

## The Third World and Ibsen: Production Perspectives in *Romersholtm*

Sandra Hardy

It is said that Odin, the king of the Norse gods, was the greatest maestro known to mankind. Because he wanted an orchestra which would resound the world over, he created an acoustical masterpiece, the Scandinavian peninsula. He placed the string section in the South, the woodwinds to the West, and the horns in the East. The allusive percussion section was placed in Finmark where the timpani could be used to chase the frost giants into no man's land. With Odin's great eye, he was able to conduct his players day and night. And it is said that this is why the sea sings and the wind whistles, the mountains roar and the sun shines at midnight.<sup>1</sup>

Henrik Ibsen, more than any other Scandinavian, tried to compose a literature which would incorporate the intricate sounds of the North with the musical soul of Norway. *Rosmersholm* may come closest to accomplishing that aim. It is a play whose movements are filled with the intricate rhythms of a developing Norway. However, rather than a stuffy Victorian lecture on duty and morality, or a depiction of a Norwegian political struggle between progressive and conservative, Ibsen's play might be better served if the passion of the play were at the heart of any production.

Few if any American productions of *Rosmersholm* have succeeded in going beyond William Archer's criticism that while the play is a masterpiece of construction, its ambiguity of character and subtexts is far too allusive to be understood by most audiences. He concluded that the play, therefore, becomes terribly monotonous theatre.<sup>2</sup> Even August Strindberg remarked in the only

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Dr. Hardy is an Associate Professor in the Theatre Department at the University of Maine where she is the Acting Specialist. While she is an Ibsen scholar whose translations have been performed at New York University, at Augustana College and at the University of Maine, her performance background has inspired considerable work in the area of comedy. She has presented workshops around the country on the teaching of comedic technique and writes frequently on the subject. Dr. Hardy's "Liberating the Acting Class: A Fresh Look at Teaching Comedic Technique" appears in *Theatre Topics*, September, 1992, and she is currently working on an acting text, *Are They Laughing?*

positive commentary he ever wrote on Ibsen's prose work that *Rosmersholm* "is unintelligible to the theatre public, mystical to the semi-educated, but crystal-clear to anyone with a knowledge of modern psychology."<sup>3</sup> While the twentieth century has brought us brilliant new insights into human behavior, *Rosmersholm* remains one of the least popular of Ibsen's prose cycle, and a mystery to those theatregoers who have seen the play produced. Perhaps a closer look at character and casting, a more careful consideration of the relationships established, and a clearer sense of character motivation will inspire some new interest in mounting this magnificent work.

At the heart of Ibsen's play is Rebekka West, perhaps Ibsen's most fascinating female character. Her contradictions are endless, her power undeniable and her fate tragic. Born in Finmark to a woman named Ganvik, she is probably a Lapp,<sup>4</sup> a nomadic people who live in northern Scandinavia. Anthropologists are unsure of the precise origin of Laplanders but speculate that they probably migrated from Asia as early as the fifth century. In Ibsen's time there were still those who believed that Laplanders practiced magic and pagan witchcraft, despite an extraordinarily successful effort to convert these gentle people to Christianity. Ibsen probably derived the name Ganvik from the word *gann*, a term commonly used to refer to the supernatural powers of Laplanders. While Scandinavia has a record of progressive reform second to none, the bigotry toward Lapps which reigned during the nineteenth century is unquestionable, and in a subtle but substantial way permeates Ibsen's *Rosmersholm*.

Therefore, it is imperative that the casting of Rebekka suggest her background. As she is probably of mixed race, that visual look should be apparent to an audience as it will help in defining the enigmatic behavior of someone very different from the people who surround her. Rebekka's unique charm is likely to have been the result of an isolated early life untouched by the influences of continental European culture and mores, and a later life abruptly altered by the education and sophistication encouraged by Dr. West. Therefore, while Rebekka is poised and articulate and superficially acceptable as the mistress of Rosmersholm, she is in no way an aristocrat of Rosmer's breeding, and should provide contrast in all these respects. It is essential that an actress avoid giving Rebekka the appearance of a Victorian matron. She is a woman of nomadic breeding whose understanding of bourgeois values is recent, and whose basic inclinations are toward expressions of honest emotion and thought. The phrase "dual personality" which Ibsen used to describe Rebekka in a letter to Hans Schroder,<sup>5</sup> the head of the Christiania Theatre, probably refers to a pagan passion restrained in gracious refinement, a mechanism of survival manifested in attempts at social acceptability. The result is a character portrayal which suggests an attractive, alluring appearance punctuated by tones of ironic contradiction.

Upon the entrance of Johannes Rosmer, an audience should be struck by the contrast between this personification of a Victorian gentleman and the woman with whom he is living. Rebekka's dark beauty is stark in comparison to Rosmer's fair hair, his light skin and his delicate good looks. The Pastor, a typical southern Norwegian, is a representative of the conservative upper class and a descendant of two hundred years of respectability and leadership in the small mill town on which the estate of Rosmersholm borders. The North-South physical contrast between Rebekka and Rosmer parallels the cultural, moral and social differences which make their union so passionate and yet so unfulfilled. Because Rosmer is so entrenched in the ministerial post his father has acquired for him, he has succeeded in hiding from the tyrannical dictates of tradition. As a result, he is rather naive about the outside world, innocent of the ways in which people are forced to survive. The word *ros* in Norwegian means praise, the word *mer*, more. The selection of the name Rosmer, more praise would indicate that Ibsen wanted his audience to understand and be repeatedly reminded of the expectations imposed on Rosmer. To be worthy of more praise than the two centuries of uninterrupted distinction his forefathers had earned was a burden made insurmountable by Rosmer's fear of failure.

In contrast, Rebekka's strength, her courage to explore the unknown, her passion for life and her will to succeed, are the direct result of her early Lapp environment where women were free to develop as full human beings. Unlike Victorian women, Lapp women were given a special place in the family tent, their opinions on all subjects were respected, and their influences on economic and social matters were considerable. Even as children, boys and girls played the same hunting games, were each given reindeer herds of their own to raise, and in general, were treated equally.<sup>6</sup> Rebekka's mother, a mid-wife and probably a medicine woman who administered to the sick in Dr. West's absence, would have been a powerful role model. While Laestadianism,<sup>7</sup> a form of revivalism to promote Christianity, was especially popular in Lapland during the last half of the nineteenth century, it is unlikely that either Ganvik or West would be attracted to this kind of fundamentalism. Unmarried with a child, living a life-style which included a lover who was clearly progressive, Rebekka's mother would have been rather critical of such a movement. More likely, Rebekka was born into an immediate environment characterized by freer intellectual, social and sexual exchange, cultural mores consistent with sexual equality and a morality based on survival rather than sin.

It is particularly important that Rebekka's confidence contrast with Rosmer's gentle reticence. She is neither abrasive nor sexually aggressive—she is charming. He is neither effeminate nor weak—he is vulnerable. Ibsen suggested to Schroder that Rosmer be played by "the most delicate and sensitive personality

that the theatre (could) lay its hands on."<sup>8</sup> But too often, Rosmer is portrayed as a rigid, inhibited, passionless man whose self-discovery is made impossible to believe. Rosmer may be shy, but he is curious, eager to serve his community, intelligent without suggesting the slightest arrogance and principled without being self-righteous. But what is most disarming is his boyish smile; for he hasn't the slightest awareness of his own passions. This is precisely why Rebekka is so attracted to Rosmer, a response which an audience must believe to become invested in their relationship.

In contrast, Rebekka is a clever conversationalist, witty and vibrant with a zest for life which lightens up a room. The actress who plays her must create the kind of personality Rosmer loves, Beate adored and Kroll desired. While the Professor suggests that she *bewitched* them all, an allusion to his racist attitudes, Ibsen, in response to Schroder's suggested casting, warned that "Rebekka's manner must on no account carry any hint of imperiousness or masculinity. She does not force Rosmer. She lures him."<sup>9</sup>

*Hel*, the first syllable of Mrs. Helseth's name, is the Norwegian word for whole, unbroken or intact. The second syllable, *seth*, means complete or solid. Mrs. Helseth is often portrayed as a cantankerous and moralistic old woman who has an adversarial relationship with virtually every other character in the play. Worse, she is often seen as the quintessential hypocrite talking behind everyone's back, but cowering in the presence of her superiors, or, the ignorant peasant whose presence is designed for comic relief. Neither the derivation of her name nor the text itself supports these interpretations. She is probably a woman of substantial size who walks with a crisp, confident gait. A keen observer with a warm but honest heart, she is a rather remarkable judge of character. And Mrs. Helseth rarely hesitates to share her observations. It is this unguarded commentary which gives foundation to her wonderful humor.

What is most important, however, is Mrs. Helseth's relationship with Rebekka West. This genuine rapport between the two women clarifies not only Rebekka's character but the *white horse leitmotif* which is so important in *Rosmersholm*. Therefore, an audience must respect Mrs. Helseth's commentary rather than dismiss it as perfunctory or the ramblings of a superstitious old fool.

The rapport between Rebekka and Mrs. Helseth is established immediately. As the first act opens, an audience sees them peering out the same window, watching Rosmer hesitate at the footbridge. It is as though they are sharing a special moment of mutual concern as they watch Rosmer try to cross the footbridge from which his wife, Beate, jumped to her death. Rebekka's use of "we" and her willingness to share Rosmer's grief with Mrs. Helseth suggest the trust she has for the older woman. And Mrs. Helseth trusts Rebekka as well, for she is quite willing to share the *white horse* myth. When Rebekka observes that

the living cling to their dead at Rosmersholm, Mrs. Helseth disagrees: "It's the dead that do the clinging in this house. . . . They don't want to let go the people they've left behind. . . . Otherwise, there'd be no white horse."<sup>10</sup> The dialogue that follows should be good-natured teasing on Rebekka's part to motivate the perceptive servant's subtle but terse commentary as they watch Kroll from the window: "He has no trouble crossing that footbridge—and it was his own sister."

The verbal patter between these two women should be filled with an ironic humor which endears them to an audience and is so characteristic of Ibsen's tongue-in-cheek attitude toward pretension. Most important, however, is that special rapport they have between them. When Rebekka, watching Kroll exit across the footbridge, wishes aloud that she hopes he doesn't meet the white horse, Mrs. Helseth becomes alarmed: "Oh, do you think someone is going to die?" Rebekka gently but honestly assures Mrs. Helseth: "No, of course not.... But there are all kinds of horses in the world, Mrs. Helseth." As Lapp custom considers servants part of the family,<sup>11</sup> Rebekka's relationship with Mrs. Helseth would allow an easy, comfortable rapport. This heritage would also explain why Rebekka, a well-educated free spirit, would be so receptive to Mrs. Helseth's apparent superstitions. The legend of the *white horse* is omnipresent in the mythology of Lapland,<sup>12</sup> and would have been quite familiar to Rebekka. Never authoritative or condescending, Rebekka becomes the beneficiary of not only Mrs. Helseth's observations but her insights as well. When Rebekka trustingly confides her concern for the Pastor's health at the opening of the third act, Mrs. Helseth offers Kroll and Mortensgaard as two very good causes for upset. She then comments on Mortensgaard: "He fathered a child with that woman whose husband deserted her. . . . She should have had more sense." Mrs. Helseth's honesty may be interpreted as judgmental, but her compassion is evident: "(Mortensgaard) couldn't marry her since she was already married. He suffered for that. . . ."

When the conversation turns to Mrs. Rosmer's letter to Mortensgaard, which Mrs. Helseth delivered, she is uncomfortable revealing the contents. While it appears to some critics that Rebekka manipulates information from Mrs. Helseth, this notion is inconsistent with the housekeeper's behavior throughout the rest of the play. As Rebekka too, has had to bear the condescension and disapproval of snobs like the Krolls, Mrs. Helseth is only too willing to confide in a person she sees as an ally. Moreover, this is a wise woman-of-the-world who is far more perceptive than to be taken in by opportunists. That she has no idea that Rebekka has, indeed, encouraged Beate's suicide, would suggest that on some level Rebekka may have taken very good care of Rosmer's wife, that Rebekka's feelings for Beate were very mixed, and that obsession with Rosmer, that

uncontrollable passion, allowed Rebekka to encourage Beate's depression and ultimate suicide.

The rapport between Rebekka and Mrs. Helseth should be seen as camaraderie, that simpatico which evolves between outsiders looking in at Rosmersholm. When, at the end of the act, Rebekka discloses that she is leaving and never coming back, Mrs. Helseth is genuinely moved: "Never? How will we manage without you? Just when everything had become so settled and comfortable. . . ." Ibsen ends the third act with a pattern an audience will recognize. When Rebekka is in trouble she always turns to Mrs. Helseth: "I think I saw one of those white horses today." Mrs. Helseth's response is doubtful: "A white horse? In broad daylight?" With a bit of vulnerability which is reserved for Mrs. Helseth, Rebekka shares her fear: "Here at Rosmersholm those white horses might be seen at any time, Mrs. Helseth."

At the opening of the last act Mrs. Helseth commits a breach of ethics inconsistent with her loyalties to the House of Rosmer. Seeing Rebekka's trunk packed, and upset that she is really leaving, Mrs. Helseth expresses her anger with Rosmer: "He hasn't behaved well at all! . . . Mortensgaard had an excuse, but the Pastor is perfectly free to marry!" Of course she has presumed that conspiring with the likes of Mortensgaard has encouraged Rosmer to be less of a man. Mrs. Helseth provides an ironic moment of introspection when she defends Rebekka's part in what she assumes is an unwanted pregnancy: ". . . I know it's not easy for a woman . . . being on her own . . . to resist. . . . After all, we're all human."

Mrs. Helseth's commentary is more than valuable exposition or peasant wisdom that exposes the pseudo-Christian ideals perpetuated at Rosmersholm. She is the rock-solid support on which Rebekka can lean when she needs acceptance. That Mrs. Helseth loves Rebekka allows an audience to believe that Beate adored her, and that Rosmer, despite his constant state of sexual denial, has fallen inextricably in love with her. Finally, Mrs. Helseth's warmth and good humor are not only entertaining, but they help to draw closer attention to the *white horse leitmotif*. The more likable and admired Mrs. Helseth is, the clearer the poetic text will play.

There is almost a fugue-like quality to the construction of *Rosmersholm* which results in a contrapuntal treatment of character development. First and most important is the melodic love story of Rebekka and Rosmer. Intricately composed and played simultaneously, however, is the political theme of this play, introduced by a pair of political opponents whose ambitions blare throughout the composition.

After an eleven-year absence, Ibsen visited Norway in 1885, one year prior to the publication of *Rosmersholm*. The liberals had taken power but he was

appalled by the state of affairs in his homeland. He became painfully aware that Norway's struggle for independence<sup>13</sup> was characterized by opportunism, and that the future of Norway was incidental to the personal ambitions of leaders, both liberal and conservative. Both parties claimed his support and then viciously attacked him when he made his criticisms known. As a result, Ibsen concluded that they were all hypocrites and scoundrels and expressed his hurt and disappointment in a letter to his publisher: "I have come to realize that all men are puny, and it is disgusting to wander among them."<sup>14</sup>

Professor Kroll and Peder Mortensgaard are clearly representative of the kind of conservative and liberal Ibsen observed in Norway. Kroll is an established man of distinction in the small village where *Rosmersholm* takes place. He is headmaster of a school which strives to give pupils a classical traditional foundation which prepares *future leaders*—conservative future leaders who will perpetuate a past at the cost of a brighter, freer future. Yet he is more than that. He is one of those invaders from the ruthless world of politics who will pay any price for power. It is not unreasonable to assume that Ibsen's choice of name, Kroll, can become troll with one slip of the tongue. And the parallel is hardly a coincidence. The troll is an offensively aggressive disrupter of other people's lives; he is rather quick, quite strong and very destructive. If thwarted, his disposition turns ugly and his behavior becomes malicious. However, he can be rather amusing at times, a tactic designed to catch people off guard.<sup>15</sup>

Professor Kroll is probably a portly man, distinguished-looking, meticulously attractive but rugged of both body and tone. He is dogmatic, autocratic and critical, character traits which are often acquired by those who, over the years, have accepted the responsibility of educating the young. But unlike so many interpretations, there is a sensual almost flirtatious quality about him. He is clever, witty and the source of much of the ironic humor in *Rosmersholm*. It is this very humor which energizes the first three acts. In his introductory scene, for example, Kroll reveals that some of the senior boys have created a secret society which subscribes to his arch enemy's liberal newspaper: "Isn't that a marvelous influence on the future leaders of this country? And it's the brightest boys! The most gifted! These are the conspirators! Not the dunces!" The irony here is enhanced by Kroll's admission that his own children have been swept into the tide of liberalism and that although his wife has always "without exception, taken his point of view on virtually every subject", she has chosen to side with the children. It is clear why the Professor has come to Rosmer for help: ". . . The whole moral fiber of this society is threatened and I have a personal responsibility to set things right!" There is a familiar ring to Ibsen's humor here. To assume that a man who has completely lost control of his family will be able

to accomplish the enormous task of setting Norway right again is irony at its best. From ironic contradiction, however, Kroll's humor turns to sarcasm at its most invective. He is not the typical school teacher parody of Ibsen's earliest work, but a man obsessed with ambition who will destroy anyone in his way. Ultimately, he becomes Ibsen's universal comment on human beings whose egoism has rendered them *puny*.

Peder Mortensgaard, whose conniving opportunism allows him to avoid those who are anti-Christian in any way because "it wouldn't be wise to alienate too many people" is Ibsen's liberal alternative to Professor Kroll. Mortensgaard suggests that there are "too many free-thinkers in the movement already," a comment which suggests the ulterior motives which lie beneath a progressive facade. Again Ibsen is going beyond his journalist parodies to create a character whose bitterness has destroyed his principles.

Ibsen describes Mortensgaard as "a small man with thin, reddish hair", and Brendel refers to him as "a plebeian fool". These descriptions are further amplified by Ibsen's choice of name. *Mort* is the Norwegian word for roach, a member of the carp family indigenous to Northern Europe and Eastern North America. More commonly known as the sunfish, it is reddish in color, extremely plentiful, but too small and bony to eat. *Gaard*, the Norwegian word for yard, completes Ibsen's allusion to a scavenger who serves no useful purpose.

Despite the vital exposition and complication he brings to the second act, there is a tendency to stereotype Mortensgaard as well. He is too often portrayed as a little sneak who preys on the weak where they are most vulnerable. Mrs. Helseth suggests that he is a man who serves the poor and the needy as well as members of his community who need advice or comfort. However, he is clearly a rather lonely, bitter man who has been the victim of self-righteous moralists whose condemnation has caused him considerable emotional and economic hardship. Like Ibsen, himself, Mortensgaard has been unjustly treated by the pillars of power, men like Pastor Rosmer who come to regret their lack of forgiveness when they are reminded of their own vulnerability. Mortensgaard, often played too darkly, has a sense of humor which is again suggested in an ironic tone so typical of Norwegian humor. The editor's sardonic observations on the nature of politics will evoke laughter, that uncomfortable laughter which reflects identification.

This tone is consistent throughout Mortensgaard's single appearance in the play, when he mocks the future headline in the *Beacon* announcing Rosmer's change in philosophy: "*PASTOR ROSMER OF ROSMERSHOLM READY TO GUIDE HIS FLOCK TO NEW LIGHT*," or when he warns Rosmer that the party has need for respectability: "You see, I, myself, am a marked man. You surely



haven't forgotten that?" Mortensgaard reminds Rosmer. "You branded me yourself, as I recall."

As Mortensgaard's scene draws to a close, his power over Rosmer increases. The editor intends to use Beate's letter describing her suspicions that Rosmer and Rebekka were having a love affair as blackmail, manipulating a confused Rosmer into complete submission. The pastor, in his self-righteous condemnation of Mortensgaard for committing a similar sin, was responsible for Mortensgaard's dismissal from the school system. The journalist has waited patiently for this moment when he is able to impose revenge by using Rosmer in his climb to political prominence: "There is no reason in the world why a liberal man like yourself shouldn't be able to live life to its fullest. But, if certain rumors. . . ." This final triumph, delivered with the ironic humor so often absent in the mountings of Ibsen, will provide the kind of rich characterization the playwright originally intended. Moreover, Mortensgaard's humanity is preserved in a fully realized character rather than destroyed completely in political parody or propaganda.

Ibsen's fugue wouldn't be complete without the third and final theme of his composition. The obbligato, Ulrik Brendel, is the voice of Ibsen, singing a soft, quaint melody that reminds us that art and politics don't create a very pleasing harmony. If Kroll and Mortensgaard are rarely interpreted with the complexity intended by Ibsen, Ulrik Brendel is consistently misinterpreted as a buffoon designed primarily for comic relief. This loquacious recluse is much more than an amusing interlude in the first and last acts. Brendel is a man of undeniable integrity, little ambition and virtually no perseverance, qualities suggested in Rosmer. He is also a man of great passion, little social acceptability, and patterns of non-conformity too entrenched to be altered. In these respects, he resembles Rebekka. A mass of contradictions, Brendel's reality is his imagination, his life is an illusion.

The anomalic Brendel may be better understood by examining the derivations of his name. The Norwegian verb *brenne* which means to burn or commit to flames, would suggest the kind of burned-out idealist Brendel appears to represent. Brendel's Christian name, however, reveals the less obvious aspects of his character. Consistent with Ibsen's fascination with the folk legends of Finmark, it is likely that Ulrik is a version of *uldra*, a good-natured gnome who drinks a bit too much and has a tendency to use strange or foreign words in his speech. The *uldra* possesses great knowledge and has to glance at someone only once to know the inner soul. He also inhabits old houses as Ulrik did when he was Rosmer's childhood tutor.<sup>16</sup>

While Brendel's scenes reflect both the strengths and weaknesses of the central figures, they are packed with a comic irony which emerges from the self-

parody so frequent in Ibsen's work. When Rosmer asks if Brendel is serious about this turning point in his career, the gentle gnome replies: "Does my own pupil not realize that . . . I am the very symbol of seriousness? That I am about to . . . cast aside this modest reserve I have managed to maintain thus far?" An audience will find this interchange extremely funny as they are able to observe Brendel's appearance first hand. There isn't the slightest reserve in either his appearance or his commentary; nor does his reputation suggest that he was ever reserved in either lifestyle or opinion. Ibsen seems to be mocking those Ibsenites who denied him his failings . . . and his sense of humor about himself.

Ibsen not only mocks his own individual failings but his own art. When Rebekka volunteers that she has read some of Brendel's works, he apologizes for having wasted her time: ". . . My most important books have been read by neither men nor woman. No one! Except . . . myself!" When she asks why, he is matter-of-fact: "I've not written them yet!" Ibsen even makes fun of the creative process through Brendel: "I am awakened by new and glorious thoughts, the shadows of new ideas take shape and a great and infinite power sets me aloft on powerful pinions to poetry and art and . . . (he suddenly falls silent) . . . all in the abstract, of course." And while Brendel pleads for solitude, his desperate need for recognition is evident: "I've been showered with applause, saturated with accolades, crowned with laurel wreathes, . . . immersed in delights so intense, so intoxicating. . . ." The playwright himself was crowned with a laurel wreath by the Archbishop in receiving an honorary doctorate from Upsala University in 1877. He never forgot that occasion as he insisted from that point on that he be addressed as Doctor Ibsen.<sup>17</sup>

Brendel's return to Rosmersholm in the last act brings a more sardonic satire to Ibsen's self-parody. An audience, introduced to his slight-of-hand in the first act, is prepared for the same tricks when he asks Rosmer for a loan. Instead, the sad little man only asks for a couple of cast-off ideals. "I'm cleaned out, flat broke, my boy, stripped bare!" Very often the humor of *Rosmersholm*, the ironic delivery which makes each character so interesting, has been absent in the preceding acts. Brendel's timely entrance in the last act then is used rather dishonestly to energize an audience, and the closing moments of the play are destroyed. Brendel's scene of self-discovery should create a pathos, for this Chaplinesque figure has witnessed a reality too painful to bear, a life too empty to endure. Certainly Ulrik Brendel can provide great fun for an audience; but more important is his function as a teller of the inner tale. An audience needs to trust this man's voice, his genuine sorrow at the loss of illusion; he not only foreshadows the futures of Rebekka and Rosmer, he personifies the conflicts in Ibsen, himself.

The desperate need for comic relief in the last act of some mountings of *Rosmersholm* would suggest that greater attention be paid to the events which lead to the demise of the central characters. Rebekka's refusal of marriage at the end of second act, her confrontation with Kroll and subsequent confession in the third act, and her ultimate decision to sacrifice her life at the conclusion of the play are seen by a unanimity of scholarship as motivated by a conscience she has recently discovered. Edvard Beyer's commentary in *Ibsen, The Man and His Work* is fairly representative: "(Rebekka), for her part, has begun to be influenced by Rosmer and the Rosmer philosophy of life, and she has begun to experience guilt."<sup>18</sup> If this interpretation is incorporated in the conception of her character, a two-act denouement is created and any suspension of disbelief will have been replaced by boredom.

Henrik Ibsen created a Rebekka West who is far more complex than many critics would suggest. The marriage proposal, for example, is not rejected by Rebekka because she has become conscience-stricken. She is responding to Rosmer's guilt-ridden desperation. In an attempt to rid himself of Beate's memory and the tragedy of her suicide, Rosmer merely stumbles on the idea of marriage. He tells Rebekka that he can replace that memory with something alive and real. Because Rebekka responds with momentary joy and then rejects Rosmer's proposal, critics believe she has been caught up in her own guilt. However, a closer examination of the dialogue reveals otherwise:

- Rebekka           (For a moment speechless, then joyously): Your wife? Your—Me?
- Rosmer:           We belong to each other. This empty place . . . will be filled with the living again.
- Rebekka:         I . . . take Beate's place?
- Rosmer:           Then there will be an end to her. Forever!
- Rebekka           (Softly, trembling): You believe that?

Rather than a sudden attack of conscience, Rebekka refuses Rosmer's proposal because she has finally seen through "the wall of dark sadness" she recognized in Rosmer when they first met. Taking Beate's place is hardly a flattering proposal, but when he suggests that "this empty place will be filled with the living again," Rebekka's hurt is undeniable. She has been a presence in the Rosmer household for well over a year and has come to see herself as more than hired help. "I . . . take Beate's place?" she asks, hoping for some reassurance, but Rosmer only reiterates his need to erase Beate's memory. His inability to respond to Rebekka at this moment is consistent with his treatment of Beate. "I've told you about those sudden outbursts of wild passion—(Beate's) desperate

pleas for me to respond," he confessed to Kroll earlier. ". . . How could I?" Rosmer never anticipated the very real threat Rebekka presented to an already fragile wife unable to bear children. Because he is oblivious to his own feelings, he is unable to express or respond to the passions of either woman. Rebekka, having heard that conversation, has no intention of taking Beate's place.

At the opening of the third act Mrs. Helseth offers some valuable insight into Rosmer's fear of feeling: "Children have never cried in this house," the housekeeper tells Rebekka. "And do you know that when they grow up, they don't laugh. . . . It's spread . . . throughout these parts." Rosmer was apparently trapped in an early environment where any demonstration of emotion was forbidden. Rebekka, for the first time, appears less vibrant, less confident and less fervent in her responses to both Mrs. Helseth and Rosmer. She struggles with the Pastor's confessions of love and guilt, feelings which are irrevocably connected in his mind, and she alludes to the reign of the white horses at Rosmersholm. It is as though she has surrendered, not to a Christian conscience as many scholars believe, but to the hopelessness of a life without the Rosmer she thought she knew. It is for this reason that she is so vulnerable to Kroll, who has come to insist that she legalize her relationship with Rosmer.

Pitted against a man driven by ambition, whose sarcasm is deadly, Rebekka's final confrontation with Kroll is absent of a confidence and wit so characteristic of her. She is forced to take a defensive posture in a lively exchange filled with the painfully ironic humor of Ibsen. Eventually Kroll's investigative technique and clever invective break through Rebekka's defenses, and she becomes confused. Unknown to Kroll, she has discovered that because Dr. West is probably her biological father, she has committed incest. Realizing that Kroll will stop at nothing to win Rosmer back to conservatism, she waits for his return and then confesses that it was she who lured Beate into madness. Rebekka has by no means given up completely, however. She reacts vehemently to Kroll's accusation that she acted with malice: "Do you think it was done coldly with such calculation? . . . There are two sides to all of us. Yes, I wanted Beate out of the way, but I never thought it would actually happen." Rebekka's sincerity here must be made believable or the final act of the play will make no sense whatever. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that an audience will believe one word unless Rebekka is played by an actress who can successfully capture the hearts of an audience. She must create a character whose charm is irresistible, whose passion is inspired, and whose performance evokes pathos.

Rosmer leaves with Kroll, his trust in Rebekka shattered, his confidence in himself completely destroyed. The psychological war Rebekka has waged against a culture she has never really understood finally takes its toll. She surrenders.

The final act of *Rosmersholm* is a coda which needs to be played with precision to make it work. Despite a vulnerability the audience has never seen in her before, Rebekka makes one last attempt to give Rosmer back his innocence. With a sensuality she is unaware she is projecting, she confesses the sexual desire she has felt for Rosmer, that "fierce, passionate uncontrollable desire" which swept her like a storm into an irresistible maelstrom. She then goes on to reveal the tragic consequences of her stay at Rosmersholm: "Little by little, a change has taken place. . . . I don't feel passion any more—that violent passion has disappeared and I feel . . . a kind of peace." This admission at the close of the play has led scholars to believe that it is Rosmer's influence which has gradually allowed her to discover a conscience.<sup>19</sup> The evidence would suggest otherwise.

First, even Rosmer admits that "people don't change others." Nor does a conscience arise in a matter of days, the time frame of this play. It seems more logical and a great deal less judgmental to assume that the Lapp culture includes a morality predicated on a very strong sense of conscience and that the incest taboo that prevails in most cultures has left her with a feeling of devastation which has overwhelmed her. Her confidence dissolved, her ability to "feel passion freely" destroyed, she is left helpless to fight Rosmer's morbid fascination with suicide. In fact, the peace she claims to feel may reflect a decision she has already made. As there is nothing for her up North, the steamer may be taking her to a suicide she has already planned for herself.

While Rebekka may feel remorse for her part in Beate's death, her alleged acquiescence to the Rosmer way of life is unsubstantiated. It seems more reasonable to assume that she now has a frame of reference to better understand Rosmer's feelings of inadequacy and irresponsibility. The insidious guilt which engulfs her, however, has little to do with Rosmer's influence. That she was neither aware that West was her father nor able to comprehend the extent of his involvement in her seduction leaves a legacy of guilt that has no other parallel. Therefore, Rebekka is left extremely vulnerable to a man who has lost everything. In the last three days, Rosmer has lost his reputation, his place in the community, his friends and the only woman who ever gave him joy. What should surprise an audience, however, is the confidence he has derived from Rebekka's admissions of sexual passion. He is receptive to Brendel's suggestion in the last moments of the play that Rebekka sacrifice herself to prove her love. Upon Brendel's exit, he appears almost transformed. He is now the passionate lover, fascinated by the possibilities of his own power. He attempts to control his morbid desire by suggesting that Rebekka doesn't have the courage of Beate's distorted mind. But of course Rebekka's mind is distorted. In her self-

destructive need to expiate her own guilt, she will gladly die for Rosmer: "If I've sinned, I must atone."

Rosmer has no way of knowing the true nature of her sin. He has become hopelessly entangled in a passion he has never felt. It is imperative that an actor allow Rosmer an intensity which leaves him unable to call upon his conscience to activate his impeccable moral code, to take control of his own destiny . . . and Rebekka's. Ironically, he has been swept into the same undertow of passion Rebekka can no longer experience. Therefore, rather than live without her, he willingly joins her as they enter the millstream, finally united.

*Rosmersholm* is a play which can hold an audience spellbound, can transport them into a world which can be as exciting as the productions of Odin, himself. But the Victorian stuffiness, the stifling atmosphere which both Beate and Rosmer allow Rebekka to enter, must be replaced with the passion of a young woman filled with enthusiasm and love for life. Her ethnicity, vital to the success of any production, should be reflected in the casting, as a constant reminder to an audience that Rebekka is enigmatic for a very specific reason. Her attitudes and values, her behavior in the context of an alien environment, and her own tragic self-discovery are predicated on her Lapp origin. Suggestions that she is obsessed with ambition or wracked with ulterior motives merely reflect the narrow minds which judged her in the play. They prevent the production from developing climactically, and destroy the pathos created in the closing moments of the play.

While Rebekka is the heart of any *Rosmersholm*, she should be surrounded with rich characterizations which do not rely on cheap stereotypes and single-dimensioned motivation. And more important, Ibsen has created an ironic humor which each of the subordinate characters employs to its fullest satiric potential. Even Rosmer, an attractive admirable man, occasionally rises to the ironic occasion. That an audience can laugh at the recognizable foibles of Ibsen's characters allows an identity with them. This will not only pace the play but give the tragedy greater impact.

In many ways the tragedy of Rebekka and Rosmer reflects the fear Henrik Ibsen had for Norway. He expressed this fatalism in a letter he wrote to Georg Brandes during his visit to his homeland in 1885:

Immense progress has been made in most directions. . . .  
(However) I am disappointed that there is neither religious liberty nor freedom of utterance beyond an arbitrary fixed limit. . . . Hence, there is much to be done. . . . But I fear that our present democracy will not be equal to the task. An element of nobility must be introduced into the national life, into our parliament, into the press and into the

daily lives of men and women. Of course it is not nobility of birth that I am thinking of, nor money nor yet knowledge, nor ability and talent. I am thinking of nobility of character, of will, of soul.<sup>20</sup>

*Rosmersholm*, then, is not a play about the hypocrisy and opportunism of Rebekka West. It is a play about a society which refuses to grant freedom of choice or freedom of expression. It is about a community which fears difference and refuses forgiveness. That we continue to cling to a narrow understanding of cultures and of women foreign to us, has allowed the world's white horses to transport the ghosts of Rosmersholm unhindered into the twentieth century. The last act of *Rosmersholm*, rather than left to sink slowly and silently into the final curtain, should resound in symphonic protest. That is the legacy left by Ibsen and the one-eyed Odin, himself.

## Notes

1. This is the beginning of a story my Norwegian father told, particularly when he was homesick.

2. William Archer, introduction, *The Collected Works of Henrik Ibsen*, vol. IX (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932) xvi-xx.

3. According to Michael Meyer, *Henrik Ibsen, The Top of a Cold Mountain, 1883-1906*. vol. 3 (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1971) 71, Strindberg's comments on *Rosmersholm* can be found in an essay entitled "Soul-Murder".

4. See Theodore Jorgenson, *Henrik Ibsen, Life and Drama* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Edward Bros., 1945) 403 for a very brief mention of this theory of origin.

5. This letter is quoted in Per Lindberg's biography of his father, August Lindberg (Stockholm: 1943) 210, trans. and noted by Meyer 75.

6. See Valerie Stalder, *Lapland Journey by Reindeer Sleigh* (Palo Alto, CA: Kodansha Int., Ltd., 1971) 85-92.

7. For a discussion of Lars Levi Laestadian and his work in Finmark see Ormolv Vorren and Ernst Mauker, *Lapp Life and Customs*, trans. Kathleen McFarland (London: Oxford University Press, 1962) 125-135.

8. Meyer 75

9. 76.

10. All the quotes from Henrik Ibsen's *Rosmersholm* are from my own unpublished translation, copyright, 1985.

11. Vorren and Mauker 136

12. For a brief discussion of the "white horse" myth see Vorren and Mauker 115-124.

13. See Halvden Koht, *Life of Ibsen* (New York: Benjamin Blom Inc., 1971) 357-368 for a brief discussion of Ibsen's politics at the time just preceding his writing of *Rosmersholm* and Edwin William Hattstaedt, *Ibsen's Ethical Materialism* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1943) for a more detailed discussion of Norwegian political history in the last half of the 19th century.

14. Henrik Ibsen, *The Collected Works of Henrik Ibsen*, vol. VI, trans. and ed. James McFarlane (London: Oxford University Press, 1960) 4.

15. Vil Huygen, *Gnomes*, from *Leven en Werken*, trans. Van de Cabouter (New York: H.N. Abrams, 1977) NP

16. NP.

17. Michael Meyer, *Henrik Ibsen: A Farewell To Poetry, 1864-1882*, vol. 2 (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1971) 226 who is quoting an English translation from John Paulsen's *Samliv Med Ibsen* (*Life With Ibsen*), II 233-234.

18. Edvard Beyer, *Ibsen, The Man and His Work*, trans. Marie Wells (New York: Taplinger, 1980) 149.

19. In addition to Meyer, Jorgensen, and Beyer, one might add Einar Haugen, *Ibsen's Drama, Author to Audience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979) to a list of scholars who subscribe to the *acquired conscience* theory.

20. Archer ix-xi.

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