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A young Norwegian offers us phantasmagoria, raisins

By Zeynep Pamuk
Staff Reporter

Flying trolls, wild reindeer hunts, raining popcorn, belly dancers, shipwrecks and lunatic asylums are all illuminated by eerie light — now green, now blue, now yellow. “Peer Gynt” at the Yale School of Drama is an epic phantasmagoria, an odyssey in search of identity that successfully mingles the surreal, the bizarre and the exotic.

Henrik Ibsen’s “Peer Gynt,” directed by Mike Donahue DRA ’08, depicts the journey of Peer (Barret O’Brien DRA ’09), a young Norwegian with an extraordinary imagination complemented by a proclivity to make up stories. On the one hand, he is a mischievous liar who elopes with the bride at a local wedding only to dump her soon afterwards. But he is also a charismatic and lively man, thirsty for new experiences on his quest for selfhood. This quest takes him from his village in Norway through exotic settings such as the kingdom of trolls and the Arabian deserts that blur the line between fantasy and reality.

Peer’s restlessness, or perhaps his dynamism, is reflected in the physicality of the play. The impressively athletic actors climb up poles, jump over fences, slide down banisters, crawl behind seats, take off their clothes, put them back on, dance, fly and somersault while they are flying. This constant motion is a verification of the vivacity of life and dreams, as well as a technique to keep the audience hooked to the events the way action movies do.

To compare “Peer Gynt” to an action movie is very reductive, of course. “Peer Gynt” is a journey for meaning, an almost greedy desire for fulfillment. Peer wants to answer the question of who he is, and discover his vocation in life. This production of “Peer Gynt” adds a contemporary, experimental dimension to Ibsen’s play, which could not have been envisioned by him in the 19th century: Almost like an improv show, the audience is made part of the action. Peer borrows clothes from the audience, offers them raisins, says “bless you” when somebody sneezes, responds to a cell phone ring by calling it his anthem, and at one point, all the characters tell stories to different members of the audience at the same time. Thus, the audience is literally drawn into the journey, both as companions to Peer and as wandering searchers themselves.

One of the greatest strengths of “Peer Gynt” is its richness and exuberance: The play compasses numerous settings and characters (most actors play six or seven different roles), but also invests energy in these settings and characters through the use of lighting, music and food. The lights change from neon green for Norway to a glittering yellow for Arabia. The music reminds one of a Kusturica movie: eclectic, chaotic, full of spirit and slightly demented. And food — unless it is

raining from the ceiling or being playfully tossed by the characters — is often handed out to the audience.

The difficulty in containing so much in a short period of time is insurmountable, and so the play runs for three and a half hours. “Peer Gynt” is not for the easily bored, since even the climbing and jumping and eating and flying can be insufficient to hold one’s attention as Peer’s quest takes on a heavier philosophical turn. Yet the actors never cease to enjoy themselves, and the feeling is generally contagious.

“Peer Gynt” cleverly experiments with techniques in reinterpreting Ibsen’s work. The result is a combination of “Arabian Nights” and troll-laden fairy tales of the North, a fascinating, unconstrained mythical journey that rewards sticking it out to the end.