

Lauritzen Prize 2008

Henning Jensen

Award speech

Henning Jensen has been awarded the Lauritzen Prize 2008 especially for the sympathetic insight and acting skill displayed in making Gamle Borgen into a living, suffering person in Lars Norén's controversial version of Kaj Munk's resurrection drama "The Word" at the Royal Playhouse. It was a performance that gave us wonderful theatre, a melding of art and life that reconciled us to the willfulness of this director. Willfulness is surely what we would call an endeavour that does away with the author's narrative and turns 'Munkish' belief and doubt into emptiness.

But Lars Norén's depiction of the resurrection was very modern and considerate, because even so he did not wish to show us inexorable death and let Inger lie in the drawing room when the curtain came down. Instead, she went away in the literal sense of the expression whilst the sons and Gamle Borgen were left sitting as if turned to stone, looking in the big room like Svend Wiig Hansen's sculpture on the west coast.

In the midst of this oppressive play of grieving people that refuse to bend, Gamle Borgen assumed the leading part because Henning Jensen played the proud powerful peasant character with tragic gravity in the play's Norén perspective. While Peter Skrædder is humbled and gets the better of himself, creating a wonder of love, Gamle Borgen has no response. In Kaj Munk's version, he could have thanked the Good Lord from the bottom of his heart but he is left behind and has to remain in Henning Jensen's monumental, deeply moving picture of loss.

The pain underlying loss of hope, the defeat lying behind the passion and the cynical actions of those in power, have been excellently interpreted by Henning Jensen. Perhaps it started with the psychopathic professor in Ionesco's "Enetime" (Private Lesson) at The Danish Theatre in 1972 and as Jean in "Miss Julie" the same year, a pattern revolving around the inherent impotence of powerful characters. Henning Jensen's first film role was also based on power, revenge and emptiness when he played the part of the young man in "Nineteen Red Roses", a film version of Torben Nielsen's crime novel. He loses his beloved and takes revenge in a series of murders of relatives of a drunk driver and his passengers.

This relatively banal film was in character with Henning Jensen's icy portrayal of conscience-less intelligence. The role was the first of many finely drawn profiles in

Danish films in which Henning Jensen later played a German officer in "The Short Summer", a Nazi werewolf in Lars von Trier's "Europe" and a series of notable, anything-but-charitable priests, ranging from the extremely unpleasant rural dean in "Barbara" via the prejudiced priest's father in "The Man Who Wouldn't Die" to the villainous dean in "Count Axel".

Henning Jensen's comedy character was vastly amusing as the aging homosexual in "En kort en lang" (One short, one long), and reminds me of his amusing Herman Bang in the TV Theatre version of Sten Kaalø's straight "Comedy in the Borderland". I would also include Henning Jensen's puffed up hospital manager in Lars von Trier's "The State", in which his astonishing ability to interpret icy authority contributed to the comical/macabre dimension of the series.

In turning back to the theatre, we meet an artist who has played more than 70 parts since his debut as Happy in "Death of a salesman" in 1971 at the Royal Theatre. These also include Happy's father Willy Lohmann at the Royal Theatre in 2000, 29 years after his debut. To show his versatility, I would mention Erik the Fourteenth by Strindberg, Garcin in "Closed Doors", Ibsen's Gregers Werle, Johannes Rosmer and Doktor Wangel, Shakespeare's Buckingham and King Lear, his great Salieri in "Amadeus", the trembling alcoholic in Lars Noren's "Personkreds 3" and the judge/executioner in Jokum Rohde's "Pinocchio's ashes" - the two latter being duly awarded Reumert Prizes.

His performance in the leading role in Sven Holm's "Schumann's Night" at the Royal Theatre in 1992 was an unleashing of energy. An impressive attempt to draw from the character an inner secret in the mad composer's creative soul. Henning Jensen's Schumann was greater and deeper than the narrative, an image of Henning Jensen's unique ability to identify with the further extremities of the human psyche.

The extremities of the human psyche are also there in the impotence of a powerful personality, its deep bewilderment when the calculations show the figures are in the red, in a deficit in the book of life. The nerves in the powerful character in "The Defeat" were gruesome and almost unbearable, exposed in Henning Jensen's headmaster Meisling in "Young Andersen", Rumle Hammerich's crushing film of the author's schooling in life. Henning Jensen made Meisling a vengeful loser, a coarse, shabby counterpart to the elegant man of the world, Salieri. Both of them are envious of an imagination that neither of them has. The human moment in Henning Jensen's merciless exposé of Meisling was the man's inner pain which we understood and felt almost scandalous empathy with.

Henning Jensen also experienced the impotence of the powerful in his King Lear at Aalborg Theatre in 2003, one of Henning Jensen's major notable royal creations. The

best for me was to see Herod in Kaj Munk's "An Idealist" at the Royal Theatre in 1996. Henning Jensen created a Herod that cast a light on the anatomy of the soul of the powerful, careless in the objectivity of his self-indulgence, shockingly calculating in his fraudulent methods and icily pitiful and exposed in the moment of doubt. He was also convincing as an executioner and the victim of the women around him.

It is a long way from Herod to Gamle Borgen, from the person who made himself a god to the believer but with Kaj Munk, we meet them paradoxically where the heart, as Søren Kierkegaard puts it, just wants to do something however contradictory they may be and in Henning Jensen they both live as human realities because he has mastered the willingness and ability of the art of acting.

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On behalf of the Prize Committee

Book/theatre critic Hans Andersen

