

87

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SILENCE AND SPACE

The New Drama of Jon Fosse

Sarah Cameron Sunde

When Jon Fosse came to New York in June of 2004 to attend his U.S. debut production (*Night Sings Its Songs* at The Culture Project's 45 Below Theatre) we walked through the park after a luncheon held in his honor. People were rushing by and he wondered aloud whether Americans ever take the time to do nothing. It was a genuine question about culture. For the first time, I realized that doing nothing might be our biggest cultural fear. Because if we were to "do nothing," it would mean we would have to take a good long look at who we are and why we exist.

Personal philosophy is embedded in every word that Jon Fosse writes. He has a deep sense of what it is to live and be present in any given moment. Whenever I correspond with him, I am reminded that life exists beyond the hustle-and-bustle of my New York lifestyle. Instead, it exists in specific moments of interaction between people and with nature—in a glance from a lover or a stranger on the street, in watching the sea for hours on end, or in the breath between actors and audience in a theatre. Fosse does not preach philosophy with his plays, but his work is so full of space for reflection that the result can seem spiritual or meditative, both for the artists working on the project and for the audience experiencing it. I connected to Fosse's sensibility immediately: his was the voice I was looking for in the theatre. I know many people feel the same way I do, but others will not. His voice is distinct and comes from a completely different perspective than Americans are used to, and both the space it creates and the philosophy it presents can be challenging.

Fosse was a well-known poet and novelist in Norway through the early 1990s, but his career took on a new dimension when he began writing plays in 1992. A regional theatre in Norway asked him to write a play, and though he was skeptical, he took on the challenge and was surprised by the results. Within a few short years, Fosse's plays were being produced in continental Europe. *Le Monde* dubbed him "the Beckett of the 21st Century," and his rise to international playwriting prominence was rapid. His work, which to-date includes 26 plays and 30 books, has been translated into more than 40 languages.

According to a variety of sources, Fosse is the contemporary playwright most produced in Europe today. He is one of a handful of groundbreaking European playwrights such as Sarah Kane, Bernard-Marie Koltés, Roland Schimmelpfennig, and Lars Norén, who explore form by crafting texts full of space for theatrical collaboration. Fosse takes that one step further by challenging the audience to have their own vision as well. He is particularly popular in Germany, where *Theatre Heute* has named him “Best Foreign Playwright,” and in France, where the French Government made him a Chevalier in 2002. His plays have found receptive audiences in countries as far flung as Japan, Malawi, and Israel. Though his work is controversial in his native Norway (his use of theatrical form and language is revolutionary for a Norwegian audience as well), the country is proud to have produced a playwright who can compare with Henrik Ibsen, one who is making an impact on the rest of the world. Fosse has been awarded the highest honors that can be bestowed on a Norwegian artist.

Jon Fosse’s *Dødsvariasjonar* (*deathvariations*) was first presented by Norway’s National Theatre in 2001. The play received its U.S. debut when this translation was produced by Oslo Elsewhere at 59E59 Theatres in August of 2006 under my direction. The premiere marked Jon Fosse’s second professional production in New York, and only the third in the United States. I believe it is only a matter of time before his plays will be seen across the country.

Comparisons to Ibsen, Beckett, and Pinter may have helped Fosse on the path to success. However, they fail to capture the essence of his work because, like those who have come before him, he is forging his own particular theatricality. As *The New York Times* wrote in its review of the U.S. premiere of Fosse’s *deathvariations*, “it is easy to see his work as Ibsen stripped down to its emotional essentials. But it is much more. For one thing, it has fierce poetic simplicity.”

For the audience member seeking space for reflection, a look into Fosse’s texts can be invigorating. He offers relief from our technology-dominated world by presenting us with real human interaction. Characters are flawed but they are doing the best they can. They are in crisis, struggling with what it means to be alive, but unable to articulate their innermost feelings. They contradict themselves; they love deeply; they search for connection to other people and the world they live in. They try desperately to communicate with each other, and they never stop trying. But sometimes they have a freeing realization that vast space separates them from each other and that they are ultimately alone.

The idea of space (both the space that separates people from each other and the limitless possibilities of what might occur in a space that is wide-open) winds its way through every layer of Fosse’s work. Everything is linked in his world. Within the space he creates, he often explores the presence of death (whether clearly as in *deathvariations* or more subliminally as a counterpoint to life) and the tension of opposites.

Fosse has said, “What I am writing about is the relationship between people, the spaces between them, and in a way what I write are the empty spaces. And more than writing about place I feel I am writing what is in a place and doesn’t belong to that place in any visible or concrete sense.”

Fosse uses space in a number of ways—space between words, space between people, and space that surrounds the audience as we watch the play. Many things are unknown; few things are defined for us. The audience is asked to think, to live in the “not knowing,” and to take the story in on a highly personal level. On first glance Fosse’s work might seem empty to Americans—no buzz, devoid of action. But if we open ourselves to looking deeper, there are layers upon layers of meaning in every moment and intense action boiling under the surface of every ambiguous exchange. I call it a world of “specific ambiguity.” Fosse rarely provides us with answers on the surface, but if we engage in the spaces, the silences and the unknown, we enter the story with our own specific experiences and we are invested in our own version of the story. Fosse’s “spaces” allow for deep cathartic moments.

He allows us into the heads of the characters by demonstrating human interaction boiled down to its simplest form. He distills the minute details of people’s encountering each other. The energy between people is palpable in the silences, in the pauses, in the stillness, in-between words and even syllables. It is what happens between heartbeats. It’s the moment after an inhale of breath but before a word is spoken or an action is taken, when all the possibilities of what could happen next are present in the room. It is a delicate world where every tiny detail propels the story forward. Fosse leads us to question: what happens in the space between people? An openness occurs which is as frightening as it is liberating. Everything is possible in this openness. There is dramatic tension in that opposition, but a truth may be found. That truth will be specific to that moment, and it may provide a sense of hope.

Fosse is not afraid to ask his audience to re-imagine what death could be. This is a very intimidating question for Americans. We tend to avoid thinking about death. In Europe, perhaps because of the still recent communal experience of World War II or because the cultures tend to be a bit more fatalistic, the conversation about death is not as taboo as it is here and the theatre is a place to pose those provocative questions. Fosse asks us to look at death and suicide from a completely different angle: what if suicide is someone’s fate? What if there is hope in suicide? What if one falls in love with death personified?

Finding hope in the despair is a reoccurring theme in Fosse’s texts, though one must dig through layers of meaning to find it. He captures deeply conflicted moments of suffering. On the surface it is easy to see his plays as dark and depressing. But at the core, they are hopeful in two ways. Hope arises out of the sheer potential of what can and might happen next. There is potential in all possibilities being present at the same time. The Young Woman in *Night Sings Its Songs* puts it best when she has a revelation that “something always happens” during the climax of the play. And, like Rilke, who taught the young poet that solitude is inevitable, Fosse reminds

us that peace may be found in recognizing that two individuals will never be fully connected. We are each alone in this world. But that is “just the way life is,” as The Younger Man says in *deathvariations*. This simple truth is reiterated throughout Fosse’s body of work.

From a technical perspective, Fosse uses words sparingly, with no punctuation except for line breaks. Words, phrases, and ideas are repeated in variations. This creates a powerful sense of rhythm and musicality that allows an aural space for discovery. Similarly, the architecture of his plays on the page creates visual space in which a reader can ruminate. His form makes every word vital and extremely active. He strikes a balance between phrases we’ve heard a thousand times and phrases that reach multiple levels of meaning. He uses common, simple everyday words and phrases to craft the poetry of each moment. Sometimes the way he twists the words into phrases sounds strange, but he is exploring new forms and creating new language. By putting unlikely words together, Fosse illuminates a new perspective on the world we live in today.

Our world today is dominated by speed and technology; communication across the globe has never been easier. But what does that mean in terms of communication with the person right in front of us? Has instantaneous communication in the world complicated basic communication between individuals? Or maybe communication has always been this complicated. In any case, Fosse opens up questions about our time and the way we communicate at the turn of this century. The “specific ambiguity” of his voice allows us room to look at our own lives in order to find our own truths.

SARAH CAMERON SUNDE is a director based in New York City. Recently, she has directed three critically acclaimed U.S. debut productions of plays by international master playwrights: *The Asphalt Kiss* by Brazil’s Nelson Rodrigues (Drama Desk-nominated production), and her own translations of *Night Sings Its Songs* and *deathvariations* by Norway’s Jon Fosse. Sunde is the Associate Director of New Georges and co-founder of Oslo Elsewhere and the Translation Think Tank. She is a recipient of a Princess Grace Directing Award, an American Scandinavian Society Artist Award, and an Hermitage Foundation Residency.