

## PEER GYNT • Henrik Ibsen

*directed by Daniel Schlusser*

Ibsen wrote *Peer Gynt* at the age of 39. He was struggling to fulfil his ambitions to be a great poet and playwright with only the mixed success of *Brand* in the previous year to justify any claims he made about himself. Writing *Peer Gynt*, Ibsen threw away any need for practical staging: it covers over 50 years in time, traverses the world from Norway to Morocco to Cairo, he sets scenes in deserts, in boats and in the dark. These factors plus a vast cast (including monkeys and a giant pig) and a length that exceeds the uncut *Hamlet* - it traditionally runs between 4 and 6 hours – means that productions are rare.

In a sense then, the writing of *Peer Gynt* was an ecstatic act, an act of creative release at a moment of crisis, paving the way for the hard logic that characterises the famous domestic dramas such as *Dollshouse* and *Hedda Gabbler*.

Although understood to be one of the greatest theatre-poems ever written, there is disagreement over its quality as a play. Typically, The Guardian's Lyn Gardner ended a recent, glowing review of a production in Manchester by saying, "Ibsen, of course, never intended the play to be performed, perceiving it as an ideal form, existing only in his head. I wonder whether the play can be made to work in the theatre at all."

The play is written in five acts, with the first three dedicated to the life of Peer in a provincial town. When Act IV starts, we are abruptly on a yacht, 50 years have past and Peer is a preposterously wealthy arms trader and exploiter of the third world, after various adventures, Act V is a return of sorts, with some strange links to the characters of the first section and, of course, the resumption of the love story. This inconstancy can be explained in terms of autobiography: The first three acts, including the journey into the troll kingdom, have close factual links with Ibsen's life from his youth and up until the time of writing. Acts IV and V on the other hand are pure futuristic fantasy and have no autobiographical anchor.

*Peer Gynt* has been chosen as the text for my research project because it connects with the themes that I am pursuing and because it presents obstacles or challenges to my habituated process. Within *Peer Gynt* is a tension between story-telling and theatre. The primacy of imaginative and sensual satisfaction over moral, ideological or even practical intelligence is a theme that is explored within the narrative frame of the play, reflected in the open dramaturgical structure of the play and finally, is one way of theorising my relationship to the audience. Much of my thesis is concerned with the theatre as secular ritual, group behaviours, sacrifice, the female chorus and other themes that are clearly challenged by one of the greatest "hero" texts of the theatrical canon.

*Daniel Schlusser (Director)*