines led to that military campaign's moniker, "The Helicopter War." Amid gunfire and explosions,

soldiers in monochrome black-and-white camouflage lay siege to the Borkman home. The lack of specific historical context for these costumes invites a contradictory reading; their ambiguity makes them wholly fictional and metaphorically applicable to all military campaigns. The universalizing ambiguity grows as the soldiers enact a litany of war crimes on the family, evoking everything from the sexual violence of the Bosnian War to the torture of Iraqi prisoners of war. At the height of the carnage, the Devil appears. Standing center stage, his archetypal presence hints at the metaphoric game being played: the supertextual expanse links the familial battle to universal symbols of conflict through historical atrocities.

John Gabriel Borkman's succession of horrors illustrates the central difference between the supertexts of Johnston and the *Saga*. Johnston champions Ibsen's archetypal connections as "examples of the way in which the human spirit once was able to invest the phenomena of human experience with life-enhancing value or with transcendental significance even if in its tragic form."³¹⁸ Johnston's nostalgia stems from a belief that now, "as unimportant cogs of capitalist economy or state power, we seem hardly capable of carrying such cargo."³¹⁹ Including references from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the *Saga* demonstrates that late capitalism is as rich in archetypes and myths as any previous historical period. The supertextual content of the past decades arguably differs from the myths of previous eras in that they are conceived as market-driven commodities. The *Saga*'s contemporaneity levels such valuations, focusing instead on the symbols' expression of cultural meaning, manufactured or otherwise.

³¹⁸ Johnston, *Text and Supertext in Ibsen's Drama*, 98

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*

Popular and contemporary references serve a critical function throughout the *Saga*. Vinge/Müller use familiar quotations to establish direct and impactful relationships between their art and audience, calling them “triggers for the DNA.”³²⁰ In the *Wild Duck*, for example, Gregers’ belief in “the ideal” is manifest through multiple pop-culture references. The character speaks in the voice of Slavoj Žižek critiquing “Cultural Capitalism” (noticeably slipping from Norwegian to English) and leads a procession of sacrificial ducks to Joan Baez’s “Here’s To You” (1971), an anthemic celebration of the persecuted and executed anarchists Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti.³²¹ Baez’s song was also featured in Christoph Schlingensiefel’s *Rocky Dutschke ’68* (1997), which paid homage to the life and attempted assassination of Rudi Dutschke, the 1960s German student movement leader, and in Schlingensiefel’s own brand of theatrical idealism, “the basic idea of *Rocky Dutschke* is the protest against a comfortable state and the tired society—against reality.”³²² The *Saga*’s allusions call attention to the political and aesthetic developments of idealism, haphazardly linking Žižek, Schlingensiefel, Dutschke, Baez, Sacco and Vanzetti, and Ibsen through the figure of Gregers. Gregers’ idealism is, meanwhile, clearly depicted in his refusal to join his father’s company, his burning of Werle’s credit cards and cash, and finally his methodical execution of his family. Knowledge of the references is, therefore, not

³²⁰ Vinge, interview with the author, July 6, 2010.

³²¹ Audio recording of Slavoj Žižek’s is taken from his lecture “First as Tragedy, Then as Farce,” presented at Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, London, November 24, 2009, <https://www.thersa.org/discover/videos/event-videos/2009/11/first-as-tragedy-then-as-farce/>.

³²² Christoph Schlingensiefel website, “Work” (*Arbeiten*) “Rocky Dutschke ’68,” “Grundidee von ROCKY DUTSCHKE ist der Protest gegen einen bequemen Staat und die müde Gesellschaft - gegen die Wirklichkeit,” accessed April 4, 2015, <http://www.schlingensiefel.com/projekt.php?id=h003>.

necessary to understanding the significance of a particular character, but rather connects them to a constellation of synonymous figures and narratives. Vinge is forthright about his intentions claiming that “all my references are obvious. And all these references are also in the [minds of the] audience. I’m not taking it and saying I invented these things, but they are an important part of my expression [...] it is a tool and a necessary tool.”³²³

Presented as overt, non-realistic, subjectively selected anachronisms, the *Saga*’s archetypal references have much in common with Ibsen’s supertext. Johnston argues that the playwright’s realist aesthetic created points of commonality between the stage and spectator by representing a recognizable milieu. Beneath the veneer of bourgeois life, Ibsen placed archetypal material that “invests his images of everyday reality with all the alarming potency and urgency that everyday reality tries to evade.”³²⁴ Ibsen’s realist slight-of-hand circumvents two distinct obstacles that his contemporary theatre presented to his larger intentions. First, as Rolf Fjelde points out, the material conditions were limiting, as “the voyeuristic theater of naturalism too easily allows the impression that the universal stage beyond the living room walls has effectively ceased to exist.”³²⁵ Romanticism, secondly, with its focus on the individual’s relationship to universal forces, could not accommodate the playwright’s desire to speak directly to his contemporaries. Realism was necessary to counteract romanticism’s quasi-religious rhetoric of idealism. The *Saga*’s use of archetypes to stage his realist play links the two phases of Ibsen’s

³²³ Vinge, interview with the author, July 6, 2010.

³²⁴ Johnston, *Text and Supertext in Ibsen’s Drama*, 74.

³²⁵ Rolf Fjelde, “The Dimensions of Ibsen’s Dramatic World,” in *Contemporary Approaches to Ibsen 2*, ed. Daniel Haakonsen (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1971), 168.

career, demonstrating Eric Bentley's observation that "[t]he Ibsen Secret, if there was one, was that the archnaturalist remained to the end an arch-Romanticist too."³²⁶

Understanding the *Saga*'s revitalization of Ibsen's oppositionality through an idealist supertext requires parsing the playwright's use of idealist/romantic elements. Although I subscribe to Raymond Williams' caution that Ibsen's value stems from his ability to present his preoccupations "in active combination, not as separate influences," untangling their constitutive parts is a necessary step in developing such an appreciation.³²⁷ In *Ibsen the Romantic: Analogues of Paradise in the Later Plays* (1982), Errol Durbach asserts that Ibsen's works are governed by "the paradoxical simultaneity of Romantic and counter-Romantic attitudes that make Ibsen a Romantic of extraordinary individuality, both celebrant and critic of a vision potentially redemptive and potentially ruinous."³²⁸ Durbach's description of Ibsen as Janus-faced romantic stresses the playwright's "ironic, skeptical, at times counter-Romantic and anti-Romantic temperament," which is largely unaccounted for in Johnston's treatment of the playwright.³²⁹ Durbach's analysis tracks mythologies of romanticism—the roles of paradise and children, for example—through Ibsen's realist works. But as Durbach is quick to note, Ibsen's relationship to Romanticism has a long history of documentation from his peer George Brandes to what Durbach considers to be the subject's high-water mark of E.M. Forster's essay, "Ibsen the Romantic" (1928). Forster likewise emphasized Ibsen's duality, noting "though he had the romantic temperament, he found personal

³²⁶ Eric Bentley, *The Playwright as Thinker: A Study of Drama in Modern Times*, 4th ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 121.

³²⁷ Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, 121.

³²⁸ Errol Durbach, *Ibsen the Romantic: Analogues of Paradise in the Later Plays* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1982), 6.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

intercourse squalid. Sooner or later his characters draw their little knives, they rip up the present and the past.”³³⁰ Durbach is less pessimistic in his estimation. Understanding the romantic aspirations of Ibsen’s protagonists as “the positive corollary of their devastation of all value in the attempt,” Durbach foreshadows the *Saga*’s recuperation of the plays’ ideologues.³³¹

More recently, Toril Moi’s *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* (2006) addresses the playwright’s romanticism through an investigation of its antecedents in aesthetic idealism. To recuperate realism’s role in the establishment of modernism, Moi positions idealism, *not* realism, as antithetical to modernism. For Moi, Romanticism was simply “the fullest and first flourishing of the post-Kantian idealist aesthetics that permeates the 19th century.”³³² Through its rejection of idealism, Ibsen’s theatrical realism is positioned as the origin of modernism. The dichotomy is well established, as Joan Templeton points out “Ibsen’s anti-idealism has been deeply entrenched in Ibsen studies since Shaw’s *Quintessence of Ibsenism* of 1891.”³³³ Moi’s central argument, that Ibsen creates his realism through the “negation of idealism,” provides a useful framework for considering Vinge/Müller’s approach to the playwright.³³⁴ Moi identifies three ways

³³⁰ Forster, “Ibsen the Romantic,” 547.

³³¹ Durbach, *Ibsen the Romantic*, 30.

³³² *Ibid.*, 82.

³³³ Joan Templeton, “*Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: A Review Essay*,” *Scandinavian Studies* 79, no. 3 (2007): 346. George Bernard Shaw framed his observation in civic rather than aesthetic terms, concluding that upon completing “his intellectual analysis of idealism” in *Brand*, *Peer Gynt*, and *Emperor and Galilean*, Ibsen “could see plainly the effect of idealism as a social force on people quite unlike himself: that is to say, on everyday people in everyday life.” The discovery, Shaw argues, would lead Ibsen to root out idealism’s legacy within the nineteenth-century drawing room. George Bernard Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1913; rep., New York: Dover Publications, 1994), 72.

³³⁴ Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, 67.

in which Ibsen's realism breaks with idealism: the inclusion of the quotidian, which counters "the idealist notion that any representation of reality would have to idealize and harmonize the everyday"; the use of self-conscious theatricality, which produces the anti-idealist effect of skepticism; and the absence of affirming resolutions, which instigated much of the moral outrage over the playwright's works.³³⁵ The formal innovations of Ibsen's realism, therefore, attack the theatrical forms that express the ideology of idealism.

The *Saga* undoes Ibsen's critique of idealism through the aesthetics of the "Total Radical Fiction." The three anti-idealist characteristics of Ibsen's realism are either subverted through stylization or simply reversed. In the *Saga*, performers engage in quotidian behaviors and activities, tending to everything from personal hygiene to household chores to sleeping. The sets are likewise minutely detailed with realistic décor. The behaviors and scenography are, however, highly codified within the *Saga*'s aesthetic. The characters are effectively denaturalized through their masks, stylized gestures, underscoring, and miming to their pre-recorded voice tracks. Müller's scenography is equally formalized. Painted in high-contrast colors, the sets are painstakingly detailed and amateurishly executed. The undisguised, aestheticized artificiality and uniformity of design and performance elements transforms the everyday behaviors and locales into idealized and harmonized art objects. The overarching aesthetic undoes the skepticism that Ibsen's theatricality produced. The *Saga*'s aesthetic does not implore audiences to suspend their disbelief—a necessary component to realism—but rather embraces theatre as artifice. Eliminating the capacity for belief, the

³³⁵ Ibid., 217.

“Total Radical Fiction” short-circuits realism’s ability to produce skepticism, as the *Saga*’s “reality” is wholly theatricalized.

The *Saga* further recuperates Ibsen’s idealism by adapting the plays into fairy tales with affirmative endings.³³⁶ Fairy tales’ narratives, in Bruno Bettelheim’s estimation, “state an existential dilemma briefly and pointedly.”³³⁷ Similarly, art historians Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner posit that one of romanticism’s “deepest ambitions,” was “the achievement of ‘immediacy,’ forms of expression directly understandable without convention.”³³⁸ Adhering to fairy tale conventions, the children of Ibsen’s plays become the protagonists of the *Saga* and are depicted as innocents who must overcome a series of obstacles *en route* to self-realization. Once the depraved adults are overthrown, all is resolved through the genre’s customary happy ending in which virtue triumphs and justice is restored to the world. The legibility of the genre necessitates the simplification of characters and situations into counterpoints that define character and spur dramatic conflict. The polarities used by the *Saga* are as thematically Ibsenian as they are ubiquitous to fairy tales: children versus adults, good versus evil. Bettelheim points out the implicit conciliatory ethics of the genre in that it “reassures; gives hope for the future; holds out the promise of a happy ending.”³³⁹ The fairy tales’ optimistic outcome offers an abeyance of skepticism and cynicism, if only in the final accounting, aligning the *Saga* with idealism.

³³⁶ Ibsen’s *The Lady from The Sea* (1888) is the clear exception to this pattern. Its affirmative conclusion, in which Dr. Wagnel and Ellida are reconciled, must be contextualized by the fact that it is among Ibsen’s most overtly romantic dramas.

³³⁷ Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage, 1989), 8.

³³⁸ Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner, *Romanticism and Realism* (New York: Viking Press, 1984), 39.

³³⁹ Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment*, 26.

Whether in the form of Johnston's supertextual allusions, Durbach's paradoxes, or Moi's modernist critiques, Ibsen's realism is understood, at least formally, to be in a state of tension with romanticism/idealism. Williams adds, however, that romanticism provides Ibsen with the socio-spiritual condition of his protagonists. The correlation lies in the shared fervency of Romantic impulses and Ibsen's characters; "[t]he desires of man are again intense and imperative; they reach out and test the universe itself [...] [s]ociety is identified as convention, and convention as the enemy of desire."³⁴⁰ In Williams' accounting, the tension between Ibsen's romanticism/idealism and his realism/modernism is expressed through an antagonism towards convention. This conflict is given both thematic and formal articulation in Ibsen's central narrative: the "heroic liberator opposed and destroyed by a false society."³⁴¹

Representations of the "liberator" and the "false society" are not uniform across Ibsen's works. While "false society" is embodied in the townspeople of *An Enemy of the People*, this same concept is evident in the geographic locale of Dr. Wangel's home that imprisons Ellida in *The Lady from the Sea*, and the religious conventions that confine Mrs. Alving in *Ghosts*. In its various guises, this spiritual suppression recurs as characters, locales, ideas, and institutions. The figure of the "liberator" is equally manifold, but recognizable in what James Hurt coins as their "project of the will."³⁴² For Hurt, "the project of the will" is part of a "mythic pattern, which underlies all of Ibsen's plays," in which a character experiences a revelation that inspires them to take on an

³⁴⁰ Williams, *Modern Tragedy*, 120.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

³⁴² Hurt, *Cataline's Dream*, 5.

idealistic “goal to which he will devote himself.”³⁴³ The most common pursuit is artistic.³⁴⁴ Charles Leland has similarly identified this aspect of Ibsen’s texts as the “calling of the vocation.”³⁴⁵ Leland maintains that vocation, like the project, is doomed because “[t]he Ibsenesque vocation is to the naturally impossible; human nature is called to transcend itself.”³⁴⁶ Hurt understands these narrative structures as “elaborations of a myth of the romantic self.”³⁴⁷ The conflict between the romantic and modern self produces one of the core questions of Ibsen’s dramas, according to Durbach: “How are we to reconcile superhuman potential and mortal fallibility, the romantic assertion of personal significance with the very real limitations imposed upon us by personal insufficiency?”³⁴⁸ Or, in Williams’ summary, “[t]he call is absolute; so are the barriers.”³⁴⁹ If the call fulfills the idealist yearnings of Ibsen’s protagonists, the costs of their pursuits constitute the anti-idealist critique.

The irreconcilable and antagonistic duality between the “liberator” heeding their “call” and the “absolute barriers” of a “false society” governs the themes and form of the *Ibsen-Saga*. As shown in the previous chapter, this duality is enacted in the *Saga*’s use of fiction/art as the “heroic liberator” deployed against a “false society”/real world whose material concerns threaten the ideals that the productions strive to realize. Berlin critic Doris Meierhenrich summarizes this aspect of the *Saga* as a desire to “subject life to his [Vinge’s] theatre of excess, to force it to another reality. This practical conflict is at the

³⁴³ Ibid., 7-8.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 7.

³⁴⁵ Leland, “‘The Irresistible Calling’: The Idea of Vocation in Ibsen,” 169.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 173.

³⁴⁷ Hurt, *Cataline’s Dream*, 5.

³⁴⁸ Errol Durbach, “A Century of Ibsen Criticism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*, ed. James McFarlane (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 245-46.

³⁴⁹ Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, 29.

heart of the radical aesthetics and is in fact the oldest dream of the artist.”³⁵⁰ What the *Saga* adds to this “dream,” by reframing Ibsen’s dialectic of the “liberator”/“false society,” is the notion that *only* art can cure the falsehood of reality. The *Saga* stages this tension thematically through the conflicts of Ibsen’s texts and extends them to the broader history of aesthetic oppositionality through its supertext.

The *Saga*’s investment in Ibsen’s romantic ideals differs greatly from the playwright’s intentions. Gone are the counter-romantic and ironic qualities that Durbach and Moi attribute to Ibsen’s critical articulation of romanticism/idealism. Instead, the *Saga* deploys Ibsen’s romantic/idealist protagonists as ambassadors of art and truth against cultural mediocrity and bureaucracy. Vinge notes that Ibsen’s idealists are often reduced to villains in production, deliberately mollifying their potent beliefs. Vinge claims that, “society instrumentalizes [Ibsen’s plays] and makes them fit our ideology in a way. That’s why Gregers [Werle] is always dark and mean and has a beard [...] He’s a fanatic because he believes in something. And this is instrumentalized by society because we are scared of these things and it threatens our ideology and the power.”³⁵¹ Gregers of *The Wild Duck* may be one of Ibsen’s more famed ideologues, but he has good company in the likes of Julian the Apostate, Brand, Dr. Stockmann, the Master Builder Solness, John Gabriel Borkman, and the sculpture Rubek, to name but a few. Vinge’s suggestion that an interpretive uniformity exists with regards to Ibsen’s ideologues may be overblown. One need only recall Peter Stein’s epic *Peer Gynt* (1971)

³⁵⁰ Doris Meierhenrich, “Wie viel Theater hält man aus?,” (How Much Drama Can We Bear?) *Berliner Zeitung*, Dec 15, 2011, accessed June 5, 2014, <http://www.berliner-zeitung.de/theatertreffen/volksbuehnen-prater-wie-viel-theater-haelt-man-aus-,14999632,11308108.html>.

³⁵¹ Vinge, interview with author, July 6, 2010.

as an embodiment of a thematic and practical romanticism or Ostermeier's attempt to align his audience with the grim realities of Dr. Stockmann's ideology in *An Enemy of the People*. Yet these exceptions seemingly prove the rule.

Ghosts is emblematic of how the *Saga* stages Ibsen's idealism through a supertext. Midway through the production, Oswald—here the representative artist/idealist—sits in his bedroom contemplating his paintings when a letter from his father is delivered by carrier pigeon. The text features excerpts from a letter written to Eugenio Barba by the Norwegian provocateur and artist Jens Bjørneboe between 1962 and 1963.³⁵² Painter, poet, novelist, and playwright, Bjørneboe was one of Norway's preeminent post-war artists. An outspoken critic of Norwegian culture and politics, Bjørneboe's letter captures the passion and rage of the *Saga*'s idealist/artist. The letter is worth quoting in entirety as it demonstrates the confrontational tenor of the *Saga*'s idealism. In the document, Bjørneboe ridicules his country's theatre:

Dear Oswald, dear son, We live in a dictatorship of mediocrity, in a cultural life in which pettiness is the entry ticket and emblem of brotherhood. It has sought to bring all people of substance in this country to a state of silence, to smother them, and, where possible, kill them. Only when one is strong enough, virtually invulnerable, can one ever achieve the creation of something... [Osvold skips through the letter before continuing to read.] That's how it is everywhere here. But it is ten times worse within theatre circles where the petit-bourgeois compulsion towards careerism, hypocrisy, backbiting, lies, and prostitution have long been the only approved morality that pertains. Norwegian theatre people have no ideals besides acting in their own interest. Not even the youngest actors here possess any ideals, or dream of a vibrant theatre. They hope through acting to simply become stars, or world-famous within Oslo society. They hope for greater wages and for their pensions. Above all else they prefer to play in idiotic farces the entire year round, while seeing themselves mentioned in the newspapers. With best wishes and fellatio, your father, Jens. B.³⁵³

³⁵² The exact dates of this text are unknown.

³⁵³ *Ghosts*, directed by Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller, video recording. Filmed at Black Box Teater, Oslo, Norway, September 15, 2009. German subtitles of Bjørneboe's original Norwegian text translated by Alan McKendrick and author.

Bjørneboe, following Oswald's confrontation with Darth Vader, is the second incarnation of the child/artist's father. If the previous *Star Wars* themed encounter between father and son summarized the central conflict of Ibsen's text, Bjørneboe's letter places Vinge/Müller's interpretive stamp on Ibsen's works. In casting Bjørneboe as Oswald's role model/father, the *Saga* establishes a supertextual lineage that stretches from Ibsen's text to avant-gardist artists to Hollywood images of ideality. As Oswald's father/role model incarnate, Bjørneboe's critiques of theatrical mediocrity function like the *Saga's* manifesto. The *Saga's* productions and methods are in direct opposition to the careerism, fame seeking, and mediocrity that Bjørneboe diagnosis.

Beyond their familial bond, in Ibsen's text Oswald and his father Captain Alving are connected through a mutual "joy of life." As Durbach points out, the phrase (*livsglede*) is one of many terms whose meaning, "a concept in which both 'life' and 'joy'—that most Romantic of verbal constellations—constantly enhance each other in the context of related image-clusters and *Leitmotive*."³⁵⁴ These 'image-clusters,' what Johnston would identify as a supertext, combine in "a living experience in the artist's vision of man."³⁵⁵ Crucially, no division exists between Oswald's art, in which "everything I've painted keeps returning to life's joy," and his own spiritual condition.³⁵⁶ Within the *Saga*, the "joy of life" is likewise equated with creativity, but linked to an oppositional idealism. The "project of the will" or "calling" is not only those contained within the plays—Oswald's calling to be a painter and pursue the 'joy-of-life' or Dr.

³⁵⁴ Durbach, *Ibsen the Romantic*, 175.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁶ Ibsen, *Ghosts*, in *Ibsen: Four Major Plays, Vol. II*, 62.

Stockmann's pursuit of truth—but the project of the *Saga* itself. The *Saga* is performed as its own Ibsenian vocation.

The *Saga*'s calling is evident in the closing hour of *Ghosts*. Like all of the *Saga*'s installments, the production features an unstructured second half—roughly three hours—in which, to quote Vinge:

I knew some coordinates, but I hadn't a clue about how to fill these three hours. So you have these coordinates and then you need to create within them. Sometimes it can be really bad, but I think that can be really interesting because you show this imperfection. At least then I can give theatre people some hope that they can make something better themselves. This is why I like this energy and people getting courage to not be afraid.³⁵⁷

This unstructured time, which the artists insist is a form of live creation not improvisation, functions like an Ibsenian obstacle, a challenge against which the artists' stamina and ingenuity are tested. Amid the many scenes developed during one particular performance, the Director character crucifies Pastor Manders. The play's pious idealist, Pastor Manders is often interpreted as the hypocritical counterpoint to Mrs. Alving's budding pursuit of truth and Oswald's "joy of life." This is true enough in earlier scenes of the *Saga*'s production, in which Manders' contempt for Oswald's artistic lifestyle is depicted in a scene of brutal sexual violence. In the final hour of the production, however, the Director takes to the stage to both punish and vindicate the Pastor. The Director bellows: "Pastor Manders is always made ridiculous! A ridiculous figure! FOR IDEALS AND WHAT IS GOOD! Pastor Manders, you are not a ridiculous figure! Pastor Manders! Show us the way!"³⁵⁸ Flaying the crucified Manders, the Director calls upon the Pastor's idealism to transform the mediocrity of the theatre: "Show us the way in this

³⁵⁷ Vinge, interview with author, July 6, 2010.

³⁵⁸ *Ghosts* video, September 15, 2007. German subtitles of original Norwegian dialogue translated by McKendrick and author. Capitalization in the original.

studio theatre, Pastor Manders, away from mediocrity, away from happiness! Away from shitty conceptual art, Away from... away from... away from one-hour-long shows!” And, in acknowledgement of the *Saga*’s failure to achieve its own lofty ideals, the Director begs the Pastor to lead their own art, “away from 6 hours! Away from 7 hours! AWAY FROM EVERYTHING! Away from everything, that’s small and measly!”³⁵⁹ Here the production looks to the source text’s representative of idealism as inspiration for its own artistic pursuits.

The scene keeps with the *Saga*’s broader interpretive strategy of elevating idealism to the central virtue of art production through a supertext. Pastor Manders, a character whose idealism is regularly instrumentalized as hollow or duplicitous, is vindicated as an inspiration for an art yet to come. In this respect, Pastor Manders and Oswald’s idealism are equated in the service of art. Embracing both Pastor Manders and Oswald is critical to the *Saga*’s thematic supertext. The characters, according to Johnston, represent a binary within Ibsen’s text: “In supertextual interpretation, one would link “joy-of-life” in *Ghosts* to a pattern including Oswald Alving’s art, the champagne, sexuality, Hellenism, the sunrise, and so on and see it as one side of a ‘binary’ system which includes, on the other, the phrase ‘duty’ linked to a pattern including social repressiveness, denial of sexuality, Pauline Christianity, the rain, and other related metaphors.”³⁶⁰ The dialectic that Johnston identifies is replaced with an overarching binary between idealism/art and mediocrity/reality. The alliance of Oswald and Pastor Manders offers, to return to Moi’s definition of idealism, the “fusing [of] aesthetics with ethics and religion, [through which] the idealist program holds out to us all an optimistic

³⁵⁹ Ibid.

³⁶⁰ Johnston, *Text and Supertext*, 51-52.

utopian vision of human perfection.”³⁶¹ In the *Saga*, such programs are forms of artistic inspiration rather than the object of artistic critique.

As we will see in the following chapter, the *Saga*'s project of restoring an uncritical idealism to Ibsen's works invites troubling synergies between art and ideology. The celebration of the uncompromising, self-destructive pursuit of art echoes the romantic fanaticism that Boris Groys identifies as central to Adolph Hitler's aesthetic theory in which “[t]he artist thus becomes one with the hero.”³⁶² Hitler, Groys continues, “saw art not simply as a depiction of the heroic but as an act that is itself heroic because it gives shape to reality.”³⁶³ Unsurprisingly, the Director regularly takes on the persona of a Nazi, often violently willing the production and its performers into the fiction of his choice. For the *Saga*, the violence of fascism is the inevitable outcome of an idealist aesthetics meeting the immovable Ibsenian obstacle.

If the *Saga* supports the ambitions of its megalomaniacal protagonists and project, it is not without its own self-critical lens. Massive, unwieldy, and uncompromising, the *Saga* invites its own undoing in the forms of failure, boredom, the limits of its fiction, and the restraints of the theatrical institutions it performs within. The idealism, therefore, is most concentrated with the aesthetic itself: an attempt to remake the world within a morally centered frame that situates the artist, imagination, and innovation at the helm. It is the impossibility of achieving its goal—replacing reality with fiction—that constitutes the *Saga*'s critique of its own idealistic impulses. As Ibsen's protagonists repeatedly demonstrate, failure is endemic to the romantic pursuit.

³⁶¹ Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism*, 73.

³⁶² Boris Groys, *Art Power* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 132.

³⁶³ *Ibid.*

Like the Romantics, the *Ibsen-Saga* looks to idealism, in form and practice, for what Durbach calls a “creative solution to life’s dilemma; a substitute religion.”³⁶⁴ By embodying the romantic ideal of art, the *Saga* counters what it takes to be the uninspired, neo-liberal-minded productions of its peers. It is with this in mind that the *Saga* refuses to make work that fits comfortably within the established frameworks designed for experimental art production. Instead, as we will see in the following chapter, the *Ibsen-Saga* takes Richard Wagner’s operas and theory of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as structural models through which the ideology of idealism fully blossoms into an aesthetic of fascism.

³⁶⁴ Durbach, *Ibsen the Romantic*, 136.

Chapter 3

The *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the Directorial Dialectic: The *Ibsen-Saga* as Wagnerian Theatre

“I have often reflected on the bonds that unite Wagner and Ibsen, and found it difficult to distinguish between straightforward historical affinity and a rapport more intimate than that wrought out by mere contemporaneity.”—Thomas Mann³⁶⁵

In *The Wild Duck* (2009), the *Saga*'s third production, the play's chief idealist Gregers Werle struggles against the jaded world of his family and peers. Gregers first appears sullenly hunched inside the cardboard tub of his father, Werle's home. His overgrown beard alludes to Gregers' long residency in the northern Hoidal forest where he infamously develops his “claim of the ideal.” Gregers' idealism, skewered throughout Ibsen's play, is championed in the *Saga*'s production as the virtuous pursuit of justice for his father's crimes against the Ekdal family. As with all of the *Saga*'s productions, the idealist's quest amounts to the violent rejection of compromise. Gregers, for example, refuses to inherit his dad's business and murders his family in search of transcendence through truth and integrity. These idealists are neither uniform in Ibsen's texts nor in the *Saga*'s interpretation of them. Ivar of *A Doll House* is an oblivious pre-teen radicalized by his family's collapse; Oswald is a child artist lashing out at the dismissal of himself and his art. Gregers differs in that he, unlike his precursors within the *Saga*, arrives with a fully flourishing ideology of idealism. He returns as a crusader.

Gregers' idealistic position in the world of *The Wild Duck* is signaled immediately. Sulking in the tub, Gregers is introduced by the mournful, third act prelude

³⁶⁵ Thomas Mann, *Pro and Contra Wagner*, trans. Allan Blunden (London: Faber & Faber, 1985), 95.

to Richard Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* (1865).³⁶⁶ The *Saga*'s supertextual allusions suggest parallels between the two texts. At the opening of Wagner's third act, the hero, Tristan, has been called home—as has Gregers. While Tristan awaits the arrival of his lover Isolde, Gregers will find his missionary salvation in the form of his half-sister Hedvig Ekdal. Rising from the tub, Gregers reveals that he is wearing a bright red t-shirt on which Richard Wagner's profile appears replete with his iconic slouched beret, so associated with the composer that it is better known in Germany as a *Wagnerkappe*. To eliminate any potential confusion, the composer's last name is emblazoned in cartoonish capital letters beneath his visage: WAGNER. Like a teenager marked with the logo of their favorite band, Gregers wears this image as a form of self-identification throughout his journey towards truth and salvation. Wagner shadows Gregers.

Wagner's personage, theories, music, and meanings permeate the *Saga*. The composers' preludes and *leitmotifs* recur in all of the productions. The program notes to *Ghosts* (2007) refer to the production as a "syphilitic *Gesamtkunstwerk*," while in an interview following the premiere of *A Doll House*, Vinge notes that "I like Wagner's pathos-filled grandeur. There's something about the times we live in that has to do with megalomania [and] narcissism. You miss [those] big proposals."³⁶⁷ While Ibsen is a multivalent sign within the *Saga* denoting idealism, modernism, and oppositionality, Wagner serves a similar function, albeit one that offers a different set of meanings and

³⁶⁶ Date notes the premiere of the opera, which was composed between 1857-59.

³⁶⁷ Vegard Vinge, interviewed by Kari Saanum, "Intervju med Vegard Vinge" (Interview with Vegard Vinge), *Norsk Shakespeare og Teater Tidsskrift (Norwegian Shakespeare and Theatre Journal)* 3-5 (2006), accessed June 1, 2014, <http://www.shakespearetidsskrift.no/arkiv/3-42006/kari-saanum-intervju-med-vegard-vinge.html?L=0>.

inspirations. If Ibsen and his *oeuvre* serve as the *Saga*'s Ur-Text, Wagner and his theories operate as the *Saga*'s Ur-Theorist.

This chapter illuminates the significance of Wagner's "big proposals" to the *Saga*. Although numerous, I do not document the *Saga*'s dovetailing of Ibsenian and Wagnerian themes, narratives, and characters—as seen in Tristan and Gregers' enfolded homecomings. These pairings are consistent with what in the previous chapter I argued is the *Saga*'s foregrounding and expansion of Brian Johnston's notion of Ibsen's "supertext" of intertextual allusions. Furthermore, this chapter does not explicitly address the *Saga*'s use of *leitmotifs*. While a Wagnerian mode of musical underscoring is used throughout the *Saga* to illustrate character or personify emotional states, this technique, as Andreas Huyssen has shown and Theodor Adorno predicted, is now ubiquitous throughout art and culture.³⁶⁸ Instead, I argue here that the *Saga*'s structural and theoretical framework is founded on Richard Wagner's concepts and legacy. I analyze two integral roles Wagner plays in the *Saga*'s theory and structure. First, I contend that the *Saga*'s performance structure, ritualistic presentation, and modernist desire to create performances that operate outside the limitations of daily life stem from Wagner's theory of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Proposed as a means of integrating poetry, dance, and music, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (Total Work of Art) is a model for the *Saga*'s idealism and totalizing aesthetic. I demonstrate that the *Saga* offers a complex rendering of Wagner's vision that highlights the contradictions inherent to the attempt to integrate the individual arts in the service of aesthetic autonomy. By creating a *Gesamtkunstwerk* that lays its contradictions bare, the *Saga* channels Wagner's concept through Brechtian

³⁶⁸See, Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1986).

aesthetics. Although an analysis of the *Saga*'s debt to the *verfremdungseffekt*, as well as other Brechtian techniques, is outside the scope of this chapter, Brecht's influence on the *Saga* should not be underestimated.

Second, I argue that Wagner's historical importance as an early *auteur* theatre artist is the model for Vinge's "Director" character. From the *Saga*'s *John Gabriel Borkman* (2012) onward, the Director always appears in a Wagner t-shirt. According to Vinge, Wagner's image is a double sign suggesting both the famed artist and the infamous Nazi concentration camp guard Gustav Wagner.³⁶⁹ The duality of the Director's artful and brutal actions within the *Saga* are galvanized under the multivalent sign of Wagner. While I address the relationship between Wagner, his theories, and fascist aesthetics, these points also inform the following chapter in which I consider the *Saga*'s ties between artistic idealism, fascism, and avant-gardism. Here I specifically examine Wagner's aesthetic idealism through the *Saga*'s onstage-figure of the Director. In performance, the Director's zealous idealism leads to tyrannical actions in the name of art, which echo the fanaticism of fascism. As I will show, critics have frequently attributed a proto-fascism to Wagner's aesthetic theories. Through his idealism, the Director embodies the duality of Wagner as both artist and fanatic. The *Gesamtkunstwerk* likewise functions as a link between the composer and fascist aesthetics. In the *Gesamtkunstwerk*'s effort to spiritually integrate its audiences into the art work, critics suggest the concept shares in a fascist agenda of unwittingly transforming spectators through aesthetic hypnotism. The *Saga*'s aesthetic idealism is equally rooted in Wagner, fascism, and Ibsen's shared temporality, which Roger Griffin

³⁶⁹ Vegard Vinge, interview with author. Internet videophone call. Jersey City, NJ and Berlin, Germany, July 6, 2010.

calls “the *futural* relationship to the past, which is the *norm* of all cultural modernism.”³⁷⁰ By staking one’s efforts on the future, present actions are—as is implied or enacted in the art, theory, and politics of Ibsen’s ideologues, Wagner’s theories, and fascist practices—exempted from present judgement. This modernist impulse is manifest in the Director’s defense of art and vision of the *Saga as Gesamtkunstwerk*. In modeling the *Saga* after these two aspects of Wagner’s legacy, the productions build allegiances between Ibsen and the composer’s idealism in an effort to prize art above all else. Before examining Wagner’s theories, I first outline how the *Saga* aligns Ibsen and Wagner, after which I offer a brief overview of the dominant perspectives on Wagner within the arts and culture at large.

Ibsen and Wagner: Antipodes No More

Pairing Ibsen with Wagner may, at first blush, seem counterintuitive. Eric Bentley compared the two nineteenth century figures only to conclude that Ibsen is Wagner’s “antipodes.”³⁷¹ The contrast stems from “their utterly different presentation of human nature. Wagner is not interested in the individual; Ibsen is above all interested in the individual.”³⁷² This dramatic divide parallels their personal world views, in which Bentley suggests that “Wagner was a fantasist outside, a realist inside; Ibsen was a realist outside, a fantasist inside.”³⁷³ This distinction is echoed in Theodor Adorno’s *In Search of Wagner*, in which he suggests that the two artists share a theme, but not an intent. Adorno claims that Wagner’s “iconic world resembles Ibsen’s with its impotent and

³⁷⁰ Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 298.

³⁷¹ Eric Bentley, *The Playwright As Thinker* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich Publishers, 1987), 118.

³⁷² *Ibid.*, 133.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, 134.

hence hollow symbols of unattainable meaning—the hero dying with vine leaves in his hair or the pointless tower of the Masterbuilder.”³⁷⁴ The implication is that Ibsen, unlike Wagner, is aware of the futility of symbols, replacing the composer’s belief in such signs with cynicism. The differing worldviews and treatment of symbols accounts, in part, for the two authors’ unique dramatic worlds: the mythic and the realistic. Following the arguments of Brian Johnston, however, I have shown that the *Saga*’s key insight into staging Ibsen is the demonstration of the dramas’ mythic allusions and structures. Thus, to see Ibsen in the light of Johnston is to see the opposition between Wagner and Ibsen erode. To ascribe “hollowness” to Gregers, Solness, or Brand’s use of symbols to justify their ambitions is, in Ibsen’s world, to render all artistic endeavors hollow. The aspirations of Ibsen’s idealists may be misguided and tragic, but those aspirations nonetheless mark characters who desire to artistically, spiritually, or politically remake the world. To expunge the artistry and ambition of Solness’ buildings or Løvborg’s manuscript from their troublesome, romantic ideals is to instrumentalize Ibsen’s plays towards political ends. These ends are, of course, Ibsen’s presumed social utility as a progressive critic of modernity’s seedy underside, of which Wagner is a chief cultural example. To prioritize the disparities between Ibsen and Wagner, as Bentley and Adorno do, inevitably devalues their commonalities. The *Saga*, conversely, joins Ibsen and Wagner through their shared idealism, rendering them both “fanatasists” inside and out.

Thomas Mann was among the first to articulate an overarching synergy between Ibsen and Wagner. Mann suggests that what unites these figures is not their historical proximity, but their expression of the nineteenth-century’s conflicted ethos: “Grandeur

³⁷⁴ Theodor Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, ed. and trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York: Verso, 2005), 139.

was the essence and hallmark of that age, a gloomy and afflicted grandeur that is at once skeptical and passionate—fanatical even—in its pursuit of truth, and that can find a fleeting happiness, without creed or religion, in surrendering to the transient moment of consuming beauty.”³⁷⁵ Mann sidesteps questions of the social applicability of the artists’ worldviews to illustrate that myth and beauty’s faultiness (Ibsen) or transcendence (Wagner) are two sides of the same modernist coin. Bernard Williams considers the duality that binds Ibsen and Wagner to be a product of their shared “aim of uniting the mythic and the psychological.”³⁷⁶ Williams argues, “Wagner is Ibsen inside out;” where the composer imbues the mythical with bourgeois psychology, the playwright loads the domestic with the weight of the mythological.³⁷⁷ The trouble for Wagner, according to Williams, is that mythic characters “express a necessity that transcends biographical particularity. To reconcile this fact with a drama for which intensity almost unavoidably means intense subjectivity is a hard undertaking.”³⁷⁸ This challenge cuts both ways. What for Wagner is the strain of bourgeois subjectivity within mythic form, in Ibsen is a disjuncture between mythic and domestic temporalities that requires the submersion of the universal within the domestic. Wagner and Ibsen’s shared temporalities and desire to unite the mythic with the psychological are at home in the *Saga*. As discussed in the previous chapter, the *Saga*’s supertextual references foreground the co-presence of universal and domestic temporalities and depict Ibsen’s characters as archetypes. The *Saga*’s supertextual productions, therefore, offer a Wagnerian vision of Ibsen’s dramas.

³⁷⁵ Mann, *Pro and Contra Wagner*, 84.

³⁷⁶ Bernard Williams, “Wagner and Politics,” *New York Review of Books*, November 2, 2000, <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2000/nov/02/wagner-politics/>.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*,

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*,

By overstuffing the bourgeois conditions of Ibsen's texts with mythological stakes, the underlying grandeur of Ibsen's ideologues is pushed to Wagnerian heights. If, as Williams suggests, Wagner is Ibsen in the inverse, to treat Ibsen supertextually, as the *Saga* does, is to Wagnerize him.

Wagner's mythological figures are not simply dramatic characters. Their function is inseparable from the production of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* that culls the entirety of theatrical effects and architecture in its service. The *Saga*, likewise, does more than mythologize Ibsen's ideologues. Constructed through supertextual allusions, the *Saga* incorporates the composer and his legacy into its Ibsenian *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Ibsen's works are thus seen through Wagner, who is placed center stage in the form of the Director. Before considering the *Saga* as *Gesamtkunstwerk*, it is necessary to outline Wagner's aesthetic theory and its legacy.

The Wagner Event

Like its approach to Ibsen, the *Saga* employs Wagner as an ahistorical ethos. That is to say, the *Saga* conflates what is historical, fictional, and cultural. This produces, as in Ibsen, a figure of conflicted meanings. On the one hand, Wagner represents the historical and theoretical realities that his work ushered into being, what Slavoj Žižek terms "the artistic-political unity of *the event called Wagner* [...] a certain vision of and answer to the deadlock of European modernity, a vision and an answer which can in no way be dismissed as proto-fascist."³⁷⁹ This vision encompasses Wagner's aesthetic and theoretical innovations, which sought solutions to and expressed modernity's zeitgeist.

³⁷⁹ Slavoj Žižek, "Wagner, Anti-Semitism, and 'German Ideology,'" in Alain Badiou, *Five Lessons on Wagner*, trans. Susan Spitzer (New York: Verso, 2010), 165. Emphasis in original.

Or, as Lawrence Kramer suggests, “Wagner became both a symptom for what was wrong with modern life and a force for what might be made right with it.”³⁸⁰ On the other hand, the *Saga* embraces Wagner’s legacy as an antecedent of fascism. This second Wagner, according to Pamela M. Potter, is the product of “[t]he atrocities carried out in the name of German culture [which] have projected a distasteful image onto Wagner as a symbol of German arrogance, paranoia, and xenophobia.”³⁸¹ The attribution of proto-fascism to Wagner and his presumed aesthetic and cultural centrality to the Third Reich and Adolph Hitler are, in actuality, overstated. Potter suggests that these narratives and inquiries emerge from “postwar debates looking to explore the relationship between highly cultured people and the atrocities they carried out.”³⁸² These discourses locate the seeds of fascism in Wagner’s Nationalism, anti-Semitism, ideas of racial purity, and their representation within his art. The *Saga* unites these two visions of Wagner within the figure of the Director and the productions’ ethos of artistic idealism that ranges from the romantic to the fascistic.

Whether read as the instrumentalization or illumination of an evolution into atrocity, Theodor Adorno is responsible for the most influential assessment of the links among Wagner’s works, theories, and fascism. The charges against Wagner are most clearly enumerated in Adorno’s *In Search of Wagner*. Written in the wake of WWII and originally published in its aftermath, Adorno’s text is central to debates on the relationship between aesthetics and ideology. The power of Adorno’s argument lies, in

³⁸⁰ Lawrence Kramer, *Opera and Modern Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 107.

³⁸¹ Pamela M. Potter, “Wagner and the Third Reich: Myths and Realities,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, ed. Thomas S. Grey (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 245.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 236.

part, in its thoroughness. Ranging from the personal—citing Wagner’s development from a political radical to an exemplary bourgeois—to undermining the composer’s theories, sources, musical compositions, narratives, and self-fashioning, the text systematically collapses divisions between the artist, his works, and their complicity in the production of future ideologies. Adorno’s portrait of Wagner is a deep entanglement of the personal, political, aesthetic, ideological, historical, and theoretical that renders the artist’s life and work inseparable. The tactic of consolidating Wagner into the bridge between art and fascism returns in Vinge/Müller’s depiction of the composer. Unlike the *Saga*, Adorno, in the aftermath of WWII, sees only carnage in the composer’s communitarian theories.

Wagner’s position as chief modernist long precedes both fascism and Adorno’s assessment. In his own time, the twin innovations that installed Wagner as emblematic of European modernism were first and foremost artistic. According to Annegret Fauser, Wagner’s renown stems from establishing artistic mediums (opera, theatre, etc.) as worthy of their own self-conscious expression and popularizing the use of myth to explore the human psyche. Coupled with the *Gesamtkunstwerk*’s spiritual and communitarian promises, Wagner’s work and theories “shifted the role of art from its traditional marginality in terms of politics, history, and economics.”³⁸³ Adorno laments this shift, which forecasts what Walter Benjamin terms the “aestheticization of politics.”³⁸⁴ The *Saga* incorporates these competing versions into their conception of

³⁸³ Annegret Fauser, “‘Wagnerism’: responses to Wagner in music and the arts,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Wagner*, ed. Thomas S. Grey (New York: Cambridge University Press), 234.

³⁸⁴ See, for example, Ansgar Hillach, “The Aesthetics of Politics: Walter Benjamin’s ‘Theories of German Fascism,’” *New German Critique* no. 17 (1979): 99-119.

Wagner. The *Saga*'s multifaceted depiction of the composer is wide-ranging, populist, and more concerned with the utility of Wagnerian ideas and themes than their historical accuracy. As always, nuance is shed in favor of didacticism. Wagner is therefore polarized in theory and personage. To that end, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is employed as both a revolutionary aesthetic that offers transcendent possibilities for art and its audiences and a blueprint for a fascist aesthetics. Wagner is likewise bifurcated into the romantic genius artist *par excellence* and the fascist dictator for whom humanity is the raw material of transformation. Adorno's prescient, if overblown, critique highlights the interdependence of the three elements that Vinge/Müller take from Wagner and incorporate into the *Saga*: the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Wagner's role as the "poet-composer" (*auteur* director), and fascist aesthetics.

Gesamtkunstwerk (Total Work of Art) ranks high among the most widely deployed and misused descriptors across all mediums of art and artistic practice. Its cross-disciplinary appeal stems from its inherent hybridity. Originally imagined as an artwork uniting the "sister arts" of music, dance, and poetry, Wagner's vision hinged equally on broad social aims. More than simply produce art, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* envisioned a process in which "all will participate actively in genius, genius will be communal."³⁸⁵ Analyzing the development of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Matthew Wilson Smith stresses that Wagner's theory responds to a crisis of alienating modernity in "an attempt to create an organic synthesis of arts that recovers supposedly original, lost,

³⁸⁵ Richard Wagner, trans. and quoted in Matthew Wilson Smith, *The Total Work of Art* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 9.

organic unities.”³⁸⁶ The *Gesamtkunstwerk* is also, as Adorno was keen to point out, wholly dependent upon the methods it sought to reject: “by striving for an artifice so perfect that it conceals all the sutures in the final artifact and even blurs the difference between it and nature itself, it presupposes the same radical alienation from anything natural that its attempts to establish itself as a unified ‘second nature’ sets out to obscure.”³⁸⁷ Smith recontextualizes these contradictions as constitutive of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Rather than a particular failing, the value of Wagner’s theory, according to Smith, rests in its “un-reconciled dialectical struggles performed under the sign of aesthetic totality.”³⁸⁸ The distinction allows for a broader conception of what constitutes a *Gesamtkunstwerk* and importantly redirects the discourse around the theory away from measuring the faithfulness of its application.

Adorno, nonetheless, saw two aesthetic/ideological crimes at the heart of Wagner’s theory. In the first, Wagner is guilty of betraying the autonomy of the individual arts through their integration into a larger work. In this instance, Adorno is most concerned with the damage done to music when placed in service of poetry and drama. Illustrative of the stage action, Wagner’s music—the *leitmotiv* in particular—“transmits a particle of congealed meaning. For all its intensity and emphasis, Wagner’s music is as script is to words and it is hard to avoid suspicion that its intensity is needed only to conceal that fact.”³⁸⁹ Put in the service of the larger work, the various arts lose their anonymity. Bertolt Brecht lodged similar complaints against the *Gesamtkunstwerk* while developing his own theory of dramatic production. In his notes to *The Rise and*

³⁸⁶ Smith, *The Total Work of Art*, 11.

³⁸⁷ Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 86.

³⁸⁸ Smith, *Total Work of Art*, 3.

³⁸⁹ Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 34-35.

Fall of the City of Mahagonny, Brecht charges “so long as the arts are supposed to be ‘fused’ together, the various elements will all be equally degraded.”³⁹⁰ While fearing the contagion of the individual arts may seem a quaint relic of modernist thought, Brecht and Adorno’s concerns over degradation hinged on the effects that Wagner intended his aesthetics to have on audiences. The audience was, after all, conceived as an integral part of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Wagner imagined his music dramas would inspire a collectivity modeled after the communal organization and participation of ancient Greek dramas and festivals. Smith traces Wagner’s interests back to romantic aesthetic theory that wanted to recover a “unity of the individual subject, unity of the social body, unity of life and art.”³⁹¹ Juliet Koss suggests that the utopian promise of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* stems from Wagner’s political involvement in the Dresden uprisings of 1849. These communitarian ideals were to be achieved through a form of spectatorship that Wagner called the “sympathetic gaze.”³⁹² Audience members complete the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and are transformed into a community through a form of spectating that Koss contends is “active, participatory, and fundamental to the creation of the work of art” and through which “both individual spectators and the performers whom they faced were absorbed into the surrounding audience through a process of sympathy or emotional and psychological transference.”³⁹³ But given Wagner’s calls to produce this spectator through absorption in his music

³⁹⁰ Bertolt Brecht, “Notes to the Opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*,” in *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. John Willet (London: Methuen, 1964), 37.

³⁹¹ Smith, *Total Work of Art*, 11.

³⁹² Richard Wagner, *The Art-Work of the Future*, trans. Williams Ashton Ellis, quoted in Juliet Koss, *Modernism After Wagner* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 21.

³⁹³ Koss, *Modernism After Wagner*, 21.

drama, the process took on a decidedly negative connotation. Adorno saw the *Gesamtkunstwerk*'s seductive powers working in tandem with its hidden means of production as emblematic of the larger culture industry. Brecht thought, like-mindedly, that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* enfeebled the spectator, "who gets thrown into the melting pot too and becomes a passive (suffering) part of the total work of art. Witchcraft of this sort must of course be fought against."³⁹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche had long preceded these fears when in 1888 he cautioned, "Wagner is a neurosis."³⁹⁵ Given fascism's subsequent attempts to entrance and cow citizens through spectacular theatrics and mythological appeals, Adorno, Brecht, and others saw Wagner's theories as a clear ideological precursor of such methods.

In Adorno's second chief criticism of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, he points out that the unification of the arts is predicated upon Wagner's role and self-fashioning as the poet-composer-genius. Wagner's self-positioning as *auteur* is diametrically opposed to the *Gesamtkunstwerk*'s equitable unification of art forms and larger communitarian model of society. For all its communal rhetoric, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is the project of the individual, no less the cult of the genius-artist. In short, Wagner "would like, single-handed, to will an aesthetic totality into being, casting a magic spell and with defiant unconcern about the absence of the social conditions necessary for its survival."³⁹⁶ It is in Wagner's desire to force unity—a unity administrated at the expense of the collective—that Adorno sees the springboard to fascism: "what predominates is already

³⁹⁴ Brecht, "Notes to the Opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny*," in *Brecht on Theatre*, 38.

³⁹⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Case of Wagner*, trans. and ed. by Walter Kaufmann in *Basic Writings of Friedrich Nietzsche* (New York: Random House, 2000), 622.

³⁹⁶ Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 90.

the totalitarian and seigneurial aspect of atomization; that devaluation of the individual vis-à-vis the totality.”³⁹⁷ In his critique, Adorno twists Wagner’s concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, his role as the “poet-composer,” and totalitarian (what I refer to as fascistic) aesthetics into a single knot. Or as Fauser summarizes, “In the world of Realpolitik, the Wagnerian systems of a total work of art (*Gesamtkunstwerk*) translated easily into all-encompassing political totalitarianism, in which Hitler’s ‘empire of a thousand years’ could become a demagogue’s artwork of the future.”³⁹⁸ It is, no less, the contradiction that continues to ruin many artistic communities and companies: the tension between the artistic project and an authoritarian figurehead.

Smith has sought to rectify these long standing oppositions to Wagner’s concepts by documenting their varied application across artistic mediums. By showing the *Gesamtkunstwerk*’s conceptual malleability—employed in various ways by Brecht, Andy Warhol, and the Disney Corporation—Smith unmoors Wagner’s ideas from the historical atrocities that Adorno and company read into them. Koss takes a slightly different tack. She too offers an historical account of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*’s development, but one that more closely attends to the concept’s original goals, which she contends are at odds with any future fascistic application. For Koss, Wagner’s detractors—Adorno and Brecht in particular—are guilty of a fundamental misunderstanding. The *Gesamtkunstwerk*, according to Koss, was never intended (and never was) a muddling of the arts through wholesale integration. This definition is chalked up to a misreading that has since taken on the weight of fact. The concept’s misunderstanding emerges from the fact that it proposed something seemingly impossible. Koss argues that the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 40.

³⁹⁸ Fauser, “‘Wagnerism’: responses to Wagner in music and the arts,” 234.

imagined to “simultaneously sustain and destroy the autonomy of the individual arts.”³⁹⁹

The undifferentiated unification of the arts, which gave rise to the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as the seed of fascist aesthetics, is for Koss antithetical in detail and execution to Wagner’s intentions. Wagner’s dialectic of unity and independence was flattened—no doubt by the combined weight of a seemingly impossible artistic task and the cloud of fascism—into what is understood as the muddled degradation of the arts. Koss similarly cites these aims with regard to Wagner’s ideal spectators, whom she understands as existing somewhere between autonomy and totality. The *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Koss concludes, was not designed to subsume the individuals of Wagner’s audience, but rather engender a communal opportunity to achieve greater autonomy within the whole. Taken at face value and on Wagner’s own word, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* exists as a theory with “revolutionary origins and emancipatory potential.”⁴⁰⁰ Or as Smith summarizes, conceptually the *Gesamtkunstwerk* “is the shape of radical hope.”⁴⁰¹ Regardless of its intentions, Wagner’s works and theories are indelibly linked to fascism; a link the *Saga* unapologetically exploits.

Despite subsequent critiques of equating Wagner and fascism, the practice continues, albeit with far less rigor or sophistication than Adorno displayed. In *Wagner’s Hitler: The Prophet and His Disciple* (2001), Joachim Köhler proposes to reveal the *factual* correspondence between the structures of the Third Reich and the composer’s art and ideas. It is notable too that Ibsen and Hitler are the subjects of Steven F. Sage’s similarly minded and equally specious history, *Ibsen and Hitler: The Playwright, the*

³⁹⁹ Koss, *Modernism after Wagner*, xii.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁴⁰¹ Smith, *Total Work of Art*, 8.

Plagiarist, and the Plot for the Third Reich (2007), which purports to link the Dictator and the playwright's works.⁴⁰² While Köhler and Sage's books omit contradiction and breadth in an effort to shore-up weak historical evidence, their works are oddly synonymous with the efforts of the *Saga* in their attempt to build allegiances between art and political ideology. In the *Saga*, these connections are maintained, but Wagner's primary function is to provide performance structures. As I argue, the *Gesamtkunstwerk* operates as a guiding principle for the *Saga*'s notion of the "Total Radical Fiction." More than an additional example of Wagner's continued influence, the Total Radical Fiction demonstrates the formal dialectic Smith and Koss believe has been occluded in the *Gesamtkunstwerk*'s history. Moreover, the Total Radical Fiction embraces the broader dialectic of Wagner himself, positioning him as an icon of both the utopian and oppressive potentials of art. Even its name encapsulates this duality. The Total Radical Fiction evokes Wagner's theory of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and Joseph Goebbels' vision of a "Total War."⁴⁰³ These antecedents provide the chief components of "total fiction" in Wagner's vision of a wholly integrated theatrical aesthetics and "total radicalism" in Goebbels' evocation of a militant Nationalism. These two notions are manifest in the *Saga* through the construction of fantastical, aesthetic totalities—evoking Wagner—and ideological totalities—demonstrated through Goebbels/fascism. Whereas Goebbels sought to evoke a vehement Nationalism, the *Saga* marshals its radicalism to the defense and exhalation of art. Meanwhile, through the process of integrating and isolating

⁴⁰² See, Steven F. Sage, *Ibsen and Hitler: The Playwright, the Plagiarist, and the Plot for the Third Reich* (New York: Avalon, 2006).

⁴⁰³ Joseph Goebbels, "Nation, Rise Up, and Let the Storm Break Loose," February 18th 1943, trans. Randall L. Bytwerk, "German Propaganda Archive," Calvin College website, accessed March 2, 2014, <http://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/goeb36.htm>.

aesthetic elements, the *Saga* foregrounds a temporal dialectic that oscillates between Wagner's mythic time and the historical time of the performance that, in a Brechtian twist, reveals the material conditions of the theatrical event.

The *Gesamtkunstwerk*'s Dialectic

While Wagner emphasized the importance of the three “sister” arts and later architecture, the *Saga*'s conception of integration is representative of the expanse of available mediums and media. It includes lighting, pre-recorded and live music, sound effects (vocal and illustrative), video (live and recorded), live broadcasts of external media (television, radio, etc.), photography, gesture, painting, dance, carpentry, etc. These various elements coalesce through the *Saga*'s pervasive audio score. As detailed in the introduction, the Total Radical Fiction's hyper-realistic sound design accompanies the gestures of every performer, stagehand, and technician. The movements of all stage properties (both props and functional elements like doors and the stage curtain) are similarly underscored with illustrative sound effects cued by the shows' technicians. While arguably “realistic” in design, the sound effects are recorded with such clarity and played at such high volumes that each element, whether it be the scamper of a mouse, Gregers' cough, or a machine gun, are equalized. The effect is the creation of an auditory hyperrealism that casts a unifying sonic net over the entire production. The use of manipulated sound in cartoons and videogames, as well as the theatre of Robert Wilson, offers useful corollaries. In each of these examples, sound is used to seemingly contrary ends. It at once testifies to the artificiality of the image—its need for exterior effects—and naturalizes them within the artificial world. That is to say, in the *Saga*'s logic, to be underscored by effects is to be incorporated within the fiction. Combined with the

productions' hallmark painterly aesthetics and codified gestures, the various media employed appear integrated when the sound effects correspond with actions and objects. Through the application of auditory or visual effects, the *Saga* not only establishes its universe, but also uses these means to absorb exterior sources (whether they be people, media, or objects) into the Total Radical Fiction.

The ability to incorporate external elements into the fiction is integral to the *Saga*'s improvisatory structure. During a performance of the *Wild Duck*, for example, the Director offered audience members the opportunity to fight a rogue on-stage robot. A young man in the front row agreed and was given a fake, plastic sword with which to combat the robot. As the volunteer stepped on stage, the technicians cued foot step sound effects to his movements and underscored his battle with the robot with the clang of a sword hitting metal. While the technicians' efforts were not wholly synchronized with the volunteer's unchoreographed movements, they did steadily improve during the participant's few minutes on stage. Synchronicity aside, the sound effects demonstrate the volunteer's absorption into the *Saga*'s artifice, which differentiated him, temporarily, from the audience of which he was previously a member.

A similar instance occurred during *John Gabriel Borkman*, in which the 2012 Champion's League football (soccer) final was broadcast live in the theatre. Between scenes, the company projected the match on the closed curtain, in which Bayern Munich of Germany played Chelsea of England for the championship. The sense was, as Vinge explained, that the match was of general concern to the audience, or, at the very least, they were aware of its contemporaneity with the performance they were watching. As the match proceeded, the technicians cued sound effects of kicked balls, cheering crowds,

and slips and falls. The process of incorporation closely follows the previously mentioned volunteer. What at first appears as foreign is consumed and repurposed through the *Saga*'s artifice. Naturalizing foreign, "real" elements into the fiction also contradicts what Postdramatic theatre sees as reality's interruptive function, as discussed in the first chapter of this dissertation. The process instead shores up the division between the fictional and the real through the application and removal of underscoring while also demonstrating the reach of the *Saga*'s *Gesamtkunstwerk*. If sonic underscoring is the only requirement to absorb something into the fiction, then the *Saga* has the capacity to remake the world in its image or, better yet, bring the world into its image. This expansiveness—real or imagined—is at the root of Adorno and others fears of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The subsuming of distinct elements in the service of a greater totality, whether they are different mediums or the seemingly real of the football match, is crucial to the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the Total Radical Fiction.

Through its expansiveness, the *Saga* illustrates the central dialectic of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, namely, that the *Gesamtkunstwerk*'s integrative aspirations run counter to key modernist concerns of what Koss calls, "purity, autonomy, and medium specificity."⁴⁰⁴ Just as Smith underscores this dialectic as endemic to the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the *Saga* places it at the center of their performances. The constitutive elements of the productions at once cohere into a totality, while regularly announcing their autonomy as independent mediums. This is evident throughout the *Saga*. Returning to the two previous examples, when the sound effects fail to correspond to the actions of the volunteer, soccer match, or any performer for that matter, they announce themselves

⁴⁰⁴ Koss, *Modernism after Wagner*, XV.

as purely sound effects, discreet aesthetic elements that when mistimed seemingly fall out of the larger work. They contradict the totality of the theatrical image while illustrating the actual mechanics of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*—its reliance on disparate modes of aesthetic expression to construct its wholeness.

The process also occurs in the reverse, demonstrating the disintegration of totalizing images rather than their construction. The *Saga*'s production of *The Wild Duck*, is, like Ibsen's text, partitioned in to two distinct locales. In the first part, the action takes place in the Werles' house, which the *Saga* depicts as a two-floor, six room diorama painted entirely in shades of black and white. The second location is the Ekdals' small two-room home, rendered in a rainbow of psychedelic colors, where the action is structured like a domestic sit-com with commercial interludes. As the action shifts from the Werles' to the Ekdals' all but the center section of the diorama—two rooms stacked on top of one another—are pushed off to the wings, leaving the middle compartment of the Werles' home. These rooms are then stripped of their wallpaper and props to reveal the Ekdal house, which is one face of a four-sided turntable. Near the close of the *Wild Duck*, the turntable begins to spin, revealing the four sections. In one space, Gina sits in the Ekdal kitchen while Hedvig repeatedly shoots herself in the upstairs attic; in another section a two-story Ibsen's hell mouth vomits Dr Relling; on a third side the pond that the wild duck was retrieved is depicted as a tropical-above and aquatic-below in which Gregers is sunk to the bottom while his father and Mrs. Sørby recline on the shore above; and the final panel features Hjalmar's fabled invention that he powers with a bicycle. The turntable spins for some twenty minutes, offering a slow motion strobe of four central themes, actions, and settings of the play. With each turn, the action of each scene

is met with its particular collection of sound and lighting effects. In the process, the action collapses upon itself. Sounds bleed from scene to scene in one's hearing and memory, creating something like a cubist depiction of the play in total. The overlapping ruptures each scene's cohesion within the play as well as its relative separation in time and space. This also holds true for the production elements that leak into one another—the roar of Ibsen's hell mouth distorts Hedvig's gunshot. The historical inevitability that Adorno and Brecht abhor in Wagner's works runs amok in this scene. Fate has taken on a maniacal and mechanical hold over the players: Hedvig will die time and time again without relief. Rather than mystify destiny through the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the *Saga* uses its very mechanism to undermine notions of an ahistorical predestination. When the turntable finally slows, it gives the sense that the cycle of violence has been interrupted; the merry-go-round of history has been unplugged and lurches to a deathly standstill as the curtain closes.

The fractured sound and imagery are also the pretext for the reassertion of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*'s coherence. The curtain reopens on the Ekdal home. The entire cast is now positioned in their respective residences: the Ekdals in their home, and the Werles, Sørby, their servants, and Dr. Relling scattered throughout the two-floor sections of the Werle house that had previously been pushed offstage. Over this still image, the opening organ refrain of Joan Baez's "Saco and Vanzetti" plays on a loop. Dr. Relling shakes an oversized container of pills, accompanied by a rattle effect, while Mrs. Sørby clinks wine glasses in synch with the music and a chime sound. Werle, likewise, shakes a bag of coins in time, while the Director delivers a cardboard keyboard to an unsuspecting audience member, now tasked with miming the song's refrain. Gina, meanwhile, has

taken center stage with a cardboard guitar. The Director instructs throughout, positioning the players, cuing their entry into the rhythm of the song, and as the music plays past its initial loop and into the opening salvo, “Here’s to you, Nicola and Bart!,” he carefully times Gina into the music counting her down to “sing, Gina, sing!” As the song bursts from the speakers, Gina strums and lip-synchs, the disparate musical gestures and sounds—pill bottle, wine glasses, moneybag—time perfectly within the larger structures of the song. Gregers, a marching drum around his neck, leads a parade of ducks around the stage that will later be sacrificed by Hjalmar and the Director. The anathematic use of Baez’s song—discussed in the previous chapter for its relationship to political idealism as well as the theatrical productions of Christoph Schlingensiefel—here is representative of the incorporative technique of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The characters’ sonic cues build into the song’s base line and eventually an entire scene, the construction of which is not only shown, but also assembled in real time through the Director’s instruction. Once the characters are fully animated, the distinct elements are naturalized within the context of the scene—their autonomy vanishes.

In these moments the *Saga* swings between what Smith has identified as the two most prevalent models of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the “crystalline” and “iconic.” The former embraces “the outward signs of mechanical production while simultaneously attempting to integrate those signs of production into a pseudo-organic totality,” while the latter hides its construction. The two share a common aim of unification while differing in their means. During scenes where the various elements are integrated, the *Saga* resembles the “iconic,” “that aims to hide the mechanisms of its own production

through appeals to nature, to roots, to myth, to blood, to folk.”⁴⁰⁵ These appeals are made through the idealistic content discussed in the previous chapter and their formal presentation as a unified art object that naturalizes its disparate elements within the fiction. The work’s iconicity is, however, unsteady. Given the shows’ partially unscripted, extreme lengths and frequent audience and Directorial interventions, the labor required to engineer the productions lies dangerously close to the surface, frequently exposing itself. In these instances, the *Saga* resembles the “crystalline” *Gesamtkunstwerk* that offers “a totalizing performance that exposes and celebrates symbols of technology and mechanized production.”⁴⁰⁶ As the performance elements unravel, each is presented as its own art object, independent of the larger narrative or immediate action. In this sense, the technical virtuosity celebrated in the “crystalline” is only readily noticeable when the “iconic” fails.

Whether the tension between the autonomy and unification of the aesthetic elements is understood as endemic (Smith and Koss) or what the *Gesamtkunstwerk* nefariously seeks to obscure (Adorno and Brecht), the model of an integrated production ushered in new theatrical necessities. Chief among these needs was the oversight of an external figure: the director. As I argue in the following section, Wagner’s role as the director exceeds practical responsibilities and establishes the director as a symbolic figure of authority and aesthetic idealism. Within the *Saga*, the shift between the *Gesamtkunstwerk*’s two poles—iconic/crystalline, integrated/ autonomous—is instigated by Vinge’s “Director” character. More than a functionary, the Director of the *Saga* represents the contradictory meanings contained within the director as personage.

⁴⁰⁵ Smith, *The Total Work of Art*, 47.

⁴⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

The Directorial Dialectic

In his historical moment and cultural legacy, Wagner has come to stand in as the prototypical *auteur* director. Christopher Innes notes the composer's centrality to the rise of the director within nineteenth-century Germany, placing his influence on par with that of the intendant system. Wagner's impact stems from two interrelated qualities: his embodiment of the role of the director and the fact that, as Innes argues, "the sheer scale upon which [his] dramas were conceived required a unified presentation that could only be provided by an offstage director."⁴⁰⁷ For Adorno, Wagner's role as the "poet-composer" generated two primary problems. First, as author, composer, and conductor, Wagner's influence overwhelms the production in which he "conquers the stage from the orchestra pit."⁴⁰⁸ Wagner's consolidation of power over the arts extends to the audience, which as integral to the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, is similarly manhandled. By stepping outside to commandeer the action, Wagner "both represents and suppresses the bourgeois individual's demand to be heard. He is the spokesman for all and so encourages an attitude of speechless obedience in all."⁴⁰⁹ Just as the arts are disciplined within the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, so too are its audiences. Central to Adorno's critique are the ways in which Wagner's role is both practical and representational. Within the work itself Wagner relies on a "system of gestures," and "[a]s the striker of blows, however, the composer-conductor gives the claims of the public a terrorist emphasis."⁴¹⁰ These performative gestures, along with those of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*'s performers, are what

⁴⁰⁷ Christopher Innes, "The rise of the director, 1850-1939," in *A History of German Theatre*, eds. Simon Williams and Maik Hamburger (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 180.

⁴⁰⁸ Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 23.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

Martin Puchner sees as Wagner's "elevation of theatricality into a value," which draws the ire of later anti-theatrical modernists.⁴¹¹ Wagner is dually accused by Adorno of materializing the artist *as* image: "The artist in his velvet jacket and beret who poses as a 'master,' as the quintessential Artist, and the half-dilettantish poet who can never quite satisfy the demand of language and the stage—however contradictory they may seem, the two are really all of a piece."⁴¹² Certainly not the first to assume an artistic posture, Wagner is more specifically representative of Adorno's fear that the image of the artist has superseded a need for talent. These iconographic qualities are encapsulated in Wagner's plume of hair and signature *Wagnerkappe*, a precursor to Ibsen's hallmark muttonchops and black top hat. Embodying the duality of master and dilettante, Wagner's visage has since accrued political weight in post-war debates over his alleged ties to and use by the Nazi party. Potter emphasizes that "[t]he controversy in essence has much less to do with the man or the music than with the psychological associations invoked by his image."⁴¹³ Potter's observation speaks to the *Saga*'s iconographic use of Wagner as a multivalent symbol capable of conjuring the best and worst of Western politics and culture—two realms that in Wagner are inseparable.

If Adorno and company have cast a negative light on Wagner as a director and cultural icon, others have sought to recuperate the composer's role. Eve Katsouraki celebrates Wagner's directorial innovations within their historical context as a means of distancing them from the shadow of fascism. Katsouraki argues that Wagner is critical to the development of the modern director not simply by virtue of historical proximity or the

⁴¹¹ Martin Puchner, *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 2002), 45.

⁴¹² Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, 100.

⁴¹³ Potter, "Wagner and the Third Reich: Myths and Realities," 245.

scale of his ambition, but because he “functions as a theatrical prototype and a cultural instigator of the *positioning of the aesthetic in relation to the political*, or else, the function of art within politics.”⁴¹⁴ Wagner’s yoking of art and politics constitutes what Katsouraki terms, “the director’s ‘subjectivity,’” which “is perpetually negotiated in relation to the Other, whether this is the actor, the audience, the script, or the stage design.”⁴¹⁵ Katsouraki’s depiction of Wagner as a collaborator rather than a dictatorial figure highlights the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as a communitarian project emerging from the composer’s anarchist sympathies. The unifying role of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* and the director, therefore, “advances a politico-aesthetic strategy that would help the process of forming a classless community of actors and spectators and thus opposes the alienating forces of bourgeois culture,” not an act of tyrannical overreach as described by Adorno.⁴¹⁶ Katsouraki and Adorno’s polarized images of Wagner as director/dictator produce a contradictory portrait of the composer. Lawrence Kramer sums up Wagner’s dichotomous legacy as one of “a figure both *of* symbolic authority and *for* symbolic authority.”⁴¹⁷ Within the theatre, no figure has come to embody symbolic authority more than the director.

In producing the work and theories that necessitate the individuated authority, and then embodying that role, Wagner stands in as the prototypical director. Wagner’s influence on pioneering *auteur* directors of the nineteenth and twentieth-century theatre

⁴¹⁴ Eve Katsouraki, “Žižek’s Death Drive, the Intervention of Grace, and the Wagnerian Performative: Conceptualising the Director’s Subjectivity,” in *Žižek and Performance*, eds. Broderick Chow and Alex Mangold (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 63. Italics in the original

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴¹⁷ Kramer, *Opera and Modern Culture*, 101.

like Lugné-Poë, Maurice Maeterlinck, Adolphia Appia, and Edward Gordon Craig is well documented. Smith's analysis of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* similarly establishes correspondences between Wagner and his presumed directorial adversary Bertolt Brecht.⁴¹⁸ In short, Wagner's attempt to create a theatrical event that was both aesthetically and politically transformative established the two main lines of inquiry for the contemporary director. In this sense, Wagner emerges as the forefather of *Regietheater*, which understands the director as an uncompromising re-inventor of canonical works to new aesthetic and political ends.⁴¹⁹ *Regietheater* lays the theatrical groundwork for Vinge/Müller's radical reassessment of Ibsen and reasserts the director as an iconic figure who both looms over and inserts his or her self into the work.⁴²⁰ Maria M. Delgado and Dan Rebellato point out that for famous, European directors of the twenty-first century, the task is "a function and a profession, a brand and a process, an encounter and a market force."⁴²¹ The *Saga's* Director character is similarly a confluence of polarities. Grounded in the dual image of Wagner, however, the *Saga's* Director departs from this lineage in the belief that aesthetic ideals supersede political or social realities, meaning that in the *Saga* no aesthetic—i.e., fascist and totalitarian—is excluded on political grounds. This is far less common than one would think. Even figures like Robert Wilson, whose work flirts with a totalitarian aesthetic, depoliticizes these

⁴¹⁸ Smith, *The Total Work of Art*,

⁴¹⁹ See, for example, Marvin Carlson, *Theatre is More Beautiful Than War: German Stage Directing in the Late Twentieth Century* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2009).

⁴²⁰ Figures like Peter Stein, Tadeusz Kantor, Robert Wilson, Frank Castorf, Ariane Mnouchkine, and Christoph Schlingensiefel are emblematic of the complex evolution of the director as personage.

⁴²¹ Maria M. Delgado and Dan Rebellato, "Introduction," *Contemporary European Theatre Directors*, ed. Maria M. Delgado and Dan Rebellato (New York: Routledge, 2010), 21.

elements to the point of being ideologically innocuous. On the other hand, Christoph Schlingensiefel's embrace of overtly ideological aesthetics employs those aspects to liberal ends.⁴²² The *Saga* conversely, with its backward looking search for aesthetic idealism, embraces the symbolic authority of Wagner as both proto-fascist dictator and utopian director. By locating Wagner's duality as the source of the director's movement, the *Saga* invites a deep political ambiguity.

The duality of the director is made explicit as an embodied character in the *Saga*'s performances. The Director appears in each of the *Saga*'s five productions and is always played by Vinge. The role is both practical and performative. The Director conducts the action in real time, fusing Vinge's directorial responsibilities with those of the character. The Director is not, however, synonymous with Vinge's role as a director, a responsibility he notably shares with Müller. It is an exaggerated theatricalization of Vinge's role, but also of the megalomania of the director as distilled in Wagner. The pacing, length, and order of scenes are frequently changed at the Director's commands. These choices occur both behind the scenes and as part of the action. The Director broadcasts his demands through a microphone designed to distort his voice into a childish warble. From the sound booth and auditorium, the Director will regularly—although not always—instruct the actors and technicians where to stand or how move and tell the technicians to adjust the sound levels, change the music, or open and close the curtains. The Director, additionally, shapes the action from the stage by whispering instructions to

⁴²² In Schlingensiefel's 2001 production of *Hamlet*, for example, real neo-Nazis were cast as Hamlet's "players" who opened the theatre into a forum for debate during the "play-within-a-play" scene, while Schlingensiefel dressed in a SS uniform orchestrated and enflamed the event. The provocation, however, was used as a means to illuminate both the rise of right-wing extremism in Western Europe and the plight of those who attempt to disentangle themselves from such groups.

performers or, more commonly, “assassinating” characters, destroying the set and props, and engaging in acts of creation: painting, filming, dancing, conducting the pre-recorded music, or simply stepping into the action to cheer on the characters or coat them in blood as they battle. Throughout the performance, the Director comments on the action, characters, and performance aligning it to a variety of traditions. During *John Gabriel Borkman*, for example, he proclaimed, “I’m [Luchino] Visconti!,” a fellow opera director and lover of romanticism, and declared, “This is Pointillism!,” to describe Hjalmar using his penis to paint scenery in *The Wild Duck*. These actions, comments, and interjections are, according to the artists, neither pre-planned nor repeated from one performance to the next.⁴²³ They are acts of inspiration or necessity that emerge in response to the performance and audience. The Director does, however, exhibit recurring behaviors, most notably lying on his back, urinating into his own mouth and then spitting it out like a fountain, and—as described in the first chapter—shooting paint from his anus onto a canvas. These routinized behaviors differ from spontaneous actions in that they are quotations of earlier works of performance art: Gunter Brus’ “Sheer Madness” (1968) and Chris Boadwee’s “Purple Squirt” (1995), respectively. This dialectic of repeated and original actions demonstrates the dichotomy of the Director. Vinge’s performance captures the symbolism *of* (creative) authority through his selection of behavioral citations, as well as an attempt to establish the director as a symbol *for* (creative) authority in his efforts to create new, spontaneous images and actions.

The Director character has appeared in various guises over the course of the *Saga*. In *A Doll House*, the Director appears only after Nora’s murder, dressed in a SS

⁴²³ Vinge, interview with author, July 6, 2010.

Lieutenant's jacket and hat. The Director lectures the audience from a textbook on directing Ibsen and repeatedly screams, "I have the Power!," in reference to firing nearly all of the show's performers days before the premiere. The last minute termination of the performers forced Vinge—as well as Müller—to play multiple roles in the production. Vinge switched between Torvald, the infant Bob, and the Director, forcing the latter character into a more limited role. Nonetheless, the Director functions as a gross embodiment of power and artistic intuition, exercising and professing fanatical control over the production while contrasting his impassioned and subjective approach to an antiquated, analytical technique of directing located in the textbook.

In *Ghosts*, the Director is a separate character and mainstay throughout the performance. First heard as a disembodied voice instructing the curtain to be opened and closed, he later appears to berate young Oswald Alving for weeping at his father's grave. Dressed in a matching pair of Oswald's pajamas and an identical mask, the Director rushes from the sound booth to hurl fistfuls of dirt at the character, calling the scene "sentimental shit." He returns after Oswald's death to mutilate and paint with Mrs. Alving's "dead" body—punishment, presumably, for her dismissal of the "joy-of-life" and her son's art. The Director joins Captain Alving onstage to execute the play's characters—save Oswald. An audio clip of the Nazi Minister of Propaganda Joseph Goebbels' 1943 speech, "Nation, Rise Up, and Let the Storm Break Loose," contextualizes the massacre.⁴²⁴ The Director, dressed as an *SS* Officer mimes along to Goebbels' text: "I ask you: Do you want total war? If necessary, do you want a war more total and radical than anything that we can even imagine today? [...] Let the slogan be:

⁴²⁴ Goebbels, "Nation, Rise Up, and Let the Storm Break Loose."

Now, people rise up and let the storm break loose!”⁴²⁵ This troubling image is the fictional extension of the *Saga*’s actual philosophy; the aesthetic manifestation of Goebbels call to “Total War.” The Director is a near constant presence until the end, painting a massive yellow sun with a brush inserted in his anus, brutalizing and eulogizing Pastor Manders, and leading the action through hours of associative twists and turns. In *Ghosts*, the Director’s fascistic leanings are overt, as are his artistic aspirations. If in *A Doll House* the Director foremost symbolized power, here the conjuring of directorial authority and Nazi brutality are presented as weapons against the enemies of art, namely Osvald’s foils. The Director’s initial appearance as Osvald’s double can also be read along these lines. The Director represents Osvald’s artistic vision fulfilled, if only as a megalomaniac.

The role of the Director in *The Wild Duck* took on unexpected qualities. Again positioned in the sound booth, the Director engaged in his standard repertoire of actions: assaulting characters, charting the course of action, and creating works of visual and performance art. His role took on a new characteristic when the performance’s premiere at the Bergen International Festival ran beyond its allotted time, forcing the festival’s director, Per Boyne Hansen, to intervene. This led to a public, mid-performance argument between Hansen and the Director, with the latter refusing to stop the show or yield to the demands of the institution. The Director incorporated the argument into the drama of the performance, continually referring to Hansen as Werle, the production’s patriarchal villain who suppresses the idealist aspirations of the young Gregers. Every night the performance exceeded its time limit and Hansen was forced to intercede on

⁴²⁵ Ibid.

behalf of labor regulations and noise ordinances. Given these public confrontations, the festival's high profile, and the explicit material contained within the performance, local and international papers quickly labeled the show "Scandal Theatre," drawing the attention and commentary of a wide array of critics and audience members, including the Norwegian Minister of Culture.⁴²⁶ While providing salacious headlines and valuable attention to Vinge/Müller's project, these confrontations highlight a critical aspect of both the *Saga* and the Director's role. In designing the *Saga* to exceed the limits of institutions—reportedly Hansen stepped in after learning that following nine hours the Director announced that act one would begin—it harkens back to Wagner's conception of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* as an art form in need of its own space, Bayreuth. As Therese Bjørneboe deftly points out, the arguments between Hansen and the Director "elevated the situation on both a political and a meta-theatrical level. The issue of power relations—who controls art, the institution or artist—refers to a real conflict between institutions and artists (wage and working time regulation, etc.), but also highlights the conflict of art and theatre as consumer goods."⁴²⁷ Bjørneboe continues that, in instances like these, "Vinge's dual role [operates] as a kind of transfer station between the fiction and the real (theatre) situation."⁴²⁸ The increased institutional entrenchment the *Saga* experienced as a by-product of its growing success exacerbates the Director's role as vanguard of artistic integrity and idealism in relationship to the institution. Hansen

⁴²⁶Finn Bjørn Tønder, "Måtte stoppe skandaleteater" (Had to Stop the Scandal Theatre) *Aftenposten*, May 24, 2009, accessed May 16, 2014, <http://www.aftenposten.no/kultur/article3089125.ece>.

⁴²⁷Therese Bjørneboe, "Hjalmars Teater" (Hjalmar's Theatre) *Norsk Shakespeare og Teater Tidsskrift (Norwegian Shakespeare and Theatre Journal)* 2 (2009), accessed June 5, 2014, <http://www.shakespearetidsskrift.no/arkiv/22009/vildanden-hjalmars-teater.html>.

⁴²⁸ *Ibid.*

unwittingly illustrates this tension when reflecting that “I think this is exciting theatre that knows no boundaries. But as organizers we should have had better control.”⁴²⁹ The Director’s intransigence illuminates and stands in opposition to the contradiction in the institution’s desire for a “theatre that knows no boundaries” and need for “better control.” The conflicts in Bergen solidified the Director as a defender of the *Saga*’s autonomy and whose antagonisms are consistently aimed at structures, institutions, and their representatives that seek to wrest control away from the artists.

In the absence of such restrictions the Director performs a unifying function. When the production of *The Wild Duck* relocated to Oslo’s Black Box Teater the following year, artistic director Jon Refsdal Moe and the theatre’s staff agreed to allow the production to run without any time restrictions. At its longest, the performance ran over nineteen continuous hours. This new version of the production alluded to the Bergen controversy with its subtitle, *The Director’s Cut*, and by broadcasting audio recordings of Hansen and Vinge’s arguments between scenes. In one of the clearest audio clips, Hansen is heard telling Vinge to “Go to bed!”; Vinge, as the Director, retorts with a succinct manifesto: “We need a new generation!” Without the institutional limitations encountered in Bergen, the Oslo performances took on a more festive air. Rather than being scandalized, the audience laughed throughout the recording of Vinge and Hansen’s fight. Adapting to the situation, the Director was more host than provocateur. Upon entering the theatre, the Director worshipfully prostrates himself to the audience occasionally kissing a passing foot. During the performance, he begged departing spectators to stay, promising that the next scene would be “really good.”

⁴²⁹ Tønder, “*Måtte stoppe skandaleteater,*” (Had to Stop the Scandal Theatre).

Tempting as it might be to see these overtures of generosity as ironic—especially given the brutal effects of the show, which critic IdaLou Larsen says “periodically transformed the theatre experience to torture”—they correspond to genuine acts of charity.⁴³⁰ The Director distributed massive bags of potato chips and alcohol to the audience and between scenes encouraged them to dance with he and the other characters to pop-music. Spectators were even periodically invited to participate in the onstage action. Vinge clarifies that despite the intensity of their performances, “we always react to the audience. When we did [*A Doll House*] in Italy the more we shit and piss the more they were applauding and were very excited. In Austria they really hated [*A Doll House*], they were booing and telling us to get off the stage. But, in *Black Box*, I felt like it was a very lovable audience and very supportive. A lot of people just want to fuck up the audience, but I like the audience.”⁴³¹ The distinction between the audience and institutions is critical to the *Saga*’s pointed idealism and is embodied in the figure of the Director. As we will see in the following chapters, the institution is often treated as a force for compromise that must be rejected; yet Vinge articulates a decidedly different picture of the *Saga*’s relationship to its spectators. This dichotomy reveals the Director to be both the Wagnerian dictator and communitarian idealist.

While undoubtedly generous, distributing junk food and other overtures are a far cry from Wagner’s ideal of the *Volk* sharing in a communal “genius.” These gestures, nonetheless, enable the possibility of a different type of communal experience. Vinge notes that through the long performances something like a utopian community evolves:

⁴³⁰ IdaLou Larsen, “*Sceneorgier i sene nattetimer*” (Late Night Stage Orgies) *Idalou* (blog), May 25, 2010, accessed June 1, 2014, <http://www.idalou.no/pub/idalou/kritikker/?aid=1252>.

⁴³¹ Vinge, interview with author, July 6, 2010.

we are in this room together and you really get attached to the audience. Because in the world everybody behaves, everybody reads something or has a motivation [behind their behavior], but when we are together on this art-tour then you really feel who your friends are, because people have to really make a choice, make an act, and say ok I'll stay for sixteen hours even if it's sometimes boring.⁴³²

Here the *Saga* offers a community founded not on the equality between artist and audience imagined by Wagner, but rather through a joint commitment by the artist and audience to valorize art. This investment is made by the audience through its dedicated attendance, despite periods of disinterest, repulsion, and boredom, and by the performers' own endurance and commitment in which they are routinely asked to subject themselves to potentially injurious and exhausting acts. By dedicating oneself to the art experience, the social conditioning that Vinge relates to behavior and "motivation" is presumably stripped away. Clarifying the audience's participation in this form of collectivity, Vinge notes that "I don't think that the audience should have 'integrity,' but I'm very strict with myself."⁴³³ The need to discipline oneself to and for the art project is consistent with Vinge's understanding of art making as "a very spiritual journey, it really changes your way of reception," and an encompassing belief that "the sublime and the willingness to sacrifice are beautiful."⁴³⁴ Vinge's summary of the *Saga*'s conceptual ethos clearly echoes the *Gesamtkunstwerk*'s romantic promise to restore, in Smith's words, the unity between "life and art."⁴³⁵ In the *Saga*'s equation, however, life is only expressed in art.

The *Saga*'s quasi-communitarian idealism is coupled with the more sinister undercurrents of Wagner's proposals. The commitment and sacrifice, which Vinge

⁴³² Ibid.

⁴³³ Ibid.

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ Smith, *The Total Work of Art*, 11.

prizes, are only achieved through a degree of dictatorial oversight. Vinge/Müller are unapologetically in control of the project. As Müller asserts, “Vegard and I are not really group ensemble workers. The piece directs everything, what we have in our minds will direct and guide everything. The art stands above everything.”⁴³⁶ Vinge echoes the sentiment, noting that “it’s not that we are extreme or fanatic, these are just words being put on us because people are afraid of there being any alternatives. I don’t expect anything more of the actors than I expect of myself. You can say it’s totalitarian and I’m the one who decides in the end [...] but in art I believe it has to be [...] it can’t just be a collective or it will be just a soup and there needs to be an energy in a way.”⁴³⁷ Müller and Vinge make two critical and interrelated suggestions that tie their approach to the theories of Wagner: first, that a clear division exists between art and life (discussed in a different context in the first chapter); and, second, that the realm of art creates a state of exception in which a fascist ideology is not only permissible, but necessary to the creation of art that has “energy.”⁴³⁸ Using Wagner, Adorno, and Brecht sought to show that ideologies employed in aesthetics not only leaked into reality, but were also used as a basis *for* reality. The *Saga* reestablishes this distinction in an effort to create spaces in which to manifest these latent frustrations aesthetically:

These very fascistic images and violence is about saying, yeah, everything is about trying to [take] control. And when you live in society you have no control. You have to go to school and work and they give you a number and you feel you

⁴³⁶ Ida Müller, interview with author. Internet videophone call. Jersey City, NJ and Berlin, Germany, July 6, 2010.

⁴³⁷ Vinge, interview with author, July 6, 2010.

⁴³⁸ Ibid. Vinge and Müller repeatedly and almost interchangeably use the terms “energy” and “fetish” to describe the kind of investment they seek to cultivate between themselves and their art as well as the collaborators they employ. Key to this idea is that one’s desire to make art be a “necessity” as evident in Vinge’s description of Jackson Pollock need to do *his* thing.

don't have any power. For me art is about controlling things, taking control of your own life, again. It's a violent act, but it's not reality, even if the feelings are [real].⁴³⁹

Evoking fascist aesthetics and behavior, therefore, is a means of asserting oneself against a sense of powerlessness attributed to capitalist society in which one's life is instrumentalized within institutions. This is also, not coincidentally, the ideological thread that runs between Ibsen's idealists to Wagner's artistic intransigence.

These two halves of the Director are joined in the *Saga's* production of *John Gabriel Borkman* (2011), for which the character is given a new costume: white track pants held up by suspenders and a black, handmade Wagner T-shirt. The *Saga's* icons, what the artists call "signs," are more totems than quotations; they attempt to conjure the ethos of what the sign represents.⁴⁴⁰ Through the Director's Wagner t-shirt, we are invited to understand his behavior as directly related to the director-composer. Wagner's personage also alludes to Gustav Wagner, the deputy commandant of Poland's *Sobibór* extermination camp. Gustav's brutality, in which he was responsible for determining which prisoners were enslaved and which were murdered, earned him the nickname the "wolf."⁴⁴¹ Conjuring the composer alongside a Nazi, the Director stands in for an artistic idealism that is always a hair's breadth from fascist brutality. The Director's actions inhabit both ends of the spectrum. He is simultaneously the communitarian "genius"

⁴³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁰ Notably, the Ibsen Hell-Mouth, featured so prominently in *The Wild Duck*, stood outside the entrance to *John Gabriel Borkman* like a totem signalling both a community and an ideology.

⁴⁴¹ For accounts of Gustav Wagner see, Yitzhak Arad's *Belzec, Sobibor, Treblinka: The Operation Reinhard Death Camps*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 191-192. It is also worth noting that Gunhild Borkman also refers to John Gabriel Borkman as a "wolf."

artist orchestrating his masterpiece and the murderous fanatic that feeds his creation with (metaphoric) blood.

The *Saga*'s attempt to create a community through a commitment to art and the institutional tensions that stem from their efforts were on display as early as the second performance of *John Gabriel Borkman*. After nine hours, the *Volksbühne*'s technical staff shut down the sound and light boards and, effectively, ended the show. While in the next chapter I reprise this event to address the function of time in relation to the institution, here the technicians' walkout is pretext to the charitable qualities of the Director. Rather than lash out or attempt to incorporate the event into the performance itself—as seen in the Bergen *Wild Duck*—the Director pleaded with the staff to no avail. It would be the last time—in performance at least—that the Director would negotiate with the institution.

After the technicians left, the performers and the Director scrambled to salvage the show, for which over a third of the audience remained. Without sound or light, the *Saga*'s aesthetic was rendered impotent. At the Director's instruction, the performers distributed cases of champagne to the audience that were left over from the show's premiere. As we drank, clapped, and clinked glasses in a show of appreciation and mild opposition to the show's end, various performers took to the stage to mime and dance. It was certainly not the show that was intended, but it once again exhibited the Director's role—pace Wagner—as a shaper of communities through art. In this instance, the role required standing downstage and uncorking bottles while wearing the inspirer of his actions like a badge on his shirt.

The fanatical aspects of the Director's performance emerged soon after *Borkman's* premiere. The show garnered a strong critical response that led to an increase in attendance. Given the group's performance methods, shows were only performed a maximum of three times a week. In an effort to increase the theatre's capacity, the *Volksbühne* installed an additional row of benches in the auditorium, which according to Vinge was done without notifying the artists or seeking their consent. The benches allegedly interfered with the Director's ability to move throughout the performance space. During the following show, the performers entered the seating rake, scattered the audience, and moved all of the benches to the stage where the Director destroyed them with an axe. The artists were forced to rebuild and repaint the seating at their own expense, but their complaint was lodged practically and metaphorically. The benches symbolized the *Saga's* compromise; their destruction was an assertion that the integrity of the art supersedes its commercial potential and institutional affiliation.

It is tempting to critique the *Saga* on the grounds of hypocrisy. They freely take the financial and material support of institutions while simultaneously taunting and disregarding those institutions' concerns. To see this behavior as hypocritical, however, is to extract it from the context of artistic idealism in which it is conceived and performed. What the *Saga* avows, through the authoritarian and communitarian helm of the Director, is its independence not from institutional support, but from institutional strictures and oversight. While this attitude itself may seem hypocritical, it is in keeping with the *Saga's* overriding idealistic ethos: "The art stands above everything."⁴⁴² The

⁴⁴² Müller, interview with author, July 6, 2010.

artists' ingratitude is, therefore, the performance of the *Saga* as a Wagnerian act of aesthetic idealism.

As I argue in the following chapter, valorizing art about all else is one of the *Saga*'s central provocations. What distinguishes the *Saga*'s provocations is a belief that art dictates its own time, that mounting a nineteenth-century artistic idealism is a question of temporality. Or, to return to Thomas Mann's summary of that century's aesthetic ethos as "a gloomy and afflicted grandeur that is at once skeptical and passionate—fanatical even—in its pursuit of truth, and that can find a fleeting happiness, without creed or religion, in surrendering to the transient moment of consuming beauty."⁴⁴³ The *Saga* asks its participants and spectators to surrender to its art, to give itself over to the impossibility of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*'s totality and the Director's demands. Fascism haunts these injunctions, because, in the *Saga*, "surrendering to the transient moment of consuming beauty" replaces both *creed* and *religion*; it becomes its own non-humanist ethics. Ibsen's protagonists may voice a similar aesthetic idealism, but it was Wagner who theorized and applied it to performance. It was Wagner who, in Jacques Rancière's estimation, moved the theatre "from a language of imagination to one of sensible reality."⁴⁴⁴ The sensible reality that Wagner conjured and embodied has taken on many forms. In the *Saga*, Wagner manifests the utopian and the fascistic, but, in either guise, he always represents the ideal, he represents the aesthetic.

⁴⁴³ Mann, *Pro and Contra Wagner*, 95.

⁴⁴⁴ Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul (New York: Verso, 2013), 122.

Chapter 4

Avant-Gardism and Institutional Temporality: The *Ibsen-Saga* as Avant-Garde Time Bomb

“The theatre only has one chance, when it understands itself as an instrument of deceleration against the general acceleration of life, information and perception. Theatre is the Stone Age, but it can teach you how to see.”—Heiner Müller⁴⁴⁵

Controversy is rarely a bad thing in the theatre. Its ability to generate news coverage, ticket sales, and broader interest was on display in the conflicts and debates that swirled around the Bergen premiere of the *Saga*'s *The Wild Duck* (2009). The three-performance run of the production the following year at Oslo's Black Box Teater brought representatives from Berlin's *Volksbühne*, one of Germany's preeminent theatres for new experimental works. Vinge/Müller were given a five-year residency (2010-15) and the keys to the Prater theatre, *Volksbühne*'s smaller stage and building that launched the careers of Gob Squad and René Pollesch, and housed productions by Frank Castorf and Christoph Schlingensief. Although essentially tenants of the *Volksbühne*—rent was paid for the use of the Prater using the twelve million kroners of guaranteed funding that Vinge/Müller received from the Norwegian Arts Council—the artists had their own theatre in which they could work and present how and what they pleased.⁴⁴⁶ The *Volksbühne*'s reputation, material resources, and deep infrastructure of marketing, design,

⁴⁴⁵ Heiner Müller, quoted in and trans. David Barnett, “Heiner Müller's *Hamlet/Machine* at the Deutsches Theater, Berlin, March 1990,” *Theatre Research International* 31, no. 2 (2006): 197.

⁴⁴⁶ IdaLou Larsen, “*Basisfinansiering til Vegard Vinge og Ida Müller*,” (“Basic Financing for Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller: Norwegian Arts Council Press Release”), *Idalou* (blog), March 30, 2011, accessed May 2, 2014, www.idalou.no/pub/idalou/artikler/?aid=1661.

and technical departments was a boon for artists who wanted to expand the scope of their project. On the surface, it was the realization of the Wagnerian vision the *Saga* founded itself upon. If previously they aspired to create a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in the Prater they now had their Bayreuth.

In reality, Vinge/Müller's time at the *Volksbühne* was one of increasingly open conflict between the demands of the expanding *Saga* and the limitations and regulations of the *Volksbühne* and its staff. The ideological roots of this dispute—the irreconcilable desires of artistic autonomy and institutional oversight—are the subjects of this chapter. What created the impasse was the *Saga*'s use of the theatre as, in the words of Heiner Müller, “an instrument of deceleration against the general acceleration of life.”⁴⁴⁷ The *Saga* combats the sense of cultural acceleration through a temporal dramaturgy of open-ended performances in which neither the content nor length are predetermined, with works lasting upwards of two weeks.⁴⁴⁸ I differentiate the *Saga*'s temporal dramaturgy and its effects from that of other durational works or what Jonathan Kalb terms “marathon theatre.”⁴⁴⁹ As I argue, it is the *unpredictability* of the *Saga*'s performance lengths that challenge institutions, which, by their definition, seek to regulate and stabilize time in relation to labor and the larger economy. In this respect, time is a tool with which the *Saga* differentiates itself—and art—from the realities of the world. Working against prominent modes of temporal organization, the *Saga* provokes the

⁴⁴⁷ Heiner Müller in Barnett, “Heiner Müller's *Hamlet/Machine*,” 197.

⁴⁴⁸ Their restaging of the *Wild Duck* in the Prater lobby ran continuously for two weeks during the 2011 *Theatertreffen*. The show could only be viewed through the lobby windows, as spectators stood inside a shed-like booth that the artists built around the exterior of the theatre.

⁴⁴⁹ Jonathan Kalb, *Great Lengths: Seven Works of Marathon Theatre* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011).

normally invisible labor laws and administrators of the institution into revealing themselves through performances of “deceleration” that enable us to see what is hidden.

I consider the *Saga*'s temporal dramaturgy an act of avant-gardist provocation against the institutionalization and rationalization of art. The European strategies of avant-garde antagonism developed between the two world wars are clear precursors to many aspects of Vinge/Müller's work. Here I focus on the avant-gardes' relationship to temporality as a form of theatrical provocation. While inspired by the avant-gardes' disruptive notion of time, the *Saga*'s temporal dramaturgy changes the means of antagonism from a speed-driven futurity to a decelerated nostalgia that, by looking back, confronts the realities of theatre production in the twenty-first century. Contrary to Western historical and neo avant-gardes, the *Saga*'s temporal provocations do not seek to collapse the division between art and the everyday. Living in the legacy of that aesthetic development, the *Saga* instead works towards a re-mythification of the aesthetic that asserts art's autonomy from life. The thematic implications of this agenda are discussed in the previous chapters through the *Saga*'s parsing of reality and fiction (chapter 1), drawing out of the mythopoeic undercurrents of Ibsen's realism (chapter 2), and the artistic intransigence epitomized by Wagner's theories and personage (chapter 3). In this chapter, I examine the celebration of art's autonomy—the belief that art supersedes the materiality of everyday life—through the *Saga*'s use of time. In refusing to organize its performances around the temporal structures of the institutions in which it works, the *Saga* performs art's autonomy from “real life.”

The oppositionality of the *Ibsen-Saga*'s temporal dramaturgy is rooted in a key self-conception of avant-garde artists. The group's self-fashioning, in which Vinge,

Müller, and their associates work in cloistered and demanding ways, exemplifies what Mike Sell calls the “minoritarian” self-positioning from which the avant-gardes have and continue to challenge locations of power.⁴⁵⁰ The *Saga's* self-assigned minority status is as defenders of art, uncompromised by the realities and dictates of the world. Their anti-institutional use of time is one of the key ways they express their sovereignty.

Scholars of the avant-gardes have repeatedly shown, however, that institutional dependency is central to the existence of oppositional art. Paul Mann describes the condition as, “the avant-garde’s perpetual institutionalism.”⁴⁵¹ At the very least, avant-garde artists remain dialectically, if not financially, anchored to the institutions they purportedly oppose. Nonetheless, the efforts to secure and valorize art’s autonomy have galvanized the *Saga's* artists’ reputation as outsiders. Characteristic of the institutionalization of the avant-gardes and their histories, the *Saga* enacts its avant-gardist oppositions from within, chaffing against the institutions that provide its funding and other material resources. In biting the hand that feeds it, the *Ibsen-Saga* highlights the tensions between avant-gardism and institutionalization. In taking up the *Saga's* antagonistic use of time, this chapter examines the relationship between theatrical avant-gardism, the twenty-first century’s theatrical institutions, and temporality. I consider these tensions through the *Saga's* fourth production, *John Gabriel Borkman* (2011-12).

For the first new work of their five-year residency at the Prater, Vinge/Müller mounted a production of Ibsen’s late play *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896). The production, in essence, continued the *Saga's* aesthetics on a grander scale. The narrative,

⁴⁵⁰ Mike Sell, *The Avant-Garde: Race, Religion, War* (New York: Seagull Books, 2011).

⁴⁵¹ Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 63.

again, follows that of the play's idealistic child, Erhart Borkman, who strains to free himself from the prison-like confines of the Borkman home, the inherited task of restoring his father's tarnished legacy, and the oppressive love of his warring mother and Aunt. Closely following the plot—if not its details—the feeble teen attempts to combat his boredom and fatigue by playing Atari video games, furiously masturbating, and listening to music. Unlike the liberating powers of art (pursued by Oswald in *Ghosts*) or truth (championed by Gregers in *The Wild Duck*) Erhart seeks and finds solace in the love of the world-wise hedonist Fanny Wilton and—sometime in the future—the comfort of the young Frida Foldal. Late in the *Saga*'s production, the trio flees the actual Prater theatre, indulging in Berlin's nightlife (comically descending upon a local bar in full costume), which is broadcasted in the theatre via a live video-feed. The titular Borkman, meanwhile, appears in many guises: a newly freed inmate in a prison jumpsuit; the aged but intractable dictator of his upstairs prison; and in his animal incarnation as a howling wolf. As is customary in the *Saga*, the narratives and backstories of these characters are explored through parallel story lines taken from popular culture, Wagner's operas, Ibsen's plays, and the staging of off-stage events. The story of Borkman and Ella's lost love, for example, is mirrored through ancillary tales, most notably the ill-fated lovers of Wagner's *Flying Dutchman* (1843) and the artist Rubek and his muse Irene from Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken* (1899).

The production also continued the *Saga*'s aesthetic of materializing Ibsen's metaphors. The earth's singing metals, which Borkman longs for, appear as an army of titanium-clad soldiers marching in lock step with battle-axes. The cold, steel fist that snuffs Borkman's heart is rendered as a massive hand descending upon the stage, which

the young Erhart must destroy with a sword. Like Hedvig's defeat of the dragon-duck in the *Saga's Wild Duck*, Erhart's confrontation with the personified appendage evokes Siegfried's slaying of Fafner in Wagner's *Siegfried* (1876).⁴⁵² Erhart's duel is sound tracked by digital chirps and burble effects, conjuring a video-game standoff between the player's avatar (Erhart) and the "end-of-a-level" miscreant (the hand). Where the villainous Dr. Relling animated Hedvig's rival dragon in the *Wild Duck*, Erhart's opponent in *John Gabriel Borkman* is operated by his father's nemesis, the lawyer Hinkle. Dressed as a red-skinned devil replete with horns, pitchfork, and cape, Hinkle (unseen in Ibsen's drama) is the production's villain. Like the *Saga's* other baddies, Hinkle is the enemy of love, art, family, and truth. Haunting the stage, Hinkle, who engineers Borkman's downfall in Ibsen's text, launches a military and sexual assault on the Borkman home, the iconography of which I discuss in chapter two. Doubling as the adversary of the Director, Hinkle forcibly penetrates Vinge with a dildo on which "*das Gesetz*" (The Law) is written in block letters. The sloganized phallus echoes one of the production's thematic leitmotifs: "the law knows no exceptions."⁴⁵³ Taken from Ibsen's text, the phrase captures a fault line between two dictums: the law of love and the law of the individual. In Vinge/Müller's production, the phrase is painted in oversized block letters across the Prater's sound booth, facing the stage at all times. While Hinkle and the law are synonymous in Ibsen's text, the *Saga* transforms the character into a punitive overlord—the devil—who observes, judges, and punishes the actions of the production's

⁴⁵² *Siegfried* was written in 1857, but not staged until 1876 as part of Wagner's completed *Ring Cycle* at Bayreuth.

⁴⁵³ This line has various translations. See for example, "The Law doesn't make such allowances," in Henrik Ibsen, *John Gabriel Borkman*, trans. Rolf Fjelde, *Ibsen: Four Major Plays, Vol. II* (New York: Signet Classics, 1970), 349.

idealists: Borkman, Erhart, and the Director. Pitting “The Law” against artistic idealism would also come to resonate in the standoffs between the *Saga* and the *Volksbühne*, with Vinge/Müller and company casting themselves as guardians of art and while framing the theatre as a bureaucratic institution governed by regulations.

The financial resources of Vinge/Müller’s Norwegian funding, the space and utilities of a dedicated theatre, and the work’s growing reputation afforded the artists opportunities to increase the *Saga*’s size and scope. The production, for example, featured over eighty collaborators/performers, used live and prerecorded film, and employed a wing and drop system within the Prater’s fly spaces to produce numerous, expansive locales that ranged from WWII battle fields to the open sea. The artists also expanded the playing space to—essentially—encircle the audience. Painted walkways stretched from the stage, alongside the audience rake, to the sound booth located behind the spectators. The action was, primarily, located in the Borkman’s home, a snowy, brick cabin of deep reds, purples, and rich blues, evoking a womb-like combination of comfort and confinement. Stacks of ice floes surrounded the perpetually besieged cabin around which costumed polar bears prowled alongside Nazi tanks, the earth’s encroaching raw materials—depicted as slug-like oil monsters—and the townspeople who mocked the fallen Borkmans until the Director dispatched them with a machine gun, leaving a quivering pile of bloodied corpses on the Borkman’s doorstep.

John Gabriel Borkman was a critical success for Vinge/Müller and the *Volksbühne*. The production was one of ten selected for the 2012 *Theatertreffen*—the most exclusive and prestigious German-language theatre festival. The *Berliner Zeitung*’s Dirk Pilz declared *John Gabriel Borkman* not only worthy of its festival selection, but

“the production of the decade.”⁴⁵⁴ Eva Behrendt’s review for *Theater Heute* highlighted the *Saga*’s resurrection of the *Volksbühne*’s reputation as a leader of theatrical experimentation. Behrendt notes that, “after years of hovering in mediocrity, the [*Volksbühne*] theatre should consider itself lucky with this exceptional co-production that builds on the old model of the artists’ theatre.”⁴⁵⁵ On the surface, *John Gabriel Borkman* was a breakthrough for its artists and a return to form for its producers.

The group’s relationship with the *Volksbühne* began to fray long before *John Gabriel Borkman* was considered a success. Eight hours into the second performance of *Borkman*, the theatre’s technical staff—who are directly employed by the *Volksbühne* and operate the Prater—powered down the sound and light boards and unceremoniously left the theatre. The technicians’ walkout was less a protest than the adherence to the *Volksbühne*’s labor regulations. Since the technicians worked more than twelve hours during the previous performance, they were instructed by their supervisors not to work more than eight hours during the subsequent show. In fact, rumors of an eight-hour limit to the performance swirled around the lobby prior to the show. When the time elapsed, the Director pleaded with the staff to continue the performance. When the technicians declined to keep working, the Director attempted to proceed with the show by bringing the audience backstage. The theatre’s stage manager, citing fire codes, forbade moving the audience onto the stage. Instead, the cast brought the audience champagne in a gesture of compensation. This seeming anomaly was in fact symptomatic of

⁴⁵⁴ Dirk Pilz, “*Ich bin hier nur geschäftlich*,” (I’m only here on business), *Berliner Zeitung*, May 6, 2013, accessed June 1, 2014, <http://www.berliner-zeitung.de/kultur/-12-spartenhaus--im-prater-ich-bin-hier-nur-geschaeflich,10809150,22684532.html>.

⁴⁵⁵ Eva Behrendt, “*Der Exzess kommt aus dem Norden ... und sieht doch sehr verschieden aus*,” (Excess comes from the North but looks very different) *Theater Heute*, no. 1, January, 2012, 18.

Vinge/Müller's residency at the *Volksbühne* in which the *Saga*'s idealistic aims of artistic autonomy continually ran afoul of the institution's regulations and administrators.

Ironically, the production's critical success only served to exacerbate tensions. Of all the conflicts that emerged over Vinge/Müller's five years time at the *Volksbühne*, the *Saga*'s use of time was the most inflammatory.

What's an Avant-Garde?

There are numerous lenses through which the *Saga* and its use of time might be considered, so it is worth asking, what is at stake in aligning Vinge/Müller's work with genealogies of the avant-gardes and what exactly does a twenty-first-century avant-garde do? I take up these (well-worn) questions advisedly and not to proscribe a definitive inheritance or legacy. While evoking the history of the avant-gardes, I hope to sidestep what James Harding outlines as two of the most treacherous pitfalls within avant-gardist studies: constructing a totalizing concept to describe what is and is not avant-garde and, secondly, propping up those constructs with the "etymological imperative," in which the history of the term "avant-garde" itself becomes the meter by which performances are measured.⁴⁵⁶ Instead, I draw on Mike Sell's inclusive query that asks not whether a work of art is or is not avant-garde, but "what are the benefits of considering this subject in terms of the avant-garde?"⁴⁵⁷ I suggest that avant-garde studies provides an aesthetic and ideological context for the *Saga*'s temporal provocations, self-organization, and, conversely, the shows' repetition of past traditions and dismissal of innovation. Avant-gardism, furthermore, illuminates the potential consequences and antecedents of the

⁴⁵⁶ James Harding, *Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s): Exorcising Experimental Theater and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 3.

⁴⁵⁷ Sell, *The Avant-Garde: Race, Religion, War*, 48.

Saga's artistic idealism and its relationship to the political ideology of fascism. These characteristics make the *Saga* an illuminating test case for ongoing debates within avant-garde studies. Before arguing that the *Saga*'s minoritarian self-positioning and temporal dramaturgy are avant-garde gestures towards theatre institutions, I briefly address three critical concerns within the field that impact the *Saga*'s correlations to avant-gardism: the relationship of the avant-gardes to innovation, fascism, and institutions. An overview of these debates will help frame how the *Saga* overtly and indirectly embodies tensions animated by the avant-gardes and the historical and theoretical discourses they inspire.

One of the most persistent charges against the idea of a contemporary avant-garde is the movements' definitional dependency upon innovation. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it has become customary to accept the postmodern proposition that newness is passé and, perhaps more damning, there is no longer an exterior position from which one might consider themselves oppositional and thus avant-garde. As a result, Martin Puchner sums up the would-be retort to the twenty-first century's vanguard artists: "tell them that they are simply wrong, that what they mistakenly take for avant-garde practices are really something entirely different (postmodernism; nostalgic return to an avant-garde that is lost; empty repetition and imitation)."⁴⁵⁸ The role of innovation is key to Puchner's catalogue of dismissals and doubly destructive as a means of defining the avant-gardes. It mandates that an avant-garde be legitimized by its departure from past practices, while any dependency upon those prior traditions from which it breaks is suspect. In the process, innovation-based definitions of the avant-garde emphasize its

⁴⁵⁸ Martin Puchner, "It's Not Over ('Til It's Over)," *New Literary History* 41, no. 4 (2010): 916.

futural aspirations while foreclosing its dependency on tradition, even if that dependency is manifest in the negative notion of a “break from.”

There are, of course, competing conceptions of the avant-gardes’ relationship to past and future practices. Peter Osborne suggests that modernism, of which he contends the avant-garde is simply a variant, contains a dialectical impulse towards innovation and tradition. He observes that, ultimately, “traditionalism and reaction are [both] distinctly modern forms.”⁴⁵⁹ By emphasizing the futural qualities of the avant-garde, the traditions on which such a vision is predicated are obscured. Puchner summarizes the limitations, noting that “the problem is not with the current avant-gardes; the problem is with the historiography that had declared them to be impossible.”⁴⁶⁰ He advocates for “a history not based on progress and points of no return, but one open to the possibility of repeated avant-gardes, in short, a history of repetition.”⁴⁶¹ This history of repeats opens the gates to additional avant-garde works and acknowledges the historical avant-gardes’ own forms of replication (manifestos in Puchner’s estimation), their own incapacity to be entirely new. Such an approach illuminates the avant-gardes as engaged in what Puchner calls a “dynamic between reconstructed past and envisioned future.”⁴⁶² That is to say, the avant-gardes are based equally on innovation and tradition. More than the condition of modernity, art theorist Boris Groys argues that the very logic of what we consider to be new is always reliant upon tradition. “Innovation,” Groys contends, “does not consist in the emergence of something previously hidden, but in the fact that the value of something

⁴⁵⁹ Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and the Avant-Garde* (New York: Verso, 1995), xii.

⁴⁶⁰ Puchner, “It’s Not Over (’Til It’s Over)”: 916-17.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, 919.

always already seen and known is re-valued.”⁴⁶³ Groys’ argument sidesteps the discussion of paradigmatic “breaks” to highlight the continuity between all art works and the relational logic of artistic valuation that requires art to remain permanently tied to tradition.

Rather than innovate, the *Saga* embraces its position as the avant-gardes’ living dead. Theirs is, after all, a theatre of ghosts dragged across the stage not as forms of forward thinking, but as a spiritual mass for outmoded notions of artistic production and importance. These are not innovations, but artistic desires fueled by their very impossibility, their outmodedness. The *Saga*’s elevation of past practices is not lost on critics, who see the work as zombie theatre, steeped in the death of once vibrant forms that they strive to resurrect. Doris Meierhenrich summarizes *John Gabriel Borkman* as a “living-dead total theatre” and “the ghostly afterlife of ‘art,’ which grasps a lot of broad forms and intentions, and at the same time, gets a handle on none of them.”⁴⁶⁴

Reanimating the avant-gardes is a failed proposal, as Meierhenrich suggests, but where the *Saga* is successful is in the provocations that stem from mounting such a ritual. What the *Saga* gives up in innovation, it trumps with time, scale, and commitment. They clog the contemporary theatre apparatus with the corpses of avant-garde practices and ideals. Theirs is a theatre not of innovation, but avant-garde intensity.

Understood as a history of repetitions, the avant-gardes help describe the *Ibsen-Saga*’s quotation of previous provocative artworks and use of repetition to frustrate,

⁴⁶³ Boris Groys, *On The New*, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (New York: Verso, 2014), 10.

⁴⁶⁴ Doris Meierhenrich, “*Wie viel Theater hält man aus?*,” (How Much Drama Can We Bear?) *Berliner Zeitung*, Dec 15, 2011, accessed June 5, 2014, <http://www.berliner-zeitung.de/theatertreffen/volksbuehnen-prater-wie-viel-theater-haelt-man-aus-,14999632,11308108.html>.

antagonize, and provoke. As early as the *Saga*'s production of *Ghosts*, critics detailed Vinge/Müller's citation of art-world provocateurs like Paul McCarthy and Hermann Nitsch—as well as other members of the Viennese Actionists—as conduits for the shows' forms of confrontational expression.⁴⁶⁵ Among the most frequently cited/reenacted works are Otto Muehl's act of urinating into his own mouth while lying on his back at a screening of his own films in Munich (1968) and Günter Brus' defecating and urinating in performance, most notably in "Sheer Madness" (1968) at the Reiff Museum, Aachen; Hermann Nitsch's excessive use of real, and Paul McCarthy's employment of fictional blood/ketchup during performances; and Keith Boadwee's "Purple Squirt" (1995), in which the artist paints by shooting pigment from his anus.

While overtly citational, these reenactments are recontextualized by the *Saga*'s overarching themes. For example, Muehl and Brus' use of excreta to collapse the gulf between the artwork and its creator is, while retaining resonances of its prior meaning, repurposed in the themes of idealism and free artistic expression associated with childhood and infantile relationships with the body's fluids. These forms of expression are then filtered through other artists' depictions of idealistic youth and Ibsen's characters and plot points. In *John Gabriel Borkman*, the Director's recreation of Boadwee's rectal painting practices stands in for the work of the artist Cavaradossi from Puccini's *Tosca* (1900), the narrative, characters, and music of which is woven through Ibsen's text as an echo of Borkman's love for Ella conceived through Rubek's love for Irene. The breadth of the *Saga*'s citations is extensive and not exclusive to the work of experimental,

⁴⁶⁵ See for example, Miriam Prestøy Lie, KUNSTKRITIKK "Joy of Life in the time of antibiotics," ("*Livsglede i antibiotikaens tid*," (20.09.07) <http://www.kunstkritikk.no/kritikk/livsglede-i-antibiotikaens-tid/>.

oppositional artists. Yet, as discussed in previous chapters, even when non-confrontational art works are conjured—*Star Wars* films or the pop-music of a-Ha, for example—these sources are used to explore their latent idealism that is in keeping with the *Saga*'s larger oppositional stance.

The artists describe the *Saga*'s referential dramaturgy as an outgrowth of their own daily existence. Vinge claims that “life is caught up in signs, I’m detached from life.”⁴⁶⁶ Vinge/Müller understand “signs” not as a semiotic partner to referents, but images, ideas, sounds, and behaviors whose meanings have become culturally hard-wired through repetition. The centrality of predetermined signs to contemporary life is the means rather than enemy of the *Saga*'s expression. Vinge elaborates, “I’m very subjective. I find some signs that I want to deal with on a personal level and I create images out of this.”⁴⁶⁷ The aim is not to make something new, but search for felt connections—what the artists describe as “fetishes”—within the existing world. In the *Saga*, fetish is free of the pejorative associations posited by both Marx and Freud and instead suggests a desire or relationship that is immediate and mystified. Frank Castorf, the *Volksbühne*'s artistic director who brought Vinge/Müller to the Prater, describes Vinge's work as “original, absolutely not a copyist. He's like a pig that eats everything and then what comes out is quite unique.”⁴⁶⁸ Even while reverting to the language of innovation measured in being ‘unique,’ Castorf is pressed to recognize that however

⁴⁶⁶ Vegard Vinge, interview with author. Internet videophone call. Jersey City, NJ and Berlin, Germany, October 31, 2013.

⁴⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁶⁸ Frank Castorf, interview with Peter Laudenbach, “*Im Gespräch mit Frank Castorf über 20 Jahre Volksbühne*,” (In Conversation with Frank Castorf about his 20 years at the *Volksbühne*) *tip—berlin.de*, November 7, 2011, accessed June 4, 2014, <http://www.tip-berlin.de/kultur-und-freizeit-theater-und-buehne/im-gesprach-mit-frank-castorf-uber-20-jahre-volksbuehne>.

Vinge/Müller's work is evaluated, its sources are always that of other recognizable works of art. As Vinge explains, "I'm not taking it and saying I invented these things, but they are an important part of my expression."⁴⁶⁹ It is the relationship to self-expression, or "fetish," that transforms the otherwise redundant "signs" that Vinge/Müller employ. While quotation and reenactments are always overt—that is to say, those familiar with the particular artwork will recognize it—they are reimagined by the *Saga*'s handmade aesthetic as well as the performer's desire to re-perform it. This subjective process, what might be understood as a neo-Romanticism in which artistic passion does not create the world but simply augments its meaning, aligns with the undergirding romanticism of Ibsen and Wagner's texts. Moreover, it calls forth an avant-gardism rooted in intention, not innovation.

The *Saga*'s citational dramaturgy is, however, often held to innovation-based notions of the avant-gardes. Maria Shevtsova's review of the *Saga*'s *Theatertreffen* performance of *John Gabriel Borkman* is emblematic of such critical approaches to contemporary vanguardism. Shevtsova suggests that "whichever way it is ultimately described, the cartoon ethos of *John Gabriel Borkman* is really quite unique. Its anarchism is not."⁴⁷⁰ Here "anarchism" refers to the performance's many quotations of antagonistic behavior—the seemingly endless slaughter of characters and the Director's provocative statements and acts—the legibility of which, within an innovation-based paradigm, is cause for the work's dismissal. Parsing the *Saga*'s "anarchism" as *passé* and "cartoon ethos" as *unique* overlooks the fact that the work understands these categories as

⁴⁶⁹ Vinge, interview with author, October 31, 2013.

⁴⁷⁰ Maria Shevtsova, "An Overview of Theatertreffen in Berlin 2012," *Critical Stages*, November 11, 2012, accessed May 19, 2015, <http://archive.criticalstages.org/criticalstages7/plugin/print/?id=7>.

indelibly linked through a subjective fetishism governed by artistic idealism. The scenography and scatology, for example, are expressive of the same ideology of idealism. Linking repetition and innovation through an oppositional purview demonstrates—pace Puchner, Osborne, and Groys—the *Saga*'s allegiance to the avant-gardes' dialectical tension between past and future practices.

The *Saga* engages with another dialectic central to the historical avant-gardes: the tension between progressive and reactionary politics. Of late, studies of the avant-gardes have grappled with the relationship between its object of scholarship and its unsavory ideological underpinnings in fascism and totalitarianism. The work and theories of Antonin Artaud and F.T. Marinetti, for example, have been re-contextualized by their ties to the prominent political ideologies of their day. These roots were previously obscured by the avant-gardes' appropriation by progressively minded practitioners and thinkers of the 1960s and '70s. Nonetheless, the legacy of conflating theatrical experimentation/innovation with social/political progressivism persists. Kimberly Jannarone calls this “the ‘political fallacy of vanguard performance’ a tendency to associate experimental performance with progressive results and ideas.”⁴⁷¹ Jannarone cautions, “The power and agency of individual minds—Enlightenment ideals—comprise only one segment of innovative performance goals.”⁴⁷² In attending to the variable ideologies that underpin experimental performance, Jannarone describes these works as “vanguard performance,” escaping the historical and generic specificity of the avant-garde. The tendency to smooth over the political complexity of vanguard performance is

⁴⁷¹ Kimberly Jannarone, “Introduction: The Political Fallacy of Vanguard Performance,” Kimberly Jannarone, ed. *Vanguard Performance: Beyond Left and Right* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015), 17.

⁴⁷² *Ibid.*, 17-18.

directly related to the avant-gardes' relationship to innovation and institutionalization. James Harding contends that measuring avant-garde art by its novelty serves to depoliticize and thereby more readily commoditize works of art. Harding suggests that the "privileging of artistic innovation over and above political struggle tends to rehabilitate the vanguards into a palatable form for mainstream consumption, shifting focus away from actual political engagement and inscribing avant-garde expression to the conventional logic of celebrating success over failure."⁴⁷³ Harding's assertion seems to verify the portrait of a contemporary avant-garde as depoliticized, risk averse, but highly successful trade in prepackaged tactics.

While in the previous chapter I took up the *Saga*'s fascistic over-and-undertones through the legacy of Wagner's personage and theories, Jannarone's qualified avant-garde lens helps to consider the *Saga*'s vanguard behaviors in relation to the ideologies that inspire them. The *Saga*'s idealism, with the contention that artistic pursuits trump the material concerns of reality, exposes the "political fallacy" of experimental performance. The strain between the *Saga*'s artistic ambitions—which border on a fascistic adherence to art—and the *Volksbühne*'s employees lay bare this contradiction. The *Saga*'s idealism asks its participants to sacrifice their labor and bodies to the demands of the piece, as understood by Vinge/Müller. Vinge is well aware of the "totalitarian" aspects of the *Saga*'s approach, which has led audiences to question the performers' participation, suggesting, they "are like his slaves."⁴⁷⁴ The unregulated and subjective determination of what constitutes labor (in terms of length and task) is at odds with the institutional terms used by the *Volksbühne* to safeguard employees from

⁴⁷³ Harding, *Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s)*, 165.

⁴⁷⁴ Vinge, interview with the author, October 31, 2013.

exploitation and other work-related dangers. The historical and aesthetic continuity between these anti-humanist politics, the avant-garde, and the *Saga*'s idealism disappears if their provocations are, for example, considered within the art historical context of institutional critique, the efforts of which are to produce change or raise awareness. An avant-garde lens that accounts for the persistent "political fallacy" highlights provocation's relationship to artistic autonomy while allowing for a political ambiguity that rests neither in progressivism nor fascism.

What then is one to make of the *Saga*'s peculiar politics, which employs fascistic ideology and liberating ideals in the service of valorizing art, not as a means to a larger political mission, but as a revolutionary act in and of itself? The *Saga*'s politics, as I began to suggest in the previous chapters, deemphasize the humanist, progressive politics ascribed to the avant-gardes and realigns them with undercurrents of Totalitarianism and Fascism as aesthetic and ideological models. Following Alain Badiou, the consistency of thought found in Fascism, Totalitarianism, and avant-garde art, stems from a shared "passion for the real [which] is always a passion for the new."⁴⁷⁵ Identification of the new and the real is chiefly determined through acts of destruction in which the actual can be differentiated from the fake, leading to the twentieth century's long list of brutalities as well as its artistic and political fascination with what Badiou terms "cruelties."⁴⁷⁶ This self-conception works to legitimize militaristic behavior, including notions of self-sacrifice and oppositionality, in the service of ushering in new epochs or art. Given the avant-gardes' dialectic between innovation and tradition, the "new" with regard to the

⁴⁷⁵ Alain Badiou, *The Century* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2005), trans. Alberto Tascano (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 2007), 56.

⁴⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 114.

Saga is epochal rather than aesthetic, an attempt to recalibrate art's role in the world. The *Saga*'s politics, therefore, emerge indirectly through the declaration of its own autonomy, which frames art itself as a political position complete with its own ideology and self-governance.

In performance, the *Saga* strives for the enforcement of art's autonomy not from institutional or governmental resources, but from their oversight. This point is clearly illustrated in the differences between the Bergen and Oslo premieres of the *Wild Duck*. As seen with Per Bøyne Hansen's interruptions of *The Wild Duck* in Bergen (2009)—discussed in the previous chapter—the *Saga*'s artists responded indignantly and confrontationally towards attempts to limit the shows' running times. These disputes between institutions and their employees on one side and the *Saga* on the other often emerge mid-performance. Therese Bjørneboe summarizes, that in coopting the standoff—theatricalizing it within the drama and ideology of the performance—the *Saga*'s artists reframed “a real conflict between institutions and artists (wage and working time regulation, etc.), but also pointed to a conflict of art/theatre consumer goods.”⁴⁷⁷ A year later in Oslo, no such conflicts arose. The lack of tension was the result of Black Box Teater's employees agreeing to give the artists free license to determine the length of each performance.⁴⁷⁸ If the Bergen performances took on an antagonistic air, Vinge explains that in Oslo “it was a very lovable audience and very supportive [...] it was

⁴⁷⁷ Therese Bjørneboe, “*Hjalmars Teater*,” (Hjalmar's Theatre) *Norsk Shakespeare og Teater Tidsskrift (Norwegian Shakespeare and Theatre Journal)* 2 (2009), accessed June 5, 2014, <http://www.shakespearetidsskrift.no/arkiv/22009/vildanden-hjalmars-teater.html>.

⁴⁷⁸ As reported by Black Box's artistic director, Jon Refsdal Moe, the employees agreed to work more hours in an effort to enable the artists' vision for the production.

more like a party.”⁴⁷⁹ The distinction between these two openings is crucial to understanding how the *Saga* responds relationally to the institutions it inhabits. The festivities of the Oslo premiere were largely a result of the institution foregoing its role of regulating time and supporting the *Saga*’s production of an art that operated autonomous from the strictures of daily life. The Bergen performances, conversely, illustrate the limitations between artistic autonomy and institutional oversight. The difference between the two premiers underscores the fact that institutions are not the outright enemies of the *Saga*, but the limitations they place on artistic production are. This type of relational thinking that occurs in the *Saga*’s performances is consistent with the avant-gardes’ sense of outsiderhood, its minoritarian self-positing.

As I have begun to suggest, the *Saga* emulates the dialectical tension between innovation and repetition as well as the political ambiguity of vanguard performance. These attributes center around the work’s artistic idealism that takes an overt and consistently oppositional stance towards outside limitations being placed on its work. Even under these redrawn terms of the avant-garde, it is still necessary to explicate how the *Saga* functions as a minoritarian formation. Sell and Puchner’s anti-innovation definitions of the avant-garde do not wholly dispel critiques that the avant-gardes’ oppositionality is neutralized by their dependency upon the institutions and traditions they seek to set themselves apart from. If the avant-gardes and their ethos of provocation have been fully integrated into institutions, how can the organizations that package and deliver these experiences also be the targets of a contemporary avant-garde? How does this contemporary avant-garde oppose an institution that at once supports it and actively

⁴⁷⁹ Vinge, interview with the author, October 31, 2013.

cultivates its air of controversy? In short, how does one establish a minoritarian position in relationship to the institution one relies upon?

The need for experimental theatre artists to distinguish themselves is not unique to vanguard works. Experimental artists regularly organize themselves in groups, companies, collectives, and other forms of ongoing collaboration. These enclaves exist, almost entirely, by first defining their difference from what might be considered “mainstream,” a blanket qualifier that typically denotes for-profit theatre or “realism” of some stripe. Secondly, and often more difficult, is the process of distinguishing oneself from one’s experimental peers. This task is normally achieved by developing a distinct but recognizable aesthetic, working process (devised, etc.), and material or political preoccupation. The most prominent companies typically merge all the above while also imagining themselves as growing out of a genealogy of experimental predecessors whom they augment or replicate. The creation of theatre companies reflects both a collectivist ideology as well as a materialist practicality. Establishing a distinguishable performance aesthetic takes time. The group formation offers a reprieve in the sense that—if committed—the members constitute a promise to further develop the process. At the outset, this is regularly at the expense of wages. As the masters of their own production, what the group offers is the promise of a future production. Given these realities and conventions of the theatre market, Sell’s definition of the “minoritarian” needs further clarification as experimental theatre necessarily sees itself as separate from, but not necessarily in opposition to, other performance groups.

Here I return to Sell’s definition of the avant-garde, worth quoting in its entirety: “The avant-garde is a minoritarian formation that challenges power in subversive, illegal

or alternative ways, usually by challenging the routines, assumptions, hierarchies and/or legitimacy of existing political and/or cultural institutions.”⁴⁸⁰ The marginal status of the group in question firmly establishes the central and time-tested quality of the avant-garde that “its *raison d’être* is to challenge power.”⁴⁸¹ Many iterations of the avant-gardes located their adversaries within their own audiences or the broader public in what Jannarone explains as “the stated goal to shake up spectators, cause a commotion, confound people’s expectations,” an ambition famously distilled in the call to *épater le bourgeois*.⁴⁸² Sell’s framing instead highlights “cultural institutions” as a key target of avant-garde animus. Jannarone expounds upon Sell’s distinction noting that because a vanguard believes itself to be an outsider, “it defines itself relationally, which means it doesn’t have political fixity.”⁴⁸³ If experimental theatre is not synonymous with vanguardism, the distinction emerges not from a lack of minority status. The differentiation stems, instead, from an intent: the desire to use one’s marginal status as a site of opposition, a staging ground on which to overtly reject other positions.

The *Saga*’s work, performance practices, and aesthetics evoke the aforementioned avant-garde characteristics, designed to “distinguish itself from a larger group by identity and position,” and challenge forms of “power.”⁴⁸⁴ For the *Saga*, self-identification always occurs in relation to the institutions it performs in—or outside of—as well as the specific contexts of each particular performance. From its inception, the *Saga* established

⁴⁸⁰ Sell, *The Avant-Garde: Race, Religion, War*, 41.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴⁸² Kimberly Jannarone, *Artaud and his Doubles* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 86.

⁴⁸³ Jannarone, “Introduction: The Political Fallacy of Vanguard Performance,” in *Vanguard Performance: Beyond Left and Right*, 23.

⁴⁸⁴ Sell, *The Avant-Garde: Race, Religion, War*, 45.

itself as an alternative to the institutional oversight in theatre practice. The artists honed their aesthetic by making performances staged in their apartment's kitchen and bathroom for small groups of friends and videotaped for posterity. As Richard Schechner points out, however, such humble beginnings are common within experimental circuits. In the context of New York experimental theatre, Schechner argues that "young artists wait in line to clamber up the ladder from performances in lofts to small theatres like the Collapsible [Hole]Giraffe to PS 122 or La Mama and on to where very few arrive: the Lincoln Center Festival or the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave Festival. From the midlevels on up, many of the artists and groups go international."⁴⁸⁵ The *Saga* does follow a very similar trajectory within a European context. In the space of three years, Vinge/Müller's productions went from free, unadvertised performances for a small enclave of hip Norwegians to playing at an international festival alongside world-renowned artists like Robert Wilson. Within two more years, they were funded with an annual budget of over one million US dollars, handed the reins to their own theatre in Berlin, and the next year invited to one of the most prestigious and institutionally entrenched festivals in Germany. From all appearances, their vanguardism was short-lived. The *Saga*'s rise was, however, fraught with overt and open conflict between the artists and the institutions it inhabited that repeatedly jeopardized their ascendancy. This trajectory differs greatly from Schechner's purposeful and careful ascent through the institutional and funding ranks. The *Saga*'s successful climb was, in contrast, equally because of and in spite of their oppositionality.

⁴⁸⁵ Richard Schechner, "The Conservative Avant-Garde," *New Literary History* 41, no. 4 (2010): 909.

The seeds of the *Saga*'s minoritarian self-positioning can be seen years earlier at the debut of *A Doll House* (2006). The production premiered at Oslo's alternative, collectively run theatre *Grusomhetens Teater* (Theatre of Cruelty). The artists commandeered the venue during its inactive summer schedule, and, by the time of the show's opening, Vinge/Müller had fired all but one of their fellow performers. The three performances of *A Doll House* were scheduled to coincide with Oslo's 2006 International Ibsen Festival. Celebrating the centenary of Ibsen's death, that year's festival was the largest to date, featuring newly commissioned Ibsen productions from around the globe by theatre's most lauded directors and companies including Thomas Ostermeier and Robert Wilson. The *Saga*'s performances ran under the mantle of their own "off-off-off Ibsen Festival," a moniker also used for the 2007 première of *Ghosts* and the Oslo performances of *The Wild Duck*. There was, however, no "Festival." The title instead parodied the institutionalization of Ibsen as well as experimental theatre's early prefix "off." The *Saga* positioned itself as an extreme alternative to the alternative, dubbing themselves not once, but three times removed from the mainstream: they are "off-off-off." Each incarnation of the "off-off-off Ibsen Festival" featured only the *Saga*'s performances. In doing so, the *Saga* made no attempt to establish a rival organization or collection of Ibsen interpreters. It simply offered itself as the sole alternative to the official.

The *Saga*'s self-conception as alternative extends beyond its public persona (or lack thereof) to the performances themselves. The three showings of *A Doll House* offered free admission and the artists invited no press. According to members of the local theatre community, the showings quickly exceeding the theatre's capacity as word

of mouth spread and producers and representatives of Norway's various theatres soon followed. Following those performances, *A Doll House* toured throughout Norway and Europe. The *Saga*'s early career seems to follow the blueprint laid out by Schechner, one that adheres to David Savran's application of Pierre Bourdieu's notion of "fields of power" to the experimental theatre landscape. For Savran, following Bourdieu, outsiderhood comes with great "symbolic capital," which artists can, and inevitably do, exchange for increasing amounts of "cultural" and "economic capital."⁴⁸⁶ Implied in such a structure, however, is also a series of concessions that with greater exposure and resources comes increased compromise, even the dilution of what first generated one's symbolic worth. The process of institutionalization within the contemporary theatre landscape necessitates one particular tradeoff, according to Schechner, disconnecting one's personal politics from the institutions that facilitate one's work. As Schechner summarizes, "[O]ne cannot speak of a radical politics at the level of Robert Wilson, the Wooster Group, Elevator Repair Service, Sasha Waltz, Heiner Goebbels, Sankai Juku, etc. Many of these artists are on the Left personally, but in their artistic practice, in terms of venues, audiences, and effects on the political world, this Left is apolitical, a style-Left rather than a workers Left."⁴⁸⁷ The absence of these artists' personal "Leftism" in their work is, presumably, the result of acquiescing to the apolitical dictates of the larger theatre market.

The *Saga* differs from these examples both in its overt declaration of their politics through performance and in the character of their convictions. The *Saga* does not take-up

⁴⁸⁶ David Savran, "The Death of the Avantgarde," *The Drama Review* 49, no. 3 (2005): 10.

⁴⁸⁷ Schechner, "The Conservative Avant-Garde": 909.

political activism—it is as politically ambivalent as all those aforementioned artists—but its strident aesthetic idealism constitutes a politics. This self-positioning is one that, in the case of the *Saga*, is impossible to partition from the work. The performances themselves are an enactment of a radical aesthetics that prizes art above all else. So while failing to attract press or sell tickets to their first performances may be seen as a successful tactic, their continued oppositionality became an increased liability once they began operating within institutions. The tour of *A Doll House*, which was greeted with technical incapacity and moral indignation—at least with respect to the group being reported to Berlin’s cultural senate—was the first and last such foray for the group. The show, which grew to nearly eight hours over the course of the tour, was too big, unwieldy, and unpredictable for the venues who scheduled the performances. Rather than adjust their methods, the group never again toured their work.

The desire and willingness of its creators to work in excess are among the most prominent ways the *Saga* establishes its minoritarian status. These excesses take two interrelated forms. The first of which, discussed as the “real as such” in chapter one, is manifest through performers enacting real behaviors often excluded from theatrical presentation: excreta, stunts, and destruction, all of which foreground their actuality and do little to safeguard against the dangers associated with them. While these efforts work to create the *Saga*’s unique dialectic between fiction and reality, they hardly provoke an institution like the *Volksbühne*. In fact, such acts are both lauded and structured by the *Volksbühne*. Frank Castorf admiringly notes that the actuality of the *Saga*’s violence, injuries, and sex “remind people that art and reality can sometimes match” and that such gestures echo Aztec performances in which blood sacrifices were made, “in the hope that

the sun would shine more.”⁴⁸⁸ Far from challenging, these acts are in keeping with the *Volksbühne*’s provocative heritage and value system of heralding transgressive art practices. Rather than forbid Vinge’s regular use of excreta and blood in performances, for example, the *Volksbühne* gave him an HIV test to ensure the health and safety of the theatre’s employees who may come in contact with his bodily waste. I do not cite this anecdote to contest the value of securing the safety of the *Volksbühne*’s staff. Instead, the pure administrative functionality—the very fact that such a procedure exists—demonstrates the extent to which vanguard tactics like defecation have been absorbed into the everyday functioning of theatrical institutions.⁴⁸⁹ The easy absorption of the avant-gardes and their provocative tactics seemingly signals the end of the avant-gardes’ capacity to shock.

The Avant-Garde and the Institution

The interdependence between institutions and vanguard artists has far-reaching consequences. The avant-gardes’ institutional entrenchment is described by cynics as cooptation, by historians as canonization, and by materialists as the realities of the art market. These arguments have collectively rung the death knell of the avant-garde. Early theorists of the avant-garde, from Renato Poggioli to Paul Mann, saw the avant-gardes’ oppositionality working in concert with the institutions it sought to challenge.⁴⁹⁰ David Savran summarizes the outcome in which, “experimental performance needs the idea of a staid, bourgeois theatre to oppose. At the same time, the commercial theatre

⁴⁸⁸ Castorf, interview with Laudenbach, “*Im Gespräch mit Frank Castorf über 20 Jahre Volksbühne.*”

⁴⁸⁹ Vinge, interview with author, Berlin, Germany, May 8, 2015.

⁴⁹⁰ See for example, Poggioli’s *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1981) and Mann’s *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* (1991).

needs the fantasy of a noncommercial realm of pure art that it can reject as esoteric and effete yet secretly imitate, and from which it draws inspiration and prestige.”⁴⁹¹ This interdependence gives way to a scenario in which the twenty-first-century avant-gardes, for Savran, “signals less a modification than a complete reversal of its original meaning. If the first avantgarde (as exemplified by Max Ernst) represented a protest against the commodification of art, its now-consecrated remains represent a kind of *hommage* to mediatized culture, an attempt both to scorn and embrace the commercial sphere.”⁴⁹² For Savran, this paradox stems from the collapse of “the modernist cultural hierarchy that opposes art and commerce, esoteric and popular, live and mediated, progressive and reactionary, avantgarde and kitsch.”⁴⁹³ The absence of cultural barriers leaves vanguard artists without targets at which to direct their art, and invites—perhaps even forces—such artists to accept their place within markets and institutions.

Yet artistic practice and its relationship to institutional support are not fixed entities. Institutional and artistic interdependence means that change at one end of the chain—whether new artistic concepts or fluctuations in the global economy or state and local budgets—shape the actions at the other end. Liz Tomlin notes, for example, that increased emphasis on the cultivation of young experimental artists adds a specific wrinkle to the possibility of avant-garde practice. While previous generations of vanguard artists may have honed their practice outside the context of the market for experimental theatre, twenty-first-century artists are pushed towards such concerns at the point of their inception. Contemporary avant-garde practice is born *of* the market rather

⁴⁹¹Savran, “Death of the Avantgarde”: 11.

⁴⁹² *Ibid.*, 36.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*, 35.

than in opposition to it, the result of which, Tomlin offers, is that “successful vanguard practices are unlikely to offer something so challenging to the reigning consecrated avant-garde practice that they appear to be unsalable in economic or symbolic terms to the consecrating institutions within academia and the wider theatre industry.”⁴⁹⁴ The presumed effect is an ever-increasing repetition of past practices shaped not by the avant-garde dialectic between innovation and tradition, but the need for legibility within the institutions that support new experimental work.

The twenty-first-century realities of the theatre world, with its close allegiances to professionalizing institutions, produce what Schechner calls the “conservative avant-garde.”⁴⁹⁵ Following Savran, Schechner understands the contemporary avant-garde as a fully realized brand that, through the processes of marketing, institutionalization, and canonization, “is known before it is experienced.”⁴⁹⁶ The failing in this pre-knowledge is the foreclosure on the avant-gardes’ potential to shock to, as Ezra Pound instructed, “make it new.”⁴⁹⁷ The “conservative avant-garde” appears as a result of surrendering oppositional and political positions to more comfortably participate within institutions. Yet Schechner and others declaring the death of the avant-garde, what Sell dubs the “Eulogist School,” base their proclamations upon a particular emphasis on the presumed innovation contained with the “avant” of the garde. As Sell’s contends, “[W]e should always remember that, before it is ever ‘in advance,’ the military avant-garde is a small

⁴⁹⁴ Liz Tomlin, “The Academy and the Marketplace: Avant-Garde Performance in Neoliberal Times,” in *Vanguard Performance: Beyond Left and Right*, 342.

⁴⁹⁵ Schechner, “The Conservative Avant-Garde”: 897.

⁴⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 895.

⁴⁹⁷ Pound’s instruction for would-be modernists to make it new was also the title of his 1934 collection of essays.

group that distinguishes itself from a larger group by identity and position.”⁴⁹⁸ For Sell, it is foremost self-conceptualization—the minoritarian self-positioning—that establishes the avant-garde. It is more a matter of attitude than aesthetics.

But Schechner’s diagnosis pivots on a far more fundamental question. Endemic to the conservative avant-garde is the practice of confronting the institutions in which they are enmeshed as well as their audiences, arguably artists’ most time-tested means of establishing their alterity. The contemporary avant-gardes’ financial entanglement with their targets produces, for Schechner, provocations made “in bad faith because the attackers appeal to the very governments, rich individuals, corporations, and foundations they attack.”⁴⁹⁹ At first blush, targeting those upon whose resources you depend seems disingenuous at best. But Schechner’s broad condemnation seems to equally miss the mark. Is the rejection of institutional oversight and values itself an act of bad faith? Or, is the issue that artists’ critiques of institutions are now preapproved, even expected by organizations and audiences? Even if such “attacks” can be anticipated, are they any less meaningful if they constitute actual risk to either the producers or targets of such gestures? Perhaps the act of “bad faith” occurs in how theatre that *actually* provokes and disrupts is conceptualized and critiqued within the academy.⁵⁰⁰ Here, again, we see the emergence of Jannarone’s “political fallacy.” As Tomlin points out, it is largely the academy itself that produces the discourse and practical training of the avant-garde artists

⁴⁹⁸ Sell, *The Avant-Garde: Race, Religion, War*, 45.

⁴⁹⁹ Schechner, “Conservative Avant-Garde”: 902.

⁵⁰⁰ See, for example, the recent debates around Ann Liv Young’s performances as well as her well-publicized disruption of performance artist Rebecca Patek’s *Ineter(a)nal F/ear* (2013) at the 2014 American Realness Festival in New York. Siobhan Burke, “Acting,” *The Performance Club*, January 22, 2014, accessed October 5 2015, <http://theperformanceclub.org/2014/01/acting/>.

of our time and the future. Might we then suspect that it is the nostalgic, institutional trumpeting of the association of a “worker’s left” politics and vanguardism that forecloses on the possibility of a contemporary, avant-gardist radicality? A radicality that, pace Jannarone, in actuality is far less aligned with progressive and utilitarian ideals and aesthetics. While shocks and protest are longed for within the discourses of avant-garde studies, their contemporary manifestation, as we will see in the final chapter, are often derided as puerile, unethical, or dismissed as provocation for its own sake. In addition to wanting avant-gardist gestures to serve progressive political ends, there is a desire for those provocations to be mutually agreeable and democratically deployed. That is to say, perhaps we have historicized and trained provocation out of the avant-gardes. Schechner's mourning for the loss of a politics synonymous with a “workers left” underscores the persistent attribution of vanguardism with progressivism. The subtext of such arguments is that the artistic value of theatrical provocation is measured by its progressive, social utility.

While offering a nuanced assessment of the dangers of pitting artistic freedom against institutional support, Shannon Jackson’s *Social Works* illustrates many of the debates hidden within this progressive tact. As Jackson warns, “[W]hen a political art discourse too often celebrates social disruption at the expense of social coordination, we lose a more complex sense of how art practices contribute to inter-dependent social imaginings.”⁵⁰¹ But what if the support of “social coordination”—institutions—born of neo-liberal dictates of efficiency, expediency, and predictability foreclose upon particular art practices? The *Saga*’s oppositionality is not arbitrarily antagonistic—as if antagonism

⁵⁰¹ Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011) 14.

could be arbitrary—but the by-product of its own “social imagining” engendered through an artistic idealism for a non-instrumentalized realm of art making. It is this aspect of the *Saga*’s vision that institutional regulation renders nearly impossible. In contrast to Jackson, allegiance to the affirmable qualities of art and its production—what we might take as exemplary models for broader social behavior, organization, or institutions—equally disavows art’s ability to elucidate institutional and artistic failings to produce such models. But, if the avant-gardes’ eulogists are to be believed, conversely, provocation and disruption for their own sakes are nothing short of a miracle. It is the resurrection of the dead.

The *Saga*’s productions thematize the paradoxes that the institution presents to avant-garde art. The tension is encapsulated in the *Saga*’s deployment of Theodor Adorno as lodestone of artistic and institutional entanglements. Adorno theorized paradoxical relationship between institutions and culture in which “culture suffers damage when it is planned and administrated; when it is left to itself, however, everything cultural threatens not only to lose its possibility of effect, but its very existence as well.”⁵⁰² Despite the historical distance that Adorno’s theorization of the “administered world” stands from the historical present, it retains its general applicability. As J.M. Bernstein contends, “[E]ven if some of the historical and sociological details of Adorno’s analyses were composed to address a specific context, it does not follow that his critical diagnosis of the predicament of culture is not applicable

⁵⁰² Theodor W. Adorno, “Culture and Administration,” in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 1991), 108.

to the present.”⁵⁰³ Among Adorno’s most prescient analyses is the paradoxical relationship between culture and what he termed administration. Adorno contends that

culture—no matter what form it takes—is to be measured by norms not inherent to it and which have nothing to do with the quality of the object, but rather with some type of abstract standards imposed from without, while at the same time the administrative instance—according to its own prescriptions and nature—must for the most part refuse to become involved in questions of immanent quality which regard the truth of the thing itself or its objective bases in general.⁵⁰⁴

Adorno, here, might be thought as the pessimist spurring Jackson’s attempt to positively outline the interdependence between artists and institutions. The distance between these two positions, however, is ambiguous at best. Jackson points out that Adorno’s call for an autonomous art “refusing social conventions of intelligibility and utility” is not necessarily synonymous with vanguard oppositionality.⁵⁰⁵ In terms of twenty-first-century art practice, Jackson locates the vanguard practices of “antagonism” and “rupture” squarely within the critical (and terminological) traditions of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe as well as Jacques Rancière.⁵⁰⁶ Unlike Laclau, Mouffe, and Rancière, however, the promotion of democracy is neither the chief aim of the *Saga*’s art nor Adorno’s aesthetic theory.

The chip on the *Saga*’s shoulder dovetails with Adorno’s belief that art’s greatness lies in its autonomy, while its reality remains tied to interdependence. The overlap between Adorno and the *Saga* is made explicit in *12-Spartenhaus* (2013), in which characters mime along to sections from Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Eugen

⁵⁰³ J.M. Bernstein, “Introduction,” in *ibid.*, 1-2.

⁵⁰⁴ Adorno, “Culture and Administration,” 113.

⁵⁰⁵ Jackson, *Social Works*, 50.

⁵⁰⁶ *Ibid.*,

Kogon's 1950 discussion, "Concerning the Administered (*verwaltete*) World."⁵⁰⁷ The theoretical excerpts are juxtaposed against anti-administration actions. In one instance, the Director uses his own feces to create paintings on blank *Volksbühne* posters. The act and the resulting scat-covered logo of the *Volksbühne* are offered for the inspection of a panel of administrators who, at times, are identified by a placard reading "Technical Management." The committee mutters unintelligibly, comically underscoring Adorno's paradox in which artistic production is subject to administrative standards upheld by unqualified but all-powerful representatives of the institution. In an act of idealist refusal, the Director reveals an AK-47, which he uses to butcher the administrators in a hail of bullets. The scene's violence is protracted. The Director fires the fake weapon excessively into the heap of quivering bodies as he coats them and the wall with fake blood. As Maria Shevtsova notes of the *Saga*'s violence, "even animated-cartoon-like simulation as this, semiotically conjures up its referent—in this case, carnage, as recognised from reality. At what point does witnessing become collusion?"⁵⁰⁸ The repeated attacks against the institution and its administrators (in other scenes a theatre director and newspaper critics are similarly executed by the Director) are the symbolic expression of the *Saga*'s idealism—the destruction of perceived obstacles to their art. Echoing Shevtsova's claim, however, the *Saga*'s staged violence towards representatives of the institution has a doubly unsettling effect as it drew upon a present and real-world referent in the tensions between the artists and the *Volksbühne*.

⁵⁰⁷ "The managed world or: The crisis of the individual," ("*Über die verwaltete Welt*"), a recorded conversation between Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Eugen Kogon in the Hessian Radio on September 4, 1950. Reprinted in: *Max Horkheimer: Collected Writings. Volume 13: Posthumous writings from 1949 to 1972*. (Frankfurt: Fischer, Frankfurt am Main, 1989): 121-142.

⁵⁰⁸ Shevtsova, "An Overview of Theatertreffen in Berlin 2012."

Casting the *Volksbühne* as an enemy of art recurs throughout *12-Spartenhaus*. The building itself—arguably one of Germany’s more recognizable theatre facades—is targeted. A video interlude gives the periscope-perspective of a submarine stalking through a flooded Berlin to torpedo the city’s theatres. After anticipatory countdowns, the *Schaubühne* and *Deutsches Theatre* are obliterated, but the scene’s climax is the total destruction of the *Volksbühne*.⁵⁰⁹ The Prater met a similar fate in *John Gabriel Borkman*, in which a video shows the theatre besieged by the devilish lawyer Hinkle, who levels the building in a torrent of animated urine. The Director, Erhart, and their crew of military personnel return from the North to mount a counteroffensive to retake the Prater. The hip Kastanienallee road, on which the theatre is located, is depicted as a battlefield where idealistic artists scurry through trenches in preparation for their assault. The military iconography, more than conjuring the tactical etymology of the avant-garde, offers a vision of the *Saga* and its creators as outsiders, soldiers for art, who must liberate themselves from the confines of institutional oversight. These examples—however resonant with the *Saga*’s tensions with the *Volksbühne*—remain wholly in the realm of metaphor. However, the *Saga*’s temporal dramaturgy becomes the most contentious of the *Saga*’s provocation expressly because, even in performance, time collapses the divide between the metaphorical and the real.

The New Time of the Avant-Garde

The conflict between the *Saga*’s minoritarian self-fashioning and institutional regulation plays itself out most profoundly through the *Saga*’s use of time as an avant-

⁵⁰⁹ The scene is an extension of the action of Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People*. Dr. Stockmann and Captain Horster, who are united in the original text and the *Saga*’s production through their admiration of truth and justice, commandeer the submarine.

gardist strategy. The unplanned lengths of the *Saga* at once separate them from their peers working in durational performance and challenge institutions' desire to absorb avant-gardist work. The institution is equipped to assimilate whatever transgressions the *Saga* stages (critiques, parodies, self-destructive and scatological play) back into its structures. Any act of resistance can be marketed and commoditized, except for their use of time, which poses particular challenges to this process. Time is the shared backdrop of both theatrical and real actions. To seize or manipulate time metaphorically—through artistic practice—has a corresponding effect within reality. The actuality of shared time becomes a fault line between the *Saga*'s establishment of an autonomous, timeless art and the temporal structures of contemporary art institutions. These competing notions of time embody the *Saga*'s dialectical stand off between art and commerce, the avant-garde and the institution.

Contemporary institutions are, first and foremost, governed through a coherent, measurable, and predictable conception of clock time. While debates over the implementation, effects, and spread of “clock time” are still unfolding in the fields of sociology and temporality studies, I use the term to denote the use of standardized time—largely understood to coincide with and expedite the industrial revolution—as a means of organizing and regulating social and economic practices and exchanges. Clock time, and its attendant regimentation, has given rise to both restrictive and liberating conditions. As David Wiles clarifies, “[C]locks are not simply a way of measuring time; they are a means of imparting a rhythm to life, which is another way of saying a discipline to life.”⁵¹⁰ While the range and specificities of how clock time disciplines life is outside

⁵¹⁰ David Wiles, *Theatre & Time* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2014), 54.

the scope of this chapter, it is notable that the governing uniformity of clock time is not neutral. Peter Osborne notes the power struggles that attend the structuring of time when he asks: “How do the practices in which we engage structure and produce, enable or distort, different senses of time possibility? What kinds of experience of history do they make possible or impede? Whose futures do they ensure?”⁵¹¹ The organization of time is, thus, the organization of the possible. This has tremendous implications for the relationship between art and institutions, which at once facilitate and restrict artistic means through clock time. Jonathan Martineau offers that the ubiquity of clock time “tends to narrow the array of possibilities of temporal experiences and to push for the conformity of temporal practices.”⁵¹² If time is synonymous with possibility, adherence to temporal regulation—clock time—infringes upon the *Saga*’s aspiration for artistic autonomy.

Conflicts between artistic autonomy and temporal constraint have numerous precedents. In particular, the use of time as an artistic weapon has strong ties to the historical avant-gardes. Futurism, for example, coveted speed’s capacity to shock the temporal sensibilities of the twentieth century. Speed’s startling effects were largely dependent upon the cultural merger of morals and a temporal nostalgia, what F.T. Marinetti called Futurism’s “most dangerous enemy, the past, that gloomy mentor and abominable tutor.”⁵¹³ In the twenty-first century, however, Futurism and the ensuing avant-gardes’ celebration of rapidity and distaste for past practices have become

⁵¹¹ Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, 199.

⁵¹² Jonathan Martineau, “Making sense of the history of clock-time, reflections on Glennie and Thrift’s *Shaping the Day*,” *Time & Society* 24, no. 1 (2015), 11.

⁵¹³ F.T. Marinetti, “We Renounce Our Symbolist Master, The Last of All Lovers of the Moonlight,” in *F.T. Marinetti: Critical Writings*, ed. Günter Berghaus and trans. Doug Thompson (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2006), 44.

culturally, if not artistically, dominant. The once agitating, forward-looking logic of the avant-gardes has been subsumed by and seems quaint in comparison to what Jonathan Crary warns is the twenty-first century's drive towards a "24/7" state of capitalism. The effects of an around-the-clock, global marketplace and its attendant praise of innovation creates a condition in which "the accelerated tempo of apparent change deletes any sense of an extended time frame that is shared collectively, which might sustain even a nebulous anticipation of a future distinct from contemporary reality."⁵¹⁴ If the contemporary is marked by the collapse of the future into the present, then an avant-garde oppositionality founded on a futural temporality is defanged by its own redundancy.

Avant-gardism is not, however, a fixed quality but an ongoing negotiation and retort to developing cultural conditions. Sell points out that "if the avant-garde is always in some fashion a response to modernity, then the emergent and diverse narratives of modernity and modernization [...] would suggest distinct understandings of the avant-garde."⁵¹⁵ Within the twenty-first century's landscape of institutionalized avant-garde aesthetics and a larger cultural context that demands institutions compartmentalize labor and consumption in rational, predictable quantities, the *Ibsen-Saga*'s temporal dramaturgy of unpredictable deceleration is both a desirable form of theatrical novelty and at odds with the institutions' mandate to regulate time. Here Richard Wagner's centrality to the *Saga* emerges in a different light, as the theory of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* was, after all, a reaction against the nineteenth-century's industrialization and attendant temporal acceleration and regimentation. In this respect, the *Saga* shares in a broad avant-gardist conception of temporality as an aesthetic tool against ones present. Unlike

⁵¹⁴ Jonathan Crary, *24/7* (New York: Verso, 2013), 41.

⁵¹⁵ Sell, *The Avant-Garde: Race, Religion, War*, 15.

the Futurists and other like-minded vanguard movements, the *Saga* uses temporality as a means of regression, a return to the forms, ideologies, and temporalities presumably shed by neoliberalism and the artistic expressions it inspired.⁵¹⁶ The *Saga* is, therefore, at odds with what Crary sees as the increasing notion that “social phenomenon that are characterized by the appearance of stasis or slow rates of change are marginalized and drained of value or desirability.”⁵¹⁷ In fact, such social phenomenon in art represent an avant-gardist rebuke of the future/present. In doing so, the *Saga* offers a vision of the world governed by the aspirations of art as opposed to the dictates of the clock. More than challenge institutional power, the *Saga*’s unpredictable lengths are in keeping with its dramaturgy and artistic ideology that uses the theatre to contest forms, institutions, and beliefs that limit and regulate artistic expression.

Vinge/Müller are adamant that the integrity of their art is dependent upon its capacity to determine its own lengths. Rather than clock time, performances are (ideally) regulated by their own real-time subjective experience of the show. The *Saga*’s approach responds to the twenty-first-century reality in which, as Vinge explains, “the element of time is cut out of us today [in which] we just consume and then need the next.”⁵¹⁸ The twenty-first-century landscape described by Vinge is expressive of capitalism’s effects on how time is conceived and used. Wiles offers, “[I]n a consumer society, it is hard to escape from conceptualizing time as a resource that we want to spend or consume to our

⁵¹⁶ The *Saga*’s idealization of the past is inspired by its two chief sources: Ibsen’s nostalgia for Nordic Pagan glory and Wagner’s romanticization of a Germanic cultural heritage. Each artist may resolve their nostalgia differently, but both look to history to shape the present.

⁵¹⁷ Ibid., 46.

⁵¹⁸ Vinge, interview with author, October 31, 2013.

maximum possible profit. Time begins to seem like a *thing*, not a *mode of being*.”⁵¹⁹

Coupled with the sense of temporal acceleration brought on by new forms of rapid communication and the need to fill those forms with content, Wiles suggests that “our temporal horizons have to some extent closed down and we are less securely anchored to past and future.”⁵²⁰ This places unprecedented pressures on the present to be efficient, a condition exacerbated by the present’s fleeting nature. If time is money in the logic of capitalism, the closure of past and future causes the price of the present to spike.

Deliberately long, slow theatre experiences may momentarily assuage this condition. While theatre can offer a sense of safe harbor in the accelerated present, it largely retains and reproduces clock time’s structuring, utilitarian logic. Experimental theatre that aims to circulate through institutions and festivals increasingly needs to adhere to the rapidity of cultural consumption. For evidence, one need only glance across the 2016 programs for the numerous New York City new work festivals, namely Under the Radar, Coil, and American Realness. Of the 42 new shows on offer, only 8 have runtimes of ninety-minutes or longer and only 3 exceed the two-hour mark. The process of selecting these shows—and thereby the partial construction of the experimental theatre market—is, in fact, largely an issue of time. The Coil Festival’s artistic director, Vallejo Gantner, notes that the delimiting factor when programming a show is “it can’t be something that requires four hours of quiet contemplation because everybody’s frenetic.”⁵²¹ Whether or not this represents a shift from previous practices, the time scale

⁵¹⁹ Wiles, *Theatre & Time*, 12. Emphasis added.

⁵²⁰ Ibid.

⁵²¹ Vallejo Gantner, quoted in “January in NYC: A smorgasbord of theater festivals,” by Molly Grogan, *Exeunt Magazine*, January 12, 2016, accessed January 15, 2016, <http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/january-in-nyc-a-smorgasbord-of-theater-festivals/>.

is inarguably in keeping with the notion of an accelerated present in which a theatre show is one of many experiences slotted into a daily schedule.

Ida Müller sums up the contemporary experimental landscape as such:

I see all these experimental performances that last 1:30 maximum; it's a touring thing and you need to be in and be out, it gives very little room for anything. When I think of theatre, I think of time spent together in a room with the audience, and in ninety minutes how can you even forget the things you need to do tomorrow or your baby at home? I find that people make things that are very easy for them. We are trying to push ourselves and put everything into the piece. With the things we are making, it's difficult to take it anywhere. Theatres are inviting us places, but it's nothing they can handle, and I actually like that it's nothing they can handle.⁵²²

The *Saga* counters the impulses of expediency through its slow pacing, incorporation of incidental and the seemingly trivial, and physical and musical repetitions in which the experience of time in the service of art becomes palpable. Or, to return to Wiles' formulation, the *Saga* returns time to a "mode of being."⁵²³ More than an act of sacrifice or aesthetic devotion on behalf of the artists—an aspect of the *Saga* discussed in the previous chapter—Vinge/Müller's constant revising and open-endedness is antithetical to institutional modes of theatrical production. Müller explains, "I worked in the institutional theatres as an assistant and in the Opera, and you're not allowed to change a lot because of costs and the planning. I found that was killing the art, because if you are a painter you always paint over your painting. It's a process and I like to work over a long time."⁵²⁴ Their processual approach, as implied by Müller, is inimical to the smooth functioning of theatrical institutions. Citing the scandal over the Bergen performances of *The Wild Duck*, Vinge explains that within an institutional setting it becomes "dangerous

⁵²² Ida Müller, interview with author, Jersey City, NJ and Berlin, Germany, October 31, 2013.

⁵²³ Wiles, *Theatre & Time*, 12.

⁵²⁴ Müller, interview with the author, October 31, 2013.

if you spend too much time with something because the energy becomes too strong. That's why when you build a play that's sixteen hours it challenges the theatre system."⁵²⁵ The strong energy Vinge describes is twofold. It is at once relational, building an experiential bond through the shared time of the art and observer. It is also, as Vinge/Müller have intimated, the strong energy of opposition that arises from the autonomy of art expressed through its internally determined temporality.

It is in the *Saga*'s dual sense of time—as both relational and oppositional—that the temporality of Vinge/Müller's shows is distinct from what Jonathan Kalb dubs “marathon theatre” and Hans-Thies Lehmann identifies as postdramatic theatre's core temporal concern of “*shared time*.”⁵²⁶ Following the disruption of the “fictive cosmos” of drama, Lehmann contends that postdramatic theatre emphasizes how performers and audience members alike experience the “shared time” of the performance event. Artists illuminate this “*shared time*” through forms of temporal distortion like “*the aesthetics of repetition*,” “*the prolongation of time*,” and acceleration.⁵²⁷ Lehmann credits Robert Wilson with not only perfecting these techniques but also addressing the temporal conventions of spectating by “stipulating ‘intermissions at your discretion.’”⁵²⁸ Wilson's efforts have no doubt influenced the *Saga*'s temporal dramaturgy as they both manifest time “as the object of ‘direct’ experience.”⁵²⁹ Wilson is also one of the foundational creators of what Kalb calls “marathon theatre.” It is defined as a form of theatre at least five hours in length that offers, in addition to an effective means of marketing, an

⁵²⁵ Vinge, *ibid.*

⁵²⁶ Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (New York: Routledge, 2006), 155.

⁵²⁷ *Ibid.*, 156.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁵²⁹ *Ibid.*, 156.

opportunity for “thinking theatregoers in the media age to resist the maddening, ubiquitous, and nearly irresistible pressure to reduce, abbreviate, and trivialize.”⁵³⁰ The examples Kalb cites are buoyed by their presumed capacity to engender community through their lengths as well as “confront us with the physical, real-time presence of toiling performers as well as fellow audience members” that highlights the passage of time as a real and consequential experience.⁵³¹ While I do not share Kalb’s alarmist take on the degradation of attention spans—a concern cleverly critiqued in the marathon works of Mårten Spångberg, for example—his descriptors apply to various aspects of the *Saga*’s use of time. As discussed in the previous chapter, Wagner’s communitarian impulses inform the *Saga*’s themes and structures albeit in a way that equally accentuates their fascistic overtones. The lengths of Vinge/Müller’s works, as the artists readily note, underscore the co-presence of performers and audiences, marking the passage of time through the accumulated wreckage, waste, and art objects produced over the course of the performance. Given the obstinacy of the *Saga*, with respect to running times, it challenges audiences and the shows’ participants—like those of Wilson—to structure their own time in response to the productions.

The *Saga*, nonetheless, departs from Kalb and Lehmann’s categories in its use of time. Vinge/Müller’s provocative or utopian effects stem not simply from the duration of their shows, but the unpredictability of their lengths. A marathon is, after all, defined by its codified and predetermined length of 26.2 miles. Similarly, for all the temporal distortion and spectatorial freedom Wilson’s works may offer, their content and running times are meticulously organized and regimented. The consistency of such works stands

⁵³⁰ Kalb, *Great Lengths*, 16.

⁵³¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

in contrast to the *Saga*'s unannounced and unpredictable performance lengths, which range from less than an hour to over two-continuous weeks.⁵³²

Many of the marathon works Kalb cites pose challenges of organization and endurance for the institutions that sponsor them and the audiences who attend the performance. These obstacles are, however, prepared for in advance and met by institutional organization and oversight. Most marathon works organize special systems of support to better facilitate their lengths by providing clearly defined, preannounced intermissions, dinner breaks, or the partitioning of the works into discreet chunks that can be seen on various nights. During Jan Fabre's twenty-four hour *Mount Olympus* (2015), for example, cots were provided for the tired as were meals offered throughout the performance. Nature Theatre of Oklahoma's ten-part epic, *Life and Times* (2009—) provides an additional example. In 2013, parts 1-4 of the production had their US premiere at the Under The Radar Festival. Spectators could decide whether to watch the show in separate, discreet sections over four nights or as a one-day, ten-hour "marathon." During the marathon evening, complimentary meals were provided between sections, as were preannounced, regulated intermissions to allow for eating and lavatory breaks. New York City's Soho Rep Theatre—a co-producer of the event—provided "survival kits" to its subscribers that included water and snacks to nourish spectators. While impressively long at over ten hours, NTOK's regimented serialization of *Life and Times*—while inarguably gracious to its spectators—structures the work around the needs of its patrons. The *Saga* by contrast, while offering food and other means of comfort by allowing

⁵³² A performance of *12-Spartenhaus* was ended after less than an hour in response to a chastising letter Vinge/Müller received from the *Volksbühne*'s artistic director, Frank Castorf; the *Saga*'s lone performance of *The Wild Duck* at the *Volksbühne*'s *Prater* ran continuously for more than two weeks.

spectators to watch in any fashion they like, refuses to structure the work around the needs of spectators, either in the form of predetermined run times or intermissions.

More than a difference of degree, the *Saga* is of a distinct temporal kind. It not only employs its temporal dramaturgy to materialize the shared experience of time between art and audience, but, more uniquely, to carve out a temporal space that announces its autonomy from the “real world.” Spectators must amend themselves to the length and intervals of the production without forewarning. The time of and between scenes have no prescribed or predictable length. Five minutes of stage action may be followed by a break three times as long or vice versa. These irregularities effectively force spectators to make individual choices about when to leave for a bathroom or food break and to determine what scenes are essential to their experience of the show. This unpredictability facilitates the *Saga*’s larger, intuition-driven dramaturgy, in which actions, scenes, characters, and runtimes change significantly from performance to performance. While the *Saga* shares its lengths with other productions, its temporal structure is indifferent to its audiences, their needs, and the institutions charged with meeting them. Such a notion is rare within the theatre, which trades in the notion of its liveness—the uniqueness of individual performance—yet marshals its power to provide a continuity from night to night that essentially eliminates the discrepancies and inequalities that emerge through repetition. That is to say, theatre attempts to balance the needs of a unique experience and the consistency of the product it sells. The *Saga*’s indifference to this balancing act is an attempt at artistic autonomy, which routinely, but not always, runs afoul of the structures charged with regulating theatrical experience.

With this idea in mind, I return to *John Gabriel Borkman*'s relationship with the institution of the *Volksbühne* (2011-12). Recognized internationally and domestically as one of the preeminent institutions dedicated to producing experimental theatre, the *Volksbühne* is no stranger to challenging works that transgress boundaries. The *Volksbühne* is, nonetheless, a state-funded institution operating under mandated labor laws. The theatre's origins are so deeply tied to organized labor that *Berliner Morgenpost* titled an article celebrating the institution's centenary "*Ein Tempel für die Arbeiter*": "A temple for the workers."⁵³³ The *Volksbühne*'s panache for experimentation and regulation encapsulates many of the tensions of institutionalizing the contemporary avant-garde. Within the context of such an institution, the most disruptive of the *Saga*'s well-documented challenges to both public taste and institutional permissiveness are the pressures their art places on the institution's task of organizing time into discreet and predictable patterns.

The *Volksbühne*'s heritage as a workers theatre provided the volatile context for many of the *Saga*'s confrontations with the institution. Reflecting on the time-based confrontations between his institution and the artists it housed, Frank Castorf explained, "I am Stasi and a Nazi to [Vinge], because I have decided as a trade unionist to cancel his performances after 12 hours."⁵³⁴ The admission is compelling, as Castorf's placement as "secret police" offers a wild inversion that sheds light on the *Saga*'s ideological

⁵³³ Stefan Kirschner, "*Ein Tempel für die Arbeiter, 100 Jahre Volksbühne in Berlin*," (A Temple for the Workers: 100 Years of the *Volksbühne* in Berlin) *Berliner Morgenpost*, December 30, 2014, accessed January 4, 2016, <http://www.morgenpost.de/kultur/berlin-kultur/article135862972/Ein-Tempel-fuer-die-Arbeiter-100-Jahre-Volksbuehne-in-Berlin.html>.

⁵³⁴ Castorf, interview with Laudenbach, "*Im Gespräch mit Frank Castorf über 20 Jahre Volksbühne*."

positioning. While the idealism the *Saga* animates echoes that of fascism, its defense of art's autonomy is ultimately incompatible with that ideology. While waging many of their ideological battles through overtly artistic means, fascism and Totalitarianism saw social utility as its chief aim. As Boris Groys argues with respect to the Stalinism, although the Soviet Union's political goals were aesthetic, their artistry was in direct service of the state.⁵³⁵ It was anything but autonomous from institutional oversight. While the *Saga* relishes the grandiose zeal of fascistic ideology, it rejects its role for art as an instrument of politics. Therefore, Castorf's elevation of his employees over the artwork—read through the time limits he imposes—relegates him to the worst aspects of fascism: Nazism.

The *Saga*'s temporal logic had an equally chaffing, if less contested, effect on the institution of the *Theatertreffen*. Held annually in Berlin, the festival gathers the year's ten best German-language performances in a two-week event. *John Gabriel Borkman*'s selection posed logistical problems for the festival. Given the intricacy of the show's set—custom built for the Prater—the show was not moved to a larger theatre as is customary, which severely limited the number of seats available for sale. The show's idiosyncratic run times and inability to be performed on consecutive nights limited it to six performances. This—in addition to the show's reputation—made it, according to Jana Perkovic, the show to which “all of Berlin tried to get a ticket.”⁵³⁶ The *Volksbühne* and *Theatertreffen* sought to reconcile this by reselling tickets to the performance once spectators left the show. Vinge/Müller maintain that they neither approved of the policy

⁵³⁵ See Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*, trans. Charles Rougle (New York: Verso, 2011).

⁵³⁶ Jana Perkovic, “true chaos: theatre at the limits,” *RealTime Arts* 110 (2012), 17.

nor were they consulted about its implementation. Their opposition to the *Volksbühne*'s ticketing practices was parodically addressed in their next show—*12-Spartenhaus*—in which they built a mock “box office” manned by a Nazi. Each time an audience member had their ticket taken by a member of the *Volksbühne*'s staff, a SS uniform-clad character positioned in the “box office” rang a cash register noise. In this way, Nazism, commercialized art, and the *Volksbühne* were comically conflated one hundred times per night.

For the *Theatertreffen* premier of *John Gabriel Borkman*, however, the *Saga* employed a different aspect of its temporal dramaturgy as an act of antagonism. Before the curtain went up, the Director counted by single digits and on occasion decimal points, for six continuous hours. No other action transpired during this time. The gesture—a possible refusal to make good on the institutional hype of the *Theatertreffen* or simply an act of petulance—garnered a roller coaster of audience responses. Spectators tolerated, mocked, joined in, and eventually rejected the presumed stasis. Vinge noted that the only reason they decided to raise the curtain—ending the scene prior to reaching their target of counting to ten thousand—was for fear of an actual riot. Vinge remembers spectators angrily turning to shout at him and the other technicians in the sound booth. The same scene was played at different lengths and to different effects on subsequent nights, including one in which Hinkle read words from the dictionary for roughly an hour.⁵³⁷

Responses from critics and spectators ranged from boredom, to admiration, to bafflement. Piotr Gruszczyński, suggesting that the counting was an homage to the numerical calculations in Sarah Kane's *Cleansed*, even noted that at times the mechanical

⁵³⁷ See, Shevtsova, “An Overview of *Theatertreffen* in Berlin 2012.”

process felt “contemplative and full of meaning.”⁵³⁸ Others attested to the show’s testing of their temporal limits, inducing “exhaustion” and requiring “endurance.” The many possible meanings of the counting aside, its effect is representative of the *Saga*’s larger temporal dramaturgy. The refusal to proceed with the dramatic action signals an effort by the artists to retain complete control/autonomy over the artistic event in the face of institutional regulations and spectatorial expectations. In the end, however, Vinge/Müller conceded to the audience’s wishes, their growing protests finally helping to open the curtains. These concessions were not extended to the institution. At the end of twelve hours during the *Theatertreffen* run of *John Gabriel Borkman*, the technicians again left the theatre. But, like previous performances, the *Saga* played on. Jana Perkovic describes the scene in which after the technical staff left the theatre, the Director remained on stage groaning, “This is not over! I will not leave!”⁵³⁹ Perkovic explains that it was only the audience who believed the show to be over when they eventually decided to applaud and leave the theatre. The Director, Perkovic speculated, may well have continued on in the empty auditorium. Doris Meierhenrich, likewise, queries the end game of the *Saga*’s logic of artistic autonomy.⁵⁴⁰ Despite the Director’s willingness to continue, if only for the integrity of the artwork itself, *John Gabriel Borkman* never did play to an empty house. Meierhenrich wonders if the desire for such “spectacular idleness (*Leerlauf*) could be the most successful, most rigorous moment of this total spectacle machine [...] that whips the entire theatre to its practical and aesthetic

⁵³⁸ Piotr Gruszczyński, “Experiencing the 2012 *Theatertreffen*” (Doświadczając. *Theatertreffen* 2012), *Dwutygodnik*, May 2012, edition 83, accessed June 4, 2014, <http://www.dwutygodnik.com/artkul/3560-doswiadczac-theatertreffen-2012.html>.

⁵³⁹ Perkovic, “True Chaos: Theatre At The Limits,” 17.

⁵⁴⁰ Meierhenrich, “*Wie viel Theater hält man aus?*”

limits.”⁵⁴¹ Even if the spectators persisted to watch, the *Saga*’s performances did drive the theatre’s technicians and administrators from the theatre. By the end of the *Theatertreffen* run, the nightly technical closure of the show was unremarkable. The *Saga* may have reached the *Volksbühne*’s temporal limits, but there was little controversy to be found there. The administration had effectively countered their move. In the end, the institution retained its power to organize time. But, as we will see in the following chapter, the next battle over the *Saga*’s autonomy would prove to be far more contested.

⁵⁴¹ Ibid.

Chapter 5
Cancellation and Conclusion:
12-Spartenhaus and the Limits of Provocation

“Vinge’s Ibsen productions at the Prater hunt all the limits of a well-tempered theatre.”⁵⁴²

--Peter Laudenbach

“Five Years With Pleasure,” reads a *Volksbühne* poster pasted to the face of the Prater theatre. In its Gothic, quasi-militaristic font, the text has the visual echo of propaganda. Similar *Volksbühne* posters regularly flood Berlin and particularly the hip neighborhood of Prenzlauerberg, where the Prater is located. Most feature equally cryptic messages conjuring a revolutionary, faux-incendiary attitude that almost ironically alludes to what is no longer even possible. Except perhaps in the theatre. The poster is an advertisement for an identically named party at the *Volksbühne* hosted by the German radio and TV personality, Nilz Bokelberg. The event promised “21 of the city’s most beautiful singers” and advised patrons to “dress appropriately.”⁵⁴³ The announcement appeared on the Prater during the final week of Vinge/Muller’s five-year residency, casting a sardonic shadow over the artists’ conflict-ridden time at the *Volksbühne*.

It was during that final week in May that I visited Vinge/Muller in Berlin. As we approached the theatre—in the throes of a final massive load-out—Vinge gestured

⁵⁴² Peter Laudenbach, interview with Frank Castorf, “*Im Gespräch mit Frank Castorf über 20 Jahre Volksbühne*,” (In Conversation with Frank Castorf about his 20 years at the *Volksbühne*) *tip—berlin.de*, November 7, 2012, accessed June 4, 2014, <http://www.tip-berlin.de/kultur-und-freizeit-theater-und-buehne/im-gesprach-mit-frank-castorf-uber-20-jahre-volksbuehne>.

⁵⁴³ “Calendar,” *Volksbühne* website, accessed February 2, 2016, https://www.volksbuehne-berlin.de/praxis/ hoeren_mit_vergnuegen/.

towards the poster. When I asked if the message was directed towards him and his company, Vinge offered a dismissive shrug. After all, the facts were contradictory: Yes, they had been at the Prater for exactly five years, but the poster referenced a different event and, as I outlined in the previous chapter, little of that time could be characterized as pleasurable. The final year of Vinge/Müller's residency was, in fact, spent secluded in the Prater working on new material, but unable to open the building to audiences. The *Volksbühne*'s staff had, reportedly, refused to continue working with the artists and Vinge/Müller were unable to reach an agreement with the city that would allow them to operate the building themselves. Given space but no audience, they turned to the most idealistic and modernist of all the arts, film. In that final year, they transformed the Prater into a massive sound stage where they could film, rehearse, and build new sets and characters unimpeded. The footage—roughly four hundred hours—would take years to edit, a process they began later that summer, the results of which have yet to be seen.

Inside, the Prater was chock-full of remnants of what the film might contain: a huge, Stalinist-style portrait of the filmmaker John Waters rested atop a stack of similarly styled paintings of Plato, the film directors Rainer Werner Fassbinder and Jean-Pierre Melville, and, of course, Wagner. A trio of animatronic figures stood motionless. Among them, a near life-sized Paper-Mache statue of Vinge's Director character in his iconic position of lying on his back to urinate into his own mouth. Equipped with a pump and plumbing, the sculpture was a working fountain capable of endless urolangia. The floor was scattered with a pale-green currency cast in the image of the *Saga*—a masked face in the center of each bill. Vinge's right palm bore stiches where weeks prior he slit

his hand open with a buck knife for a scene in which his character takes a ritualized oath—his blood spattered onto a pile of their counterfeit money.

Upstairs, the Prater's offices looked ransacked. Here were the guts of the *Saga* separated from the productions' artifice. A ten-foot table stacked with CDs; heaps of books, sketch pads, photos, dog-eared papers; Hinkle's massive phallus from *John Gabriel Borkman* lay on a table like a beached fish—its allure and menace stripped by lack of context; the phrase *das Gesetz* faded but still legible. The *Saga*'s gang of hired hands, core collaborators, and volunteers were prepping everything for storage inside tractor-trailer-sized shipping containers. A group of six, Vinge, Müller, and myself included, gathered in the Prater's upstairs kitchen for a vegetable-soup lunch prepared by one of their associates. They discussed a final film shoot to take place in a nearby forest and whether the *Saga*'s composer, Trond Reinholdtsen, spent the night in his makeshift studio in the Prater's attic. Their residency complete, the need to vacate the Prater was a matter of course. But the issue of pleasure—alluded to on the *Volksbühne*'s poster—was anything but a foregone conclusion. If the *Saga*'s turn to making films is grounded in a deep affinity for cinematic structures, characters, and the medium's history, it is also the result of their work's growing interest in testing the boundaries of distance and intimacy between audiences and art. Without an audience, Vinge/Müller and their collaborators could freely negotiate among themselves how long they worked and what they did with their own and each other's bodies. It was a degree of institutional support and artistic autonomy unimaginable in their previous works. The only thing that needed to be sacrificed to attain it was an audience.

In this concluding chapter, I provide an overview and analysis of *12-Spartenhaus*, the *Saga*'s final production at the Prater. What began in *John Gabriel Borkman* as an ideological stalemate between the artists and institution over time limits, ended in Vinge/Müller's self-proclaimed "*Eine Kündigung*" (cancellation) of *12-Spartenhaus*. I argue that the contentious end of *12-Spartenhaus* is emblematic of Vinge/Müller's notion that theatre's purpose is, in the words of Peter Laudenbach, to "hunt all the limits of a well-tempered theatre."⁵⁴⁴ *12-Spartenhaus* assails the so-called "well-tempered theatre" by stalking the limits and expectations of audiences, critics, and the institution. While the institution's relation to the *Saga*'s excessive running times was the focus of the previous chapter, here I consider the limits of physical bodies. As Vinge's stitched-up hand attests, the *Saga* sees the performing body as raw material in service to its art. Although there is a long precedent of endurance and self-mutilation within performance art, the recipient of these actions is typically the artist themselves. *12-Spartenhaus*' limit-testing opened up an ethical gray-area in which the *Saga*'s artistic ideals led to concerns for the personal safety of audiences and the theatre's staff, resulting in at least one injury.

Through *12-Spartenhaus*, and the debates it inspired, I ask, what are the problems and importance of the *Saga*'s efforts towards autonomy and idealism? This question supplies an inroad to examining the seeming gaps between the desire for experimental art and our actual encounters with it. Whereas earlier productions raised the question of the *Saga*'s ideological relationship to other contemporary theatres, Ibsen, Wagner and fascism, and provocation, *12-Spartenhaus* amplified the *Saga*'s core dialectic—the relationship between fiction and reality—through the safety and security of human

⁵⁴⁴ Laudenbach, "*Im Gespräch mit Frank Castorf*."

beings. Following my performance analysis, I offer suggestions about the *Saga*'s value with respect to other contemporary theatre and performance scholarship. I propose that the *Saga*'s emphasis on artistic autonomy and idealism—expressed through the breach of limits—differentiates their art from other contemporary theatre and provides insights into longstanding questions of theatre's relationship to society through the legacies of Ibsen, Wagner, the avant-gardes, and contemporary performance. These summations are deliberately inconclusive, even abstract. As the title "*Saga*" suggests, Vinge/Müller's project is epic, sequential, and ongoing. The inconclusiveness of my final section mirrors the uncertainty of the *Saga* itself.

12-Spartenhaus

The ambition for artistic autonomy, discussed in the previous chapters, was controversially achieved in *12-Spartenhaus* (2013). Vinge/Müller's final production for the Prater was in development even as *John Gabriel Borkman* played to sold-out houses during the 2012 *Theatertreffen*. Critic Sascha Krieger notes that during one performance of *Borkman*, the Director character continued to intone "*12-Spartenhaus*," which the critic took to exemplify the *Saga*'s aesthetic: "a theatre comprised of spoken and dance theatre, ranging from opera to puppetry, architecture to painting, everything you can imagine and even a lot that you would rather not imagine."⁵⁴⁵ The title—which translates literally to "12-Line House"—evokes the antiquated definition of an art institution by the number of different arts or "lines" it produced. A theatre offering dance, opera, and theatre would, thus, be classified as a three-line house. As the title suggests, *12-*

⁵⁴⁵ Sascha Krieger, "*Weltvision im 12-Sparten-Haus*," (A Vision of the World in the *12-Spartenhaus*) *Stage and Screen* (blog), May 20, 2012, accessed June 18, 2014, <https://stagescreen.wordpress.com/2012/05/>.

Spartenhaus exceeds the mediums traditionally associated with the theatre. Identifying twelve distinct art forms within the production requires imaginative leaps, but the predominant crafts are all well on display: theatre, dance, opera, painting, film, performance art, music, and sculpture, with digressions into more specific disciplines and genres like ballet and documentary film. More importantly, the name exemplifies the *Saga*'s expansiveness rather than directly corresponding to twelve discreet arts. The title takes on numerological and iconic resonates within the production: a white number twelve adorned the exterior doors of the Prater like the understated logo of a secretive nightclub. It also exemplifies the *Saga*'s artistic largesse, which the artists see as falling victim to the very institutions charged with supporting the imaginative spirit. The production sought to incorporate this notion of expansiveness by creating a free, live Internet feed of the performances. Hosted on their own purpose-built website, www.12spartenhaus.tv, the live streams were foiled by technical challenges unresolvable prior to the production's early closure. The desired financial and spatial autonomy that *12-Spartenhaus TV* was to offer the production were two of the show's dominant themes. *12-Spartenhaus TV* represented the promise of offering performances free of charge to spectators. The *Saga* repeatedly railed against the *Volksbühne*'s attempts to monetize the success of *John Gabriel Borkman* by pressuring the artists to give more performances, adding additional seats to the theatre, or reselling the tickets of spectators who left before the show's end. Self-broadcasting performances would allow Vinge/Müller greater autonomy over the distribution of their art and the ability to give it away. The failure to broadcast performances would, however, become an afterthought in a series of thwarted ambitions.

In terms of content, *12-Spartenhaus* continued the practice of thematizing conflicts between artistic autonomy and the dictates of reality as exemplified by the institution. Rather than locating the battle within the mythologized realms of the domestic sphere—as was the case with the *Saga*'s previous works—the production was set within the theatrical institution itself. *12-Spartenhaus* is a fictional Nazi-era theatre *cum* opera house populated by theatrical personnel. The *12-Spartenhaus*' staff/characters include a dramaturge, conductor, orchestra, ballerinas, janitor, ticket-taker/box office sales person, actors, singers, literary manager, technical staff, stagehands, directors, assistant director, and critics. Much of the show's action follows the daily pursuits of these performers and administrators. Though historical settings deliberately bleed into one another in the *Saga*—as I examined in chapter two—*12-Spartenhaus*' imagery consistently evokes the Nazi era. The theatre's administrators wear Gestapo-style costuming, while the theatre's finance officer sports a swastika armband. The main hall of the theatre features a massive Nazi-style eagle and one of the show's scenes takes place inside “Salon Kitty,” the historical brothel used by Nazis during WWII. The conflation of Nazis and theatrical administrators escalated the derogatory depiction of the *Volksbühne*'s staff, and impugn the theatre for the temporal limits and financial compromises they imposed on *John Gabriel Borkman*.

Like previous productions, *12-Spartenhaus*' events and characters are based on an Ibsen text. In this case, *An Enemy of the People* (1882) serves as the production's model. Following the outline of Ibsen's play, *12-Spartenhaus* relocates the Stockmann brothers' ideological standoff over the town's contaminated water supply to the Nazi-era theatre. The theatre stands in for the play's toxic bathhouse with the theatre's art poisoning the

institution's patrons. Dr. Relling (transplanted from Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*) is seen dumping pollutants into the water supply labeled "Zionism," "Transcendentalism," "Egotism," "Fatalism," and "Postmodernism," among other poisonous "isms." Relling's lacing of the water is juxtaposed with a live video of the theatre's sealed-off auditorium, half-full of a decaying zombie audience. Dr. Stockmann—the intrepid idealist of Ibsen's play and Vinge/Müller's production—tracks the origins of the pollution back to the theatre. As with the original play, *12-Spartenhaus* pits Dr. Stockmann against his brother Peter Stockmann who, in the *Saga*'s production, is the theatre's bureaucratic administrator profiting from the disease-inducing art. Peter defends the theatre's practices as economically sound against Dr. Stockmann's proposed renovations. In an effort to silence his brother, Peter abducts and tortures the Doctor, who persistently bellows, "*Wahrheit! Wahrheit!*" ("Truth! Truth!") Ibsen's infinitely corruptible supporting characters (the printer Aslaksen and the newspaper editors Hovstad and Billing) are meanwhile transformed into the theatre's finance officer and critics. Echoing Ibsen's text, *12-Spartenhaus* depicts a morally opposed theatre system split between heroic artists (Dr. Stockmann, his family, the Captain Horster, and the Director) and administrative and artistic functionaries. The battle between artistic freedom and administrative overreach plays out thematically through the transposed plot of *An Enemy of the People* as well as Vinge's performance of opposition towards the *Volksbühne* in which he repeatedly assassinates the fictional theatre's technical staff, administrators, and critics.

The production featured a scenographic conceit new to the *Saga*. Given its polluted state, the theatre's interior was locked and spectators were restricted to the lobby

of the Prater for the show's duration. The performance was viewed on screens that streamed live footage into the lobby from within the theatre, while some action could be seen through windows that revealed small portions of the building's interior. The Prater's lobby—transformed into *12-Spartenhaus*' lobby—was painted in patterns of black and green cracked marble, conjuring the opulence of a bygone era. Spectators milled about, sat on benches, and picnicked or hunched on the floor throughout the show. The scenographic layout evoked the work of the *Volksbühne*'s late stage designer Bert Neumann. Known for his collaborations with Frank Castorf and René Pollesch, one of Neumann's trademarks were his onstage enclosures—typically homes or other container-like structures—that hid the performers from the audience's view. The action was then filmed and projected onto the stage set, splitting the difference between the live and mediated, the filmic and the theatrical.

What differed in *12-Spartenhaus* was the sense that the audience was, essentially, barred from the actual theatre. The main set of windows between the Prater's lobby and the performance space looked onto the entrance to *12-Spartenhaus*, a sweeping set of twelve numbered stairs leading into the theatre. The evil Peter Stockmann tried to open the theatre's doors for nearly an hour with a massive set of keys. Meanwhile, the audience clustered around the doorway in hopes that the next attempt might allow entry into the larger interior only glimpsed on the film screens. Inside the theatre, however, Peter and Relling tauntingly bellowed “the auuuuu-dieeeeeennce,” or dryly read from Thomas Bernhard's novel *Woodcutters* (1984), a nasty indictment of theatre artists and their patrons. During one performance, Peter read aloud from the text for nearly four hours. For Peter, the public was a monetary calculation, made explicit by his mechanistic

counting of the box-office take. Relling functioned as a quasi-Nazi scientist/theatre visionary, representing a bolder agenda. Echoing Wagner and Hitler, as well as more egalitarian projects of audience development, Relling genetically engineered an idealized audience of the future with a mixture of chicken eggs and gallons of “director’s sperm,” producing a brood of screaming babies.

While thematically linked to the endangered public of Ibsen’s text, the means by which the audience was excluded and taunted led to critical and audience backlashes. On the second night of the performance, a pair of artists came equipped with power tools to unscrew the walls dividing the lobby and performance space. The duo—surprisingly—was not stopped and, reportedly, voluntarily turned back almost immediately once they stepped inside. Many critics argued that the refusal to admit the audience into the playing space and relative inaction of the performance, combined with the *Saga*’s now familiar excreta and violence, was ultimately unsuccessful. Sebastian Leber wonders, “How pathetic must one’s life be to choose this torture over the real world outside?”⁵⁴⁶ Others speculated that refusing to admit the audience was a function of the production being incomplete—a suspicion given some credence by the artists’ in-performance complaints that the *Volksbühne* pressured them to open the show. Dirk Pilz saw the work’s conceit as an artistic antagonism towards audiences and critics. Addressing his review to Vinge and Müller, Pilz writes, “It’s clear you wanted to annoy and tease us stupid spectators. It

⁵⁴⁶ Sebastian Leber, “*Vegard Vinges 12-Spartenhaus Ekel ist auch nur ein Gefühl*” (Vegard Vinge’s *12-Spartenhaus*: Disgust is only a feeling) *Der Tagesspiegel* June 28, 2013, accessed January 11, 2016, <http://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/vegard-vinges-12-spartenhaus-ekel-ist-auch-nur-ein-gefuehl/8416278.html>. 28.06.2013

did not work: I was not annoyed, not at all, but you have fooled us all, of course.”⁵⁴⁷ Pilz contextualized his playful acceptance of the performance using the premiere’s musical leitmotif of David Guetta’s club hit, “Just One Last Time.”

This is the end station
But I can't move away from you
This is the edge of patience
But you won't prove yourself to me
Still you drain my soul and

Even though it hurts I can't slow down
Walls are closing in and I hit the ground
Whispers of tomorrow echo in my mind
Just one last time⁵⁴⁸

The song’s references to patience and self-sacrifice seemed to thematically underscore the performance. The singer who “drains [their] soul” for the addressee who “won’t prove [themselves]” echoes the larger standoffs between the *Saga* and the *Volksbühne*, but also the expectations of audiences and the artists’ seeming withholding of the performance. Or, as Pilz summarizes the performance, “It was the theatre audience staged as redemption and mass overture of longing!”⁵⁴⁹

12-Spartenhaus did not fail to elicit longing during the two performances I attended. Sequestered in the lobby, I passed the time in speculative conversation. Yes, it was true that audience members dismantled the door during a performance. It was

⁵⁴⁷ Dirk Pilz, “*Ich bin hier nur geschäftlich*” (I’m only here on business), *Berliner Zeitung*, May 6, 2013, accessed June 1, 2014, <http://www.berliner-zeitung.de/kultur/-12-spartenhaus--im-prater-ich-bin-hier-nur-geschaeftlich,10809150,22684532.html>.

⁵⁴⁸ David Guetta, featuring Taped Rai, “Just One Last Time,” from *Nothing But the Beat 2.0*, Virgin Records, 2012, compact disc. This song is also the theme to *A Good Day to Die Hard* (2013), the fifth installment of the *Die Hard* film franchise. The film’s conflict, like that of *An Enemy of the People* and *12-Spartenhaus*, centers on a person persecuted because they have documents that would expose the corruption of a high-ranking official.

⁵⁴⁹ Pilz, “*Ich bin hier nur geschäftlich*” (I’m only here on business).

confirmed that on another night, well past one in the morning, Vinge unlocked a door and admitted the roughly twenty remaining audience members into select sections of the interior. These conversations were interspersed with great bursts of action transmitted out to us from the interior: rehearsals for *Aïda* and *Rigoletto*; Relling's grotesque science experiments; the dramaless labor of theatre administrators and employees; the cast roaming the Prater's enclosed backyard; a jungle stage-set in which strange leaf-monsters lurked; and, as always, the Director's violent rampages against critics and the theatre's fictional staff. When projected onto the lobby's video screens, the scenes were sparks of hope that the theatre was clicking into gear, that the gaps of inaction would be replaced by a succession of scenes and, maybe, even greater coherence. While the desire for narrative drive was palpable to me and the other spectators I spoke with, its materialization remained elusive. At times this felt like a deliberate affront to an audience's expectations and wishes. Or what Pilz aptly dubbed, a "supersubversive avant-garde theatre of refusal (*Supersubversive Theaterverweigerungsavantgarde*)."⁵⁵⁰

Oscillating between repetitive or durational action *and* inaction to tease and torment audiences was not unique to *12-Spartenhaus*. The harmless barrages of potato chips or cardboard boxes launched into the audiences of *The Wild Duck* and *John Gabriel Borkman* put a comic face to audience antagonism. Conversely, the deafening and relentless squeals of baby-dolls pushed through a meat grinder (*The Wild Duck*) or hours of counting and the smashing of the audience's seats (*John Gabriel Borkman*) or ranting at spectators are deliberately assaultive. The audience's physical remove from the onslaughts of violent destruction and inactivity played a critical function in the

⁵⁵⁰ Pilz, "*Ich bin hier nur geschäftlich*," (I'm only here on business).

production's reception. The video projections in *12-Spartenhaus* failed to capture the richness of the *Saga*'s color palette, which amplified the distance between the audience and the action and deflated the imagery's capacity to make inaction hypnotic. The production's thematic preoccupation with the audience's role within theatre institutions, coupled with the physical and visual isolation from the action, foregrounded the questions "what am I watching and what am I waiting for?" The sense of isolation and security that the wall produced ultimately dulled *12-Spartenhaus*' ability to seduce with spectacle or titillate with the fear of one's proximity to excreta and violence. Yet, as Pilz notes, the absence of these elements also drove a desire for them. The limits of the wall sparked a wish for its transgression.

Read as the willful frustration of spectators' expectations or the dramatization of the shuttered baths of Ibsen's text, the walled-off interior of the theatre offered the *Saga* a new level of autonomy with respect to its audiences. The partition itself offered some clues to its function. One section of the barrier featured a cutout window above which the phrase "ideological wall" was emblazoned. Behind the portal sat Aslaksen, the cautious printer of Ibsen's play, droning his maxim "moderation." The phrase, in *An Enemy of the People*, is a shield behind which Aslaksen continually shifts and hedges his political allegiances, a song praising the path of least resistance. The cost of Aslaksen's moderation is a spiritual mediocrity. Vinge/Müller's Aslaksen is the personification of his ideology. The character is a decrepit ghoul roaming the theatre's halls, meditatively repeating "mooooooodeeeeeeeeraaaaaaatiooooooon," his bass-heavy voice reverberating with the authority of God. Carrying a glowing orb, Aslaksen is the mystic of the theatre's

mission of moderation, never raising his voice or resorting to physicalized declarations of his beliefs, as is the usual course for the *Saga*'s ideologues.

The wall also became the metaphorical locus of the production's rage at the *Volksbühne*. During one performance, the Director smashed dozens of plastic chairs against the interior of the Plexiglas windows that separated himself and the audience. Fearing the wall would shatter, the *Volksbühne*'s technical staff—who manned the spectators' side of the lobby—cleared the audience from the area. Over the following weeks, the Director began assaulting the structure with an ax. His first targets were the ideological wall itself and the fake ticket booth, both of which were destroyed and required the technicians to safeguard audience members from splintering debris. Following one such attack during a June 9th performance, the Director discharged a fire extinguisher through a hole that he smashed in the dividing wall. Andreas Speichert, a staff technician of the *Volksbühne*, intervened and inhaled the extinguisher's discharge. Speichert received medical treatment for his exposure. In Peter Laudenbach's coverage of the event, he cites previous encounters between Speichert and Vinge/the Director in which the latter called the stage manager a Nazi for his attempts to limit his destructive behaviors, while Speichert testified to Vinge's kindness outside of his performances.⁵⁵¹

The encounter between Speichert and Vinge became pretext for the long brewing tensions between the artists and the institution to boil over. As reported by Sebastian Leber of *Der Tagesspeil*, the performance following Speichert's injury was cancelled

⁵⁵¹ Peter Laudenbach, "Vegard Vinge und der Eigenurin" (Vegard Vinge and his urine), *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 28, 2013, accessed February 4, 2016, <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/berliner-volksbuehne-vegard-vinge-und-der-eigenurin-1.1707605>.

under the auspices that the technician was on medical leave.⁵⁵² Vinge/Müller, meanwhile, contend that the technical staff called in sick to retaliate against the production. The artists pointed out to me that never before has an entire performance been cancelled because a single member of the technical staff was sick. Ida Müller went on to say that the very night of the performance in question, Müller and Speichert discussed the issue while drinking at a bar. When the show did reopen, Vinge/Müller received a letter from Frank Castorf, the *Volksbühne*'s artistic director, cautioning them against their destructive behaviors.⁵⁵³ The list of complaints included the injury to Speichert, the financial damage done to the foods offered at the lobby's café (the owner of which was told to seek recompense directly from Vinge), as well as Vinge's use of his own feces, what Castorf called the Director's throwing of "stinking masses."⁵⁵⁴ Castorf noted that this was a final warning, an effort to "ensure that [the performance] will no longer affect the health and other rights of employees and the public."⁵⁵⁵ Failure to adhere to these limits would result in possible "prosecution of relevant actions" and the "termination of our contractual relations."⁵⁵⁶ The letter was issued from Bayreuth where Castorf was staging Wagner's *Ring Cycle*. Germany's most radical post-reunification director (Castorf) posting a disciplinary notice from the cradle of the country's artistic idealism (Bayreuth) was not only ironic. It demonstrated the limits Vinge/Müller had reached.

⁵⁵² Leber, "Disgust is only a feeling."

⁵⁵³ Frank Castorf, unpublished letter to Vegard Vinge, June 12, 2013.

⁵⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

The June 23rd performance of *12-Spartenhaus* was a response to the letter and the events that inspired Castorf's admonishments. As the audience gathered outside the Prater, the Director took to the theatre's upstairs offices followed by one of the show's camera operators referred to as "mother." Speaking through a microphone that distorted his voice to the character's trademark childish warble, the Director peered down at the spectators to announce that "today only the administration plays," explaining, "I'm very sorry, but try to be in the ass of the *Volksbühne* for three years and then you're fucking nothing in the end."⁵⁵⁷ For this performance, the disintegration to "fucking nothing" left only the Director to lead a behind-the-scenes tour of Vinge/Müller's own administrative apparatus (showing aspects of the artists' otherwise secreted working process and spaces) and a grotesque exposé of the *Volksbühne*'s administrative and funding structures. Taped to the walls of the Prater's office were storyboards for the production's hundreds of scenes, which the Director removes and drops to the audience below, informing them that they don't need to come inside; they can bring the show home. Scanning over the image-covered walls, the Director laments the images that will never be staged: "this would have been a really good scene."⁵⁵⁸ The wall gave an insider's look at the production's ever-expanding scope: a photo of a forty-foot tall leg stomping across the stage (an *homage* to Robert Wilson's 1969 *Life and Times of Sigmund Freud*); scenes from Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* (1881) and *Little Eyolf* (1885); an orchestra huddled in the cab of a helicopter; and a women (Wagner's Brünnhilde?) consumed in a funeral pyre.

The remainder of the performance—less than two hours—featured the Director analyzing and creating his own promotional materials for the *Volksbühne*. *A Volksbühne*

⁵⁵⁷ *12-Spartenhaus*, performance video, June 23, 2013.

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

pamphlet titled *Capitalism and Depression*—part of a series created by the dramaturge Carl Hegemann—inspires the Director to ask, “[W]here is the depression in capitalism?”⁵⁵⁹ The character then proceeds to create covers for two of his own pamphlets: “Administration and Depression” and “Technical Management and Depression.” Under each title, the names of the chief employees of those departments—including Andreas Speichert—are listed. These pointedly mocking proposals lead to a visual analysis of the publicity photos from a roundtable discussion with Hegemann, Nicolas Stemann, and other notable German directors. The Director points out that all of the images prominently feature the directors’ hands in expressive poses. He concludes that hands are the essential tools of German theatre directors before leading a comic seminar on how to effectively use your hands as a director, ridiculing the director as an empty symbol of artistic authority. The Director then reads the entirety of Castorf’s letter while the camera provides a point-of-view image of the text. The document—now in a plastic slipcover—is stained with Vinge’s excrement, which he used to paste the notice to Prater’s door during the previous performance. The Director reads every sentence with slow and deliberate consideration, allowing the viewer time to digest the information. The scene is grim and perverse. By turning the reproach of the theatre’s chief administrator into an ideological prop, the Director positions Castorf as the voice of the *Volksbühne*’s authoritative language. Smearred with shit and read aloud in a childish burble, Castorf’s authority is recast as the scolding of an angry parent.

Once finished with the letter, the Director provides his own diagnostic of the *Volksbühne* as an institution. The Director places a blank *Volksbühne* poster on the office

⁵⁵⁹ Ibid.

floor, squats above it and defecates. Using a black marker, the Director draws a map of the *Volksbühne*'s institutional structure using clumps of his own feces as landmarks, the most important of which are the theatre's administrative offices, café, and "economic" department. The Prater, a little black bubble subtitled "Art," is relegated to the far corner of the poster. The Director pushes globs of his excrement from the *Volksbühne*'s three key locales to the Prater. The resonances of Ibsen's contamination narrative are evident—the pollutant in *An Enemy of the People* is a runoff from the larger industry—but the Director's concern is the marginal status afforded to art in general and the *Saga* in particular within the theatre's larger structure. This point is illustrated with facts written around the poster's fecal landmarks: The *Volksbühne*'s budget is 25 million euros, 17 million of which goes to "administration," 90% of which comes from tax payers, while the remaining 10% comes from ticket revenue.⁵⁶⁰ Why then, wonders the Director, do tickets to *12-Spartenhaus* cost 25 euros, noting that their performances and all other theatre performances should be free.

More than wishful thinking, Vinge—as is the *Saga*—is concerned with how theatre's circulation as a commodity impacts its artistry. Muttering to himself, the Director explains, "We have to have the premiere very soon. It doesn't matter if it is shit, as long as we can open and sell tickets."⁵⁶¹ Using the excrement, the Director begins to link the phrases and figures written across the poster before covering the large block letters of "VOLKSBÜHNE" with a thick smear of shit. He then coats his white mask with the remaining excrement and announces, "This is the new *Volksbühne* poster. I'll

⁵⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁵⁶¹ Ibid.

put this poster up all around the world; I will show that this is the reality.”⁵⁶² Returning to the theatre’s upstairs window, the Director informs the spectators below that this new poster is available for purchase at the *Volksbühne*, but he will give it away for free. Before dropping the poster out the window, he pauses as a few children pass by, noting that “the kids have shit in their diapers and I have shit on my poster. This is very dangerous, if someone gets hit by this I will get sued.”⁵⁶³ The poster flutters harmlessly to the ground where some onlookers assist the Director in affixing the new placard to the outside wall of the Prater.

Scatology has long been substance and synonym for art. Hal Foster suggests, via Freud, that the use of shit within the visual arts “tests the anally repressive authority of traditional culture, but it also mocks the anally erotic narcissism of the vanguard rebel-artist.”⁵⁶⁴ Vinge’s fecal paintings certainly combine a sense of anti-authoritarianism and self-mockery. On the one hand, they break taboos and reveal societal contradictions, highlighted by his comparison of his “dangerous” shit poster and the presumably innocuous full diapers of children. On the other hand, when Vinge coats his face with his feces, eats it, or mails it to South America as a work of art, he draws the familiar and unflattering correlation between creation and excretion. Foster notes that underlying the anti-social and self-ridicule is often “a fatigue with the politics of difference [...] a strange drive to indistinction, a paradoxical desire to be desireless, a strong call of regression that went beyond the infantile to the inorganic.”⁵⁶⁵ Applicable as Foster’s analysis may be to the visual artists of the 1980s and 90s, to which he addresses his

⁵⁶² Ibid.

⁵⁶³ Ibid.

⁵⁶⁴ Hal Foster, *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency* (New York: Verso, 2015), 22.

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid., 24.

observation, here the comparison falls short. Despite its oppositional and lampooning quality, Vinge's use of scat to create the "new *Volksbühne* poster" is designed to mark distinctions and illuminate the hidden realities of working within the theatrical institution, not to obscure them. As I argue in the first chapter, the irruption of the real—here feces—is the means by which the *Saga* differentiates between fiction and reality. It is the extra-theatrical reality of the shit that grounds Vinge's didactic claims, giving olfactory evidence of their urgency and truth.

Although much remarked upon, Vinge's expulsive efforts and play with the fire extinguisher were not his most dangerous actions of the production. After adorning the Prater with the "new *Volksbühne* poster," the Director climbs back to the second floor offices and out a window onto the theatre's roof. A hundred feet above the street, the Director brazenly walks the length of the theatre's pitched summit—roughly an additional hundred feet—before climbing up the fifty-foot high fire escape of the adjacent building and onto its roof. The camera operator stays put at the Prater's windowsill, the distanced vantage giving a portrait of how high Vinge has climbed and, more importantly, how far he could fall. Standing atop the neighboring building, the Director is miniaturized. Arms outstretched victoriously, he surveys the city—a theatrical Rocky atop the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Posturing aside, Ibsen's *Master Builder* (1893) is the closest referent for the Director's dangerous stunt. The Master Builder Solness—goaded by the fellow idealist Hilda, who stokes the architect's arrogance and refusal to submit to the physical and spiritual limits of his body and art—climbs and falls from the spire of his newly erected building. Solness' death offers a complex series of reactions from the shocked onlookers. It devastates his wife, Mrs. Solness, who faints, and

produces smug acknowledgment of the artist's limits from Ragnar, the builder's young rival. But for Hilda, the youthful idealist, the Builder's efforts and death are rapturous. Hilda imagines the Builder confronting God himself atop the spire. As others report that Solness' "whole head is crushed," Hilda hears "harps in the air."⁵⁶⁶ While Ibsen placed Solness' fatal climb off-stage, Vinge attempts his ascent in full view of his audience and the unwitting pedestrians walking along Kastanienallee. In the moment, it is impossible to know what outcome of *The Master Builder* we are about to experience.

The Director stops and looks back at the camera. At this distance, he is a half pale-white, half shit-brown face on the horizon of Berlin's blue sky. Returning, the Director straddles the lip of the adjoining building's roof, his foot blindly searching for a rung. Unsuccessful, he adjusts his tack, now approaching backwards. There is a morbid beauty in watching Vinge negotiate the ladder a hundred feet above the street. It is a scene foreign to art, but so familiar in extreme sports—the skier outrunning an avalanche or Evel Knievel launching himself over the fountains at Caesar's Palace (1967); the realization that Vinge may not die, but he is risking his life. The stunt promises no medal or world record, but conjures the romantic vision of the artist articulated by Wagner, the same composer who Vinge wears like a superhero's insignia on his chest:

the demonstration of [the artist's] full ascent into universalism, a man can only show us by his Death; and that not by his accidental, but by his necessary death, the logical sequel to his actions, the last fulfillment of his being. The celebration of such a death is the noblest thing that man can enter on.⁵⁶⁷

⁵⁶⁶ Henrik Ibsen, *The Master Builder*, trans. Brian Johnston. *Ibsen's Selected Plays* (New York: Norton & Company, 2004), 422.

⁵⁶⁷ Richard Wagner, *The Art Work of the Future and Other Works*, trans. W. Ashton Ellis (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 199.

I do not laud injury or death, as Wagner did, but the willingness to demonstrate one's commitment and refusal through personal risk is a noble thing. Within the context of art it is beautiful. Vinge reprises and surpasses Solness' climb. Whereas Ibsen offers Solness' death as rejoinder to the architect's bravado, the Director's safe and seemingly fearless ascent transcends the limits of artistic pragmatism. The Director walks back along the seam of the roof towards the camera operator—arms defiantly outstretched in a Christ-like pose—picks up the microphone and speaks: “this is very, very dangerous, we have to shut the performance down because this was so dangerous.” Looking back across the roof, he concedes: “There is the limit for German theatre.”⁵⁶⁸ Back inside the Prater, the Director washes the shit from his face. In the final image of the performance, the live video is replaced by a title card declaring, *Eine Kündigung*: “Cancellation.”⁵⁶⁹

Days later, Nicole Konstantinou, the *Volksbühne*'s head of press and public relations, offered an official statement in response: “We stand by his art. The piece is not cancelled.”⁵⁷⁰ In fact, *12-Spartenhaus* gave two further performances, completing the originally scheduled run. The Director's stunts and excretions during the last performance of *12-Spartenhaus* were performed differently, but their effect was the same. The Director prowled the Prater's backstage, carefully reading any safety instructions he found. Encountering a fire extinguisher, he reads its warning label before discharging its contents into his own face. In the haze of white powder, the Director dramatically enacts his own affixation. Later, the Director inverts the practice of

⁵⁶⁸ *12-Spartenhaus*, performance video, June 23, 2013.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷⁰ Nicole Konstantinou, quoted in “*Ekel-Künstler nagelt Castorfs Wutbrief an Tür*” (Disgust artists nailed Castorf's angry letter to the door), *B.Z. Berlin*, June 25, 2013, accessed February 3, 2016, <http://www.bz-berlin.de/artikel-archiv/ekel-kuenstler-nagelt-castorfs-wutbrief-an-tuer>.

urinating into his mouth by relieving himself into a backstage toilet and delicately cleaning the rim of stray droplets. In demonstrating the “rules” and dangers of *not* following them, the Director elucidates the theatre as a site of regimentation and limits. The fire extinguisher scene is half-mockery, half-science experiment exhibiting the harmlessness of the action that sparked such debate. The Director’s performance of a housebroken adult, meanwhile, lampoons the institution’s presumed power to sanction artistic expression. The Director’s parodic obedience, just like his transgressions, directs attention to the theatre’s limits.

The previously scheduled fall reopening of *12-Spartenhaus* never occurred. Berlin’s critics playfully speculated over the artists’ whereabouts and work. In *Berliner Zeitung*, Matthias Weigel gave a fictional account of an attempt to sleuth out Vinge’s identity and location to satisfy his gossip-hungry boss.⁵⁷¹ Titled “The Case of Vegard Vinge,” Weigel uncovers the funding announcement for the duo’s next production, *Total-Theatre 12*. The project, which was soon after aborted, planned to move the group to the *Volksbühne*’s main stage where they would simultaneously present Ibsen’s twelve “realist” texts in the style of Erwin Piscator’s “total theatre.”⁵⁷² The editor meets Weigel’s discovery with a revealing rage, “FUCK THE ART, MAN! I NEED HIS UNDERWEAR, his father complex, his cuddly toy, something up close and personal!”⁵⁷³

⁵⁷¹ Matthias Weigel, “*Der Fall Vegard Vinge*” (The Case of Vegard Vinge), *Berliner Zeitung*, December 16, 2013, accessed February 8, 2016, <http://www.berliner-zeitung.de/kultur/unterm-strich-der-fall-vegard-vinge,10809150,25638256.html>.

⁵⁷² The project, which was aborted for undisclosed reasons, first came to light through a funding proposal posted on the website of the Cultural Foundation of Germany (Kulturstiftung des Bundes), but has subsequently been removed. http://www.kulturstiftung-des-bundes.de/cms/en/sparten/buehne_und_bewegung/totaltheater.html

⁵⁷³ Weigel, “The Case of Vegard Vinge.”

The editor's hyperbolic response illustrates the cult of intrigue that grew out of the *Saga*'s productions and their creators' attempts at personal and artistic autonomy. Weigel went on to write a more searching, two-part report for *Nachtkritik* titled "What really makes Vegard Vinge."⁵⁷⁴ The articles featured conversations with the *Volksbühne*'s Sebastian Kaiser, who confirmed that the theatre was trying to bring Vinge/Müller's project to the main stage, but in the interim the artists would finish their residency in the Prater. In the spirit of Brecht's proposed laboratory theatre, the artists would show their work when they deemed it ready. Castorf affirmed the compromise, noting, "I think Vinge's retreat is something special and important."⁵⁷⁵ The *Volksbühne*'s permissiveness caught the attention of Berlin's then mayor, Klaus Wowereit, who, according to Castorf, said, "Frank, I do not get angry, but eventually the theatre has to play and be seen."⁵⁷⁶ Nearly six months removed from the scandals, cancellation, and debates, Weigel posited that the entirety of *12-Spartenhaus* and the battles it provoked were "a defiant response to the previous success [of *Borkman*], the *Theatertreffen* invitation, and 'Vinge-hype' [...] A

⁵⁷⁴ See, Matthias Weigel, "Was macht eigentlich Vegard Vinge?" (What Really Makes Vegard Vinge?), November 20, 2013: http://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8769:blog-was-macht-eigentlich&catid=315:blog-gemeinundnuetzlich-aktuell&Itemid=100078; and "Was macht eigentlich Vegard Vinge?, Teil II" (What really makes Vegard Vinge, Part II), December 16, 2014: http://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=10376:blog-was-macht-eigentlich-vegard-vinge-teil-ii&catid=315:blog-gemeinundnuetzlich-aktuell&Itemid=100078.

⁵⁷⁵ Klaus Wowereit, quoted by Frank Castorf in interview with Peter Laudenbach, "Wir erleben den permanenten Weltkrieg—Frank Castorf im Gespräch" (We are witnessing a permanent World War—an Interview with Frank Castorf), *tip—berlin.de*, November 11, 2014, accessed February 9, 2016, <http://www.tip-berlin.de/kultur-und-freizeit/wir-erleben-den-permanenten-weltkrieg-frank-castorf-im-gesprach>.

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

masochistic refusal against all expectations.”⁵⁷⁷ Vinge gave some evidence to this impulse years earlier when discussing the group’s increasing success:

If I say I want to take away my name [from the production] then the theatre says “no one will come because they need something they can recognize.” But I find this to be a very interesting mechanism because [at the same time] you have to reinvent yourself all the time. You have to be careful that your name doesn’t become a brand, because it becomes a brand anyway and [then] what do you do with that brand? It would be nice to ruin my own brand in a way.⁵⁷⁸

As scholars of the avant-garde point out in the previous chapter, what at first seems to be career suicide often ends up a gateway to greater prestige and success. Whether *12-Spartenhaus* is seen as an idealistic stand, childish reaction, or calculated ploy, the risks the *Saga* takes are as uncommon as the responses it garners. While Castrof and many critics stood behind the production and Vinge/Müller’s “retreat,” others squarely rejected the *Saga*’s methods as outside the bounds of art. Vinge/Müller never reopened the Prater and never explained its closure. In the midst of the *12-Spartenhaus* scandal, Wolfgang Behrens’s article for *Nachtkritik* featured a compelling clue in the form of an anonymous quote from a member of the *Volksbühne*’s technical staff. Discussing the plan to reopen *12-Spartenhaus* that fall, the staff member replied, “The *Volksbühne*’s employees know how to stop it.”⁵⁷⁹ In some sense then, the *Saga* successfully discovered the limits of Germany’s most permissive theatre.

⁵⁷⁷ Weigel, “The Case of Vegard Vinge.”

⁵⁷⁸ Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller, interview with author. Internet videophone call. Jersey City, NJ and Berlin, Germany, July 6 2010.

⁵⁷⁹ Wolfgang Behrens, “*Die Kündigung?*,” (Cancellation?) *Nachtkritik*, June 23, 2013, accessed June 1, 2014, http://www.nachtkritik.de/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=8061%3A12-spartenhaus-ida-mueller-und-vegard-vinge-halten-die-tueren-fest-verschlossen&catid=42%3Avolksbuehne-berlin&Itemid=60.

A Conclusion

12-Spartenhaus' cancellation provides an opportunity to ask: what does the *Saga*'s idealist desire for autonomy and oppositional means teach us about the limits of contemporary theatre? Practitioners have long sought to expand the parameters of their theatre, offering challenging content and forms. Such "hunting" of limits is recognizable to the point of near banality in accounts of postdramatic theatre's "undecidability," Ibsen's transgressive plays, Wagner's seductive and ideological operas, and the antagonisms of the historical avant-gardes' manifestoes and performances. These narratives of theatre's capacity to challenge—driven by the avant-gardes' own legacy and the academy's thirst for discovery—have led to a suspicion of provocation.

This suspicion is palpable in the reportage and criticism of contemporary performance. In the *Performing Art Journal*'s fortieth-anniversary issue, the publication's founder and editor, Bonnie Marranca, considers the landscape of theatre in 2015. Marranca observes that "a sense of taking pleasure in the experience of artworks themselves is frequently missing, that they are regarded essentially as a manifestation of culture—a statement about something else."⁵⁸⁰ At first blush, the art-first sentiment seems in keeping with the *Saga*'s aspirations for autonomy. As Marranca's assessment continues, however, she asks, "Is there too much critique in writing on the arts today? Do so many works have to be 'subversive,' a form of 'resistance,' or 'intervention' to be worthy: how have they earned those descriptions?"⁵⁸¹ The twin binaries set up here are endemic of contemporary experimental performance both in its creation and its broader

⁵⁸⁰ Bonnie Marranca, "Present Tense," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 112, no. 1 (2016): 4.

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid.*

academic discourses. On the one hand, art experience is valued by its instrumentalization as a cultural spokesperson, its ability to help us see the world more clearly. On the other hand, art is dogged by a critical discourse that favors forms of provocation, of which Marranca wryly ponders the merit. Surely, the impulse to find a cultural talisman hidden within every new production leads to overstatement, which this very conclusion may also be accused. What is worrisome, however, is attributing art's capacity to unsettle, provoke, and antagonize with overzealous analysis. Provocation in Marranca's summary is synonymous with social utility, which is the enemy of art's vitality. Contemporary performance scholars invested in critique express a similar fatigue. Mike Sell declares, for example, in the introduction to *Avant-Garde: Race, Religion, War*, that the book is "a call neither for a new avant-garde nor for cutting-edge accounts of the newest, coolest, most radical art from some hitherto unnoticed enclave."⁵⁸² Sell's foray into under-appreciated aspects of what today's avant-garde might mean is beyond reproach. Yet the sentence—admittedly singled out for purposes of illustration—captures a more widespread suspicion of transgression *as* fashion: old wine in new skins. Richard Schechner's "The Conservative Avant-Garde" announces a comparable weariness: "With each passing year, the historicity rather than the currency of the avant-garde is seen more clearly."⁵⁸³ Provocation's obsolescence is, now, an historical inevitability.

Suspicion towards provocation coincides with a turn towards the non-antagonistic aspects of theatre's social dimensions. Some engines influencing this shift are the decentering of the historical avant-gardes as an exclusively European (and oppositional)

⁵⁸² Mike Sell, *The Avant-Garde: Race, Religion, War* (New York: Seagull Books, 2011), 3.

⁵⁸³ Richard Schechner, "The Conservative Avant-Garde," *New Literary History* 41, no. 4, (2010): 896.

construct, performance studies’ understanding of the broader range of social activities as “performance,” as well as the post-WWII neo-avant-gardes’ emphasis on the political utility of theatre as a means of direct action, enlightenment, or democratic representation. Shannon Jackson’s *Social Works* (2011), Jill Dolan’s *The Utopia in Performance* (2005), and Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics* (1998)—to name only some of the most recent and important contributors—emphasize aspects of this sociality, highlighting a current interest in the redemptive features of theatre, the capacity of art to offer sanctuary, community, and comfort, its capacity to engender understanding and reflection. Perhaps most telling of all is the fact that Nicholas Ridout’s *Passionate Amateurs* (2013), which examines “those who work together for the production of value for one another (for love, that is, rather than money) in ways that refuse—sometimes rather quietly and perhaps even ineffectually—the division of labor that obtains under capitalism as usual,” has not one mention of Wagner or the avant-gardes.⁵⁸⁴ To be fair, Ridout attends to less picked-over and overtly “social” artists. Nonetheless, the works and practitioners discussed by Ridout trade in the theories of Wagnerian communitarianism as well as avant-garde amateurism and outsiderhood. The result is a vision of theatre’s sociality expunged of the medium’s unsavory contradictions, ugly pasts, exploitations, coercions, seductions, and other systems of power. This is Kimberly Jannarone’s “political fallacy” reproduced as critical lens.⁵⁸⁵

⁵⁸⁴ Nicholas Ridout, *Passionate Amateurs Theatre, Communism, and Love* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), 15.

⁵⁸⁵ Kimberly Jannarone, “Introduction: The Political Fallacy of Vanguard Performance,” Kimberly Jannarone, ed. *Vanguard Performance: Beyond Left and Right* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015).

So what's wrong with that? In fact, as I have argued throughout the preceding chapters, the *Saga* similarly imagines the theatre as a site of redemptive experience. In contrast to predominate discourses on contemporary performance, the *Saga* proposes that our current theatre is the obstacle to such aesthetic achievements. The most common forms these "obstacles" take in the *Saga* are actual and fictional administrators, management, artists, institutions, and regulations. The curator, artistic director, technical staff, stage manager, and public relations people are exposed within the *Saga*'s productions. It is cruel to demonize them. They are not demons. Many love art as much as Vinge/Müller. But fairly or not, these subjects of the larger theatre system—what Shannon Jackson calls social support—are the limits to be interrogated.⁵⁸⁶ Indispensable as they are to the production of art, from the perspective of autonomy, their centrality threatens to supersede the art itself. The impediments these people and rules represent to the theatre is their authority to evaluate and limit art using non-artistic categories. Or, as Adorno saw the predicament, culture's subjection to "abstract standards imposed from without."⁵⁸⁷ This is not exclusively an issue of how funds are divided between artistic and administrative needs, but more importantly a question of influence and control: who gets to establish the rules of the game. The hunt of limits is an effort to expose where this power is unbalanced. For the *Saga*, theatre is only redemptive and can only be a model of freedom when the barriers to its own creative sovereignty are overcome. Unlike its contemporaries, the *Saga* sees the theatrical landscape as saturated—even defined by—regulations, limits, and governance. In performance, therefore, the *Saga* hunts theatre's

⁵⁸⁶ Shannon Jackson, *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (New York: Routledge, 2011).

⁵⁸⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, "Culture and Administration," in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (New York: Routledge, 1991), 113.

limits rather than create within them. To do so, the *Saga* looks back to the mythologized time of modernity where notions of artistic autonomy, idealism, and opposition were seen as radical rather than ridiculous.

As I have attempted to illustrate throughout these chapters, the *Saga*'s backward-looking idealism is its most important and prominent feature. It separates it from nearly all other Western theatre artists working today. The *Saga*'s idealism rejects what most of today's theatre artists and art works have accepted as a fact of life in late capitalism, namely, social atomization. In rejecting this, the *Saga* asks how much an audience, institution, or employee will endure in the name of art. Embedded in the question is an idea that if art is to be more than a cultural commodity, aesthetic experience must be measured by one's willingness to endure, to exchange something other than money. With this ideology in tow, the *Saga*'s artists burden themselves with self-imposed endurance in the forms of time, effort, and injury. In the permissible and affluent cultures of Norway and Germany, where free speech and expression are not only prized but also protected, the *Saga* must seek out risk. If the *Saga*'s artists seem unafraid, it is partly because they have financial support, but also because they operate within cultures where risk is rewarded. In comparison, the *Saga* reveals how the chill over arts funding, prompted by the global financial crisis, has replaced artistic boldness and refusal with the mentality of the market economy. As the choreographer Mårten Spångberg summarizes with self-deprecating sarcasm, "Whatever the price, whatever the circumstances, whatever the proposition is, in the era of projects we are all always available."⁵⁸⁸ It is the pervasiveness of this mentality that makes the *Saga*'s "retreat" after *12-Spartenhaus*—let

⁵⁸⁸ Mårten Spångberg, "Motivation at the End of Times," *Frakcija: Performing Arts Journal* no. 55 (2010): 71.

alone their history of refusals—important. Total retreat, just like autonomy is impossible. The *Saga*'s doomed pursuits, however, cast the material conditions of the contemporary theatre in stark relief. In the end, as always, romantic idealism is made to kneel before materialism—spiritually dead, but intractable. These are the limits to be tested, discovered, but never overthrown.

The performances' pursuit of limits takes heroic narrative forms, but the *Saga* itself is more historical than valiant. Previous practitioners who challenged and changed artistic limits inspire all the *Saga*'s methods, ideology, and aesthetics. What is critical in the *Saga*'s return to the transgressions of Ibsen, Wagner, and the avant-gardes is the potential to redeploy those attacks on contemporary limits. The tools may seem familiar but their use and targets are different. The *Saga* enables us to consider that while provocation and transgression constitute their own historical categories, their effects always function in the present.

It is against the tides of anti-provocation, commercializing experimental performance, and austerity that the *Saga* marshals the grandiose idealism of the nineteenth and twentieth-centuries. Theatre has always looked backwards. Repetition whether in plots, characters, practices, or thought, has always shown the present through the past. Experimental theatre has often sought to parlay or critique these methods by restaging or deconstructing canonical texts, but it rarely draws upon what made those works daring or notable in the first place. The *Saga* gathers from its sources what Boris Groys argues is modernity's epochal ethos, "in which the present was experienced as a moment of transition from the familiar past to the unfamiliar future."⁵⁸⁹ This surety of

⁵⁸⁹ Boris Groys, *In The Flow* (New York: Verso, 2016), 137-38.

forward motion, what appears in the *Saga* as an ideological didacticism, is what gave modernity its revolutionary fervor, a quality absent from the contemporary. The question that Vinge/Müller provokes us to ask is, therefore, a historical one: what are the conditions that make a project like itself so improbable today? Or, conversely, the *Saga* invites us to see the present as a time of unprecedented possibility, a period in which the dreams of the past can be made present. The only thing lacking is the will. In addressing itself to the limits, the *Saga* helps us to see the theatre, theatrical institutions, and audiences in action, in crisis. Like all ideology, it forces you to align yourself. It believes that the only way to know the health of an art is to ask where it stands now, today, and again in the next performance, in the present. This is something that opposition can do for us. It can teach us the rules of the game.

What is the virtue of this return to idealism and autonomy? As I've argued throughout, the *Saga*'s use of Ibsen, Wagner, and avant-gardist provocation affords an opportunity to reflect on what these forms and ideologies contribute to contemporary practice. In the case of Ibsen, this constitutes a fuller appreciation of his non-realist concerns and the interrelationship between his plays, themes, and recurring character types. The *Saga*'s procedures affirm Ibsen as a formalist, an aesthetic rather than social iconoclast, the forerunner of the European avant-gardes. While these notions are not unique to Ibsen scholarship, they are rare within Ibsen productions. Even in the case of most radical European directorial revisions of Ibsen's plays, as I argue in chapter two, experimentation is seen as the purview of the director rather than the text in question. The *Saga*'s decade-long meditation on Ibsen's themes, conflicts, and characters attributes a level of aesthetic radicalism to the playwright unmatched in his production history. In

doing so, the *Saga* invites scholars to consider Ibsen's canonization in relation to aesthetic intransigence rather than its advertised social utility.

For Wagner, the *Saga* offers a chance to consider the legacy of his theories and personage through performance. Staging the composer as the *Ur* director, the *Saga* gives new attention to the complex interchange between his ever-shifting art and biography. The concern is Wagner's art, but also its uncanny transformation into an expression and typification of an art's politics. Whether dismissed or unpacked, Wagner is symbolically synonymous with fascism and Nazism. By filtering Ibsen's plays through Wagner's theories, narratives, and personage, the *Saga* forges new links between the two artists' idealism. Through ideological connections, the *Saga* uses Wagner to make its return to unfashionable notions of artistic autonomy, grand narratives, and the sublime, despite the political contexts and historical eventualities that have come to shape those concepts. In doing so, Vinge/Müller provide an opportunity to query the relationship between post-WWII critiques of ideological aesthetics and the current state of an increasingly commoditized and market driven arts sector. Have the critique and deconstruction of art's grand narratives also helped to pave the way for the commoditization of art practice? Do those critiques, conversely, now provide opportunities to reclaim antiquated notions of art's spiritual rather than pragmatic centrality to social life? One would assume that if such a notion is defensible, it rests on the parsing of aesthetic idealism from its complicity with historical atrocities. The *Saga* refuses to provide such neat parceling: Wagner is Genius *and* Nazi. In performance, the dialectical jostling between the poles of art and fascism recharges the theatre as an overtly ideological enterprise. The *Saga*

stages a space in which it is neither naïve nor safe to ask, what is possible through the ideology of aesthetic idealism?

The *Saga*'s dogmatic search for outer limits gives lie to the notion that the theatrical avant-garde is dead. Unlike the *Saga*'s use of Ibsen and Wagner, the productions' engagement with the avant-gardes is more theoretical than citational. Yet, the avant-gardes' ethos within the *Saga* is unmistakable. Within the contemporary theatre, the avant-gardes' spirit of opposition is synonymous with Ibsen and Wagner's idealism. The *Saga*'s oppositionality, whether manifest temporally, in the refusal to tour, or even perform, shines a light on the limits and taboos of our contemporary theatre. Limits are generational, fluid and, as the *Saga* shows, must be endlessly negotiated and rejected. In this respect, the *Saga* is a litmus test for artistic limits in the opening decades of the twenty-first century. By demonstrating the fact that opposition is possible, the *Saga* invites scholars to ask, what other limits and conventions have settled into experimental practice? More to the point, what are the origins and effects of those limits and conventions? What, for example, is rendered obsolete by the ninety-minute time slot and who benefits from its ubiquity?

The reconsideration of historical forms (Ibsen's realism), ideologies (Wagner), and performance modes (avant-garde oppositionality) stems from the *Saga*'s recuperation of aesthetic idealism to contest the contemporary theatre. In doing so, the *Saga* invites scholars of contemporary practice to consider the cost of having jettisoned ideas of idealism, autonomy, and opposition in favor of discourses of subjectivity, relationality, and resistance. The causes of such shifts are manifold and, as the *Saga* makes clear, idealism's relationship to historical horrors have done tremendous damage to those

concepts in the theatre. Reinvesting in idealism as an aesthetic practice rather than a political reality offers the concept renewed value. Here autonomy—the empirical separation of fiction and reality that undergirds the *Saga*—is of the utmost importance. The promise of a recuperated artistic idealism, divorced from material concerns, rests in the disunion of fiction and reality. Contrary to the preoccupations of contemporary European and US experimental theatre, the *Ibsen-Saga* denounces the relativism born of anti-idealist art.

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