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Domesticating Ibsen for Italy: Enrico and Icilio Polese's Ibsen Campaign by Giuliano D'Amico (review)

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Comparative Drama, Volume 49, Number 2, Summer 2015, pp. 230-233 (Review)

Published by Western Michigan University

DOI: [10.1353/cdr.2015.0020](https://doi.org/10.1353/cdr.2015.0020)



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Again, the ideas that Sofer presents about the nature of theater, within the sophisticated theoretical framework that he provides, tempt the reader to deduce the way that a play depends on absence, the secret behind the theatrical curtain. An analogy to which he returns is the way that astronomers map dark matter by observing the distortions that such matter creates in their observations. Yet his map of theatrical dark matter omits plays outside the Anglo-American tradition, as well as any performed between 1700 and the middle of the twentieth century. His introduction even mentions these omissions, noting that he was “drawn to several of [postclassical Western theater’s] densest theatrical concentrations, but many others await spectral investigation” (14). Surely a reader is tacitly invited to wonder where the observations of this study would work if extended to non-Western theater, whether one examines traditions in which the female body is absent (yet present in its female characters) or puppet plays that substitute wood or shadows for flesh. In the Western tradition, theater was the dominant performance form from 1700 to 1900 because of the absence of mass media. More people attended the theater in those two centuries than in any other period. If attendance does not create a dense theatrical concentration, to borrow Sofer’s phrase, one must reasonably wonder if dramatists create their most powerful work only when the theater is under threat, by the authorities or by indifference. To say that omission of such topics is a weakness in Sofer’s book would, of course, be to miss his point completely: these questions are left for the reader to consider and for other scholars to address.

The book is compact, with the text running 145 pages, and it is one of few books I know of that has a glossary and notes that are of almost as much interest as the body. Well-written and well-argued, it certainly deserves a place on the bookshelf of anyone seriously interested in how drama works.

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Giuliano D’Amico. *Domesticating Ibsen for Italy: Enrico and Icilio Polese’s Ibsen Campaign*. Bari, Italy: Edizioni di Pagina, 2013. Pp. xiv + 358. €20.00.

Aspiring to recount the hard-won imposition of Ibsen’s drama upon Italian theatrical audiences and the “domesticating” translation of the Norwegian author’s texts for this purpose, Giuliano D’Amico’s *Domesticating Ibsen for Italy: Enrico and Icilio Polese’s Ibsen Campaign* also achieves two other important tasks: it provides a history of Ibsen’s fortunes in Italy from the mid-1880s through the 1910s and highlights, as the best theater history does, the many ways in which the art and

business of performance always already intertwine. The story D'Amico tells is a complex and often amusing one, for the father-son team behind the campaign, Icilio and Enrico Polese Santarnecci, were “two of the most powerful, hated, and feared individuals in the Italian theatre community,” whose business ethics, taste, and talent were continuously called into question (3). D'Amico begins with two chapters that introduce the dastardly duo and orient the reader to Italian stage practice of the period and then follows with five more that explore Ibsen in Italy. With a focus on the translation practices of Enrico (the son) and his co-translator Paolo Rindler, D'Amico provides an extensively researched study that makes a welcome contribution to Ibsen scholarship.

Most satisfying about this book's approach is the way it considers general sociocultural circumstances, artistic-literary context, and the business of theatrical production together as one organic whole. To a certain extent, this was unavoidable, as Polese father and son had their hands in various honey pots: they owned and operated a theatrical agency, *Larte drammatica*, which marketed Ibsen's plays; produced a journal of the same name that publicized and reviewed them; and, of course, Enrico translated the texts with Rindler. These men could not have avoided practical considerations while translating any more than D'Amico could have ignored them as he analyzed their work. The book partially concerns itself with “marketing operation,” then, as “the Poleses had a personal interest in making the plays more suitable for the market” (4). And, indeed, D'Amico convincingly argues that the men viewed the texts “primarily as market goods from which they could gain returns” and accordingly transformed the iconoclast Ibsen's plays into “average” products that would appeal to conventional bourgeois audiences (105). At the same time, the author is careful to note instances in which modifications were made to make the plays producible under the Italian companies' role system—making characters conform to the generic types in which actors and actresses specialized—and also dedicates attention to how these companies approached new texts, how the Poleses positioned them through articles, ads, and reviews, and how Ibsen was finally received. In other words, D'Amico rightly recognizes that the texts were commodities at least as much as they are artistic artifacts, with the result that his study is not just one of translation practices or of comparative drama but of global theater history.

The assessment of the Ibsen campaign is meticulously detailed. D'Amico first discusses the “prehistory” of Ibsen in Italy—the period before the Poleses strove to launch him, which included the surprisingly non-scandalous premier of *A Doll's House* in 1889—and then moves on to the campaign, divided into three phases. The first (1892) saw *The Wild Duck* essentially fail; in the second Ibsen gained ground with *Ghosts* only to lose some with *Hedda Gabler* and then finally establish himself as a force to be reckoned with thanks to a perceived

greater verisimilitude in *The Pillars of Society*; and in the third and final phase (1893–94), the backlash began, in response to *The Master Builder*, *Rosmersholm*, and *The Lady from the Sea*, although star actor Ermete Zacconi, who had stunned audiences as Oswald in that triumphant *Ghosts*, then carried *An Enemy of the People* to success. (D'Amico also gives a chapter-long nod to Ibsen in Italy through 1921 but unfortunately doesn't say much about the extraordinary attention paid successively to the Norwegian dramatist by Italy's men of letters and theater [Alberto Savinio, Scipio Slataper, Silvio D'Amico]).

At times, the true significance of what happened to Ibsen's texts through the various translations and productions gets lost in the details: D'Amico admirably covers an incredible amount of ground, but his analysis would also benefit from more moments of summary and reflection. Certainly, key points saliently emerge: the perception of Ibsen as a "philosopher" and weird Nordic Other and the Poleses' conviction that he would therefore be an acquired taste; the challenge his "didacticism" would pose to a conventional bourgeois public; the foreignness and supposed irrelevance of his feminist message; the way that the role system conditioned the translators' work, etc. But, especially given the author's acknowledgment that some of Ibsen's difficulties had nothing to do with Italy but instead with the banal nature of commercial theater and culture of the period more generally, the reader is left unsure of what it is, precisely, s/he has learned about *Italy* from this wealth of information. (That said, the window onto the country's theatrical practice will be highly valuable indeed to the non-specialist, and the differences in reception from city to city are telling, too.)

As noted, the translation process is central to the book's inquiry. Polese (who had never even been to Norway) created an environment that corresponded to the land already imagined by Italians—an exotic and foreign place of "indomitable" nature "whose basic connotations and associations include darkness, coldness, a scanty population, quietness, sadness and surliness" (19). This Norway "*domesticates and foreignizes* at the same time. It domesticates because it serves the interest of the target culture, and it foreignizes because it creates and interpolates 'foreign' elements not present in the source text" (20). Strategies ranged from the addition of descriptions and stage directions to the Italianizing of character names or the cutting, simplifying, and changing of dialogue. Some changes, however, were made for the benefit of companies who acted them: the partitioning of acts into scenes, or changes in character to conform to roles. Too often in recent decades scholars feel a need to apply layers of theory where simply recounting history will do, and D'Amico is no exception. His account suffers somewhat from this, as sometimes his use of jargon feels unnecessary and even stilted. The discussion of these latter practices seems particularly burdened by it—perhaps "domestication" is too laden a term for choices designed mainly to facilitate

actors' preparation. That said, the intricacies of the translators' work—and, indeed, of the entire Ibsen campaign—are fascinating. One is left wondering if the domestication/foreignization, painstakingly recounted thanks to an impressive foray into the archives, didn't hinder rather than aid the understanding of Ibsen's genius. Likewise, though D'Amico demonstrates that the Polese team was quite aware that it was presenting a very particular Ibsen, the reader can't help but wonder if the most egregious alterations were the result of studied efforts to create their own Norwegian Enrico (as Ibsen was named in Italian) or, simply, of sloppy work. (Many contemporaries in fact leveled this criticism.)

A small issue the reader faces with this book is the three languages it employs: it is written in English but discusses translation from Dano-Norwegian to Italian, in most cases citing Ibsen's texts in only the latter two languages and glossing the differences in English. Even for the reader who (like myself) reads both Italian and English, this method leaves something to be desired. But these are merely unfortunate nuisances to be forgiven; D'Amico's work is to be lauded, and his efforts will be appreciated by translation specialists, Scandinavian and comparative literature scholars, and theater historians alike.

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