Book Review

Giuliano D'Amico, *Domesticating Ibsen for Italy: Enrico and Icilio Polese's Ibsen Campaign.* Turin: Biblioteca dello Spettacolo Nordico, 2013. Xiv + 358 pages. Paperback. 20 Euros.

D'Amico's impeccably researched and clearly written book, very handsomely produced in Professor Franco Perelli's *Spettacolo Nordico* series at the University of Turin, is an admirable example of the current interest in Ibsen's reception outside Norway. Making extensive use of archival material, including sixteen Italian collections that reach from Milan to Naples; a myriad of 19th-century newspapers and periodicals; and hundreds of articles and books, D'Amico provides a meticulous record of the introduction of Ibsen to Italy by the Milan-based theatrical agency *L'arte drammatica*. The father-and-son team of Icilio and Enrico Polese led a campaign to mount Ibsen's work that was characterized by "struggles, polemics, and battles" and that lasted for three years, 1891—1894.

D'Amico provides a fascinating account of the Poleses, who were scrappy commercial theatre people; the father was a Jack of all trades—an actor's agent, an impresario, a translator and seller of scripts, who ran the agency and who had enormous power in the theatrical world—and the scapegrace son acted as his father's *aide-de-camp* and translated Ibsen's plays. Both men were feared and hated by their colleagues for their power and for their underhanded dealings—they were known as abusers and blackmailers —and the son was commonly called *il terribile Pes*. It is a commonplace notion in previous scholarship on the Poleses that father and son were unscrupulous adventurers whose interest in Ibsen was mostly commercial. D'Amico claims that what is important is that they made "a great and heroic effort" to establish Ibsen on the Italian stage. He presents them as savvy marketers with a very successful *modus operandi*: first, they bought the rights to Ibsen's plays (almost certainly from the German theatrical agency Felix Bloch Erben) and announced their acquisition in their widely read magazine, *L'arte drammatica*; then, Enrico, with

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his partner Paolo Rindler, would adapt the text from German and/or French translations (neither knew Dano-Norwegian); *L'arte drammatica* would advertise the play's foreign success and sell

Enrico's adaptations to a theatre company; after the Italian premiere, the Poleses would publish good reviews (often written by themselves), which would help them to sell the rights to other companies. The last step, which often came well after the performances, was to publish Enrico's adaptations as books. Besides the money from the sales of the rights and the adaptations, the Poleses received royalties for each performance, and they also received a percentage of the book sales.

D'Amico provides a full, very interesting account of Italian 19th-century theatre and its touring companies, and claims that to make Ibsen's texts palatable to Italians, Enrico Polese had to "domesticate" them to conform to the expectations of the public and the norms of the theatre, including its hierarchical role system: *primo attore* or *mattatore* (leading man); *prima attrice* (leading lady), *caratterista* (character actor), *brilliante* (the wit), and so on. It was understood that the major actors expected to play only sympathetic roles. Relatedly, Polese domesticated Ibsen textually, and D'Amico provides categories of his changes: excision, concision, and expurgations of lines, passages, and scenes; simplifications of complex passages; "exoticization"; and hints and help to audiences, e.g., explicitation of ambiguous lines and augmentation of the text.

Citing theorists of reception and translation, including Gérard Gennette, D'Amico presents the categories of textual changes as normal processes in translation. But these categories take on ghastly life in D'Amico's exhaustive accounts of the scripts of the eight plays introduced by the Poleses to Italy. The numerous expurgations, additions, and changes are shocking to anyone who knows the text either in the original, or in English, French, or German translation. At the same time, Polese exoticized Ibsen, drawing on his popular reputation in Italy as a writer of misty, philosophical "Nordic" plays. The result of what was a bafflingly contradictory approach—trying to transform Ibsen into an Italian playwright and at the same time insisting on his essential foreignness —was, unsurprisingly, a bizarre mélange. In the first production of *The Wild Duck* in Rome, the *mattatore* Novelli, who played Old Ekdal, added an apologetic prologue in which he asked the audience to think of the play as a strange, foreign bird; the role was given more importance because of the status of Novelli, who wore a low-brimmed hat and gold earrings. The textual changes were so many and so detrimental that critics who knew

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the play in French translation called Polese's script a "horrible mutilation" and, in fact, it chops off a third of Ibsen's text and bowdlerizes much of the rest: Gregorio's "claim of the ideal" is turned into a book called *The Perfect Man*; at the end of their crucial conversation, Edvige blatantly announces to Gregorio, "Il sacrificio"; Molvik's and Relling's final conversation is cut, along with Relling's "Shut up, you're drunk"; and Old Ekdal nicely rounds out the softening and distortion by announcing in the last line, "The forest has taken her revenge." D'Amico does not say this, but he nonetheless demonstrates that the first Italian *L'anitra selvatica* was a travesty of Ibsen's play. It was also a failure with the public.

In contrast, the second Ibsen production, *Ghosts* (*Spettri*), was Ibsen's greatest early Italian success and it remains his most popular play in Italy. Rindler's and Polese's adaptation is considerably less cut than their *Wild Duck* , but here, too, they flatten Ibsen's characters into clichés, making Regina into a stock maid from an operetta, "Giacobbe" (Engstrand) a sentimentalist who truly loves Regina, and Manders, a raving fundamentalist. The roles of Elena and Oswaldo are less tampered with—no doubt, D'Amico explains, because they were played by the *primi attore* of the company, Virginia Marrini and Ermete Zacconi—and yet their characters, too, are sentimentalized. Elena speaks of her terrible suffering during Oswald's absence, and he calls her "la mia mammina." The play's success was due in large part to the realistic acting of Zacconi, who had longed to play Oswald, and who turned him into the protagonist of the play (an error made in early

productions of the play in France and England, as well). The role became one of Zacconi's favorites, and D'Amico's accounts of the great actor's *Spettri* scripts (in the Zacconi archives in Genoa), which Zacconi annotated and amended painstakingly over the years as he continued to play the role, are so fascinating that I read them three times. I have one small cavil, however. D'Amico calls Zacconi's natural, realistic acting, including the "pathological rendering of syphilis," an Italian "domestication" and quotes Anne Charlotte Leffler, in *Verdens Gang*, on Zacconi's acting "in the most natural and spontaneous way, as only an Italian can do," and Rosalie Jacobsen, in *Illustreret Tidende*, on Zacconi's "huge superiority over the Nordic actors who have played Oswald." Making judgments on national acting styles is a tricky business. Nine years earlier, in 1883, the great August Lindberg, introducing *Ghosts* to *Scandinavia*, had played Oswald on a triumphal tour through Sweden

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and Norway, transfixing his audiences with a naturalistic performance that is a landmark in theatrical history. And Antoine, too, had rendered his audience rapt with his pathological portrait of Oswald in the French premiere, at the Théâtre Libre, in 1890.

After *The Wild Duck*, the greatest failure of the Ibsen campaign, and *Ghosts*, the greatest success, the Poleses were responsible for performances of six other Ibsen plays, all of which received mixed critical and popular reactions: *Hedda Gabler*, *Pillars of Society*, *The Master Builder*, *Rosmersholm*, *The Lady from the Sea*, and *An Enemy of the People*. D'Amico thoroughly considers each one, in turn, and by now we are able to anticipate the "domestication." We are not surprised to learn that Hedda, in some quarters, was not considered a "normal" woman but a pathological case (similar to the way she was seen in England); or that Enrico Polese tried to soften her character, e.g. instead of considering *love* a horrible word, she considers it a beautiful one. (Nor are we surprised to learn that the Poleses published a scathing attack on the performance in Rome, attributing the failure to the performers themselves and not to their script or their author.) With *Pillars*, again, the text is "extensively excised"; the women are, naturally defanged; Dina Dorf is stripped of her ambition, Lona Hessel still loves Bernick; in *The Master Builder*, we find the same sort of sentimentality and "banalization"—Hilda's "many" kisses become "thousands and thousands" and her underwear, while still present, is not dirty. In *Rosmersholm*, "poor Beata" becomes a "martyr," Rosmer speaks to Rebecca of a "true love burning" behind their friendship, not of a "hint of love." And so on.

An Enemy of the People holds a special place in the Polese story and D'Amico's discussion of it is a *tour de force*. Because of the absence of a publication, the first Italian *Enemy*, with Zacconi as Dr. Stockmann, has not been associated with the Poleses. But D'Amico, an indefatigable archival detective, has located two manuscripts of the translation used by Zacconi which, as he demonstrates, have all the marks of Enrico Polese's work. Moreover, since the Poleses owned the Italian rights and Zacconi had good working relations with them, there is no reason to suppose that the translation was not the work of Enrico. Along with this discovery, D'Amico offers a fascinating account of how Zacconi, who played

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Dr. Stockmann as a secular saint, without any of Ibsen's ambiguities, expurgated the already expurgated translation. But Zacconi's excisions,

numerous as they were, were not enough to suit the censors in Trento and Fiumi (then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire), who struck out all references to political upheavals, forcing Zacconi to re-write the entire fourth act. In 1928, history repeated itself when Zacconi had to submit his script again, this time to Fascist censors, who felt no need to add to their exacting predecessors' objections. My summary cannot do justice to this fascinating account.

Alongside D'Amico's dominant narrative of the Polesi campaign are some wonderful accounts of related subjects; among them are Benedetto Croce's championing of Ibsen in Naples; Luigi Capuana's production of the first Italian *Doll House*; Duse's performances of Nora, Mrs. Alving, and Hedda; the tangled history of European copyright during the 19th century. D'Amico handles masses of sources with great sureness, and these parts of the book are as interesting,

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and sometimes more interesting, than the Polese narrative. In spite of its title—*Enrico and Incilio Polese's Ibsen Campaign*—the book treats the whole early reception of Ibsen in Italy.

Something must be said about D'Amico's odd attempt to rescue the Poleses from their bad reputation. D'Amico makes it clear that they were regarded as unscrupulous operators by their contemporaries—Zaconni called Icilio a "scoundrel"—and that modern scholars, including Roberto Alonge, the Italian doyen of Ibsen reception studies, agree; Alonge regards Enrico as "ominously fascinating," a "bandit" and an "adventurer." D'Amico hopes that because of his book, nobody "will still be tempted to pass such a moral judgment." But the fact that the Poleses played a primordial role in introducing Ibsen to the Italian stage cannot rescue them from their shady lives. D'Amico himself writes of Enrico's "talent for digs, fawnings and slander" and documents some of his heinous acts, including his translation of Auguste Ehrhard's fine book *Henrik Ibsen et le théâtre contemporain*, in which he removed everything that contradicted his own adaptations of the plays, which, not surprisingly, turned out to be the majority of Ehrhard's book! But while D'Amico writes that Enrico Polese "mutilated" Ehrhard's text, he notes that it would have been "counterproductive" to have done otherwise and that the publication "somehow legitimized Polese and his work on Ibsen." Polese's fraudulent publication is not defensible on the grounds of self-promotion, and if it "legitimized" Polese's own adaptations, then so much the worse.

Enrico's Ibsen adaptations continued to be republished decade after decade, becoming "canonized," in D'Amico's term, in Italy, and it was only in the 1940s that more faithful translations of Ibsen began to appear. This is important for D'Amico's establishment of the significance of the Poleses, and it is also important to note that these adaptations were, in the phrase of one important critic, "notoriously awful." D'Amico writes that if the Poleses had been more faithful to Ibsen, the Italian stage might not have been ready for him; this might be so, and one could also argue that a later, truer Ibsen would have been preferable. D'Amico writes at the end of his book that "it is more interesting to understand how they [the Poleses] were working within a system with its own rules shaping a new Ibsen" than to blame the Poleses for using Ibsen to make money and for Enrico's "heavy domestication." It seems to me that the question is not a matter of either/or but rather of both/and: The money-making Poleses were important players in the introduction of Ibsen to Italy in a hard-fought, three-year campaign that produced eight plays by "Enrico Ibsen," a very pale shadow of Henrik. D'Amico has provided a flawlessly researched book that amply demonstrates this proposition. Its sense of place as it plunges us into the world of late 19th-century Italian theatre also makes it a great read.

Joan Templeton, Editor