



Folia
Scandinavica
Posnaniensia

Folia Scandinavica
VOL.34, 2023 (p. 108–120)
DOI: 10.14746/fsp-2023.34.08

Somewhere between Malmö and Copenhagen

Inter-spaces in Marius Ivaškevičius' play
Close City

Clemens Rätzel University of Greifswald)

Abstract

In the drama *Close City*, first published in 2005, Lithuanian playwright Marius Ivaškevičius focuses on the (im)possible connections between Malmö and Copenhagen. The initially realistic setting of a failing marriage in the spirit of August Strindberg and Ingmar Bergman evolves gradually into an absurd spectacle that explores spatial and intertextual interstices. This article investigates how the drama, as a scenic kaleidoscope, elaborates on the influence of imagined geographies in the Baltic Sea region, discusses (gendered) power relations, and questions Scandinavian exceptionalism.

Keywords: theatre, intertextuality, thirdspace, (re-)imagining Scandinavia, Lithuanian literature



PRESSIo.

© 2023 Clemens Rätzel. This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons BY 4.0 license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.en>).

1. INTRODUCTION

What lies between Malmö and Copenhagen, one might ask, but the Øresund. The strait that seems to have been overcome more than 20 years ago by a bridge that makes exchange between the two cities – and thus between the countries of Sweden and Denmark – convenient and efficient. At least literarily, there is far more in between than seems possible at first glance. In his play *Close City* (*Artimas miestai*), the Lithuanian author Marius Ivaškevičius places his *dramatis personae* into this borderland between Denmark and Sweden. The main characters Svante and Annika Svantensson live in Malmö overlooking the Øresund and facing the lights of Copenhagen. Their dreams, hopes and (forbidden) pleasures, however, seem to be located on the other side of the bridge – in the Danish capital. What starts as a more or less realistic take on a marriage in crisis in the tradition of August Strindberg and Ingmar Bergman turns gradually into a multilayered display, featuring elements of absurd and postmodern theatre: Both the Queen of Denmark and the King of Sweden are amongst the *dramatis personae* as well as Carlsson (“A Swede with a propeller”) and The Little Mermaid.

In this article I want to investigate the inter-spatial dimension of this play on three levels. At first, I want to look closer at the formation of the inter-territorial spaces in which the plot is set: Malmö, Copenhagen and the void in between. From the very beginning, these supposedly real spaces and urban sketches are presented as also imagined; in the second act they seem to merge, perhaps even collide. The inscription of the fairy-tale characters of Astrid Lindgren and H. C. Andersen – Carlsson¹ and The Little Mermaid – reinforces this aspect and invites us to read the scenes of the drama with Edward Soja as real-and-imagined spaces.

Secondly, intertextual spaces occupy an important position in the drama, which I will explore in more detail in the middle part of this article. These intertextual references to the Scandinavian fairy-tale-world and the plays of the so-called Modern Breakthrough further underline the intermingling of the real and the imagined. Furthermore, these intertexts can also be found on the formal level and in the constellations of characters. Here, the effectiveness of cultural intertexts from “the North” is already indicated; the audience can easily locate them in the (imagined) landscape and thus understand them.

Finally, I want to draw attention to the nature of imagined landscapes by not only investigating the spatial and intertextual constructs but also by exploring the question: who is imagining? This question can be posed in the same way to the characters of the drama, to the audience, and to the author as well. Perhaps initially less clearly than Ivaškevičius' essay series *My Scandinavia*, which my colleagues Lill-Ann Körber and Ieva Steponavičiūtė Aleksiejūnienė explore in this volume, *Close City* is also a literary portrait of Scandinavia(s) that looks at this region from a non-Western perspective and, precisely in the interplay of real-and-imagined-places, exhibits, undermines, and questions common images and narratives of the North.

Thus, this article is an invitation to a close reading of the play, and likewise to investigate the (textual) interstices between Malmö and Copenhagen, and to explore new perspectives on Scandinavia(s). Before doing so, I want to introduce the play in greater detail.

¹ Astrid Lindgren's character Karlsson-on-the-Roof differs in spelling. But it is not only the addition of “A Swede with a propeller” in the index of characters that makes the parallels between the figures unmistakable.

2. CLOSE CITY

Close City is a drama in two acts with a preface by the author, published in 2005.² Annika and Svante have been married for 15 years and live together with their three children in Malmö. Symptomatic of their crumbling marriage is the fact that Svante spends every weekend with his (imaginary) friends Ulf and Gösta in Copenhagen, while Annika stays at home. She has never visited the city on the other side – on the grounds that she would get seasick on the ferry between the two cities. Copenhagen is thus portrayed as a place of longing that is tangibly close and yet – at least for Annika – distant. The other city, so close and yet so far, becomes a kaleidoscope of dreams

With the opening of the Öresund Bridge comes the opportunity for Annika to visit the Danish capital. On the train crossing the bridge, portrayed as a transformation process, she meets Brigit (who later turns out to be a policewoman), who refers her to a prostitute (Lars) whom Annika visits to live out her fantasies. From her initial curiosity about what her husband finds so inspiring about Copenhagen, a sexual and sensual rediscovery by the main character seems to ensue. Eventually, Annika agrees – whether she does so voluntarily remains open – to work as a prostitute herself in Copenhagen. In increasingly diffuse spatial constellations, the two cities increasingly merge, with the sound rising to the family's house on a stormy night. Worlds collide, the dreaming ends, Annika is killed by a bullet from Svante's rifle, and Christmas arrives in a very different Malmö.

As mentioned in the beginning, the depiction of a marriage in crisis is flanked by the fairy tale characters Carlsson and The Mermaid, as well as the appearance of the Swedish and Danish monarchs. The collage-like, disparate parts of the drama create an initially realistic, increasingly transcending, dreamlike dramatic landscape in which the horror of the plot unfolds. The resulting, sometimes uncomfortable ambiguities leave the audience to sort out the characters and stories themselves, find connections and valuations, and discover the multiple layers of the drama in ever new angles.

According to the author in a conversation from May 2022, the inspiration for the play derived from a newspaper article he found during a stay in Copenhagen in 2004. The article reports the death of a woman who – as only becomes clear in the course of the investigation – led a double life between Malmö and Copenhagen; a woman who existed in two versions, so to speak. The German publisher Henschel henceforth advertises the play as an “erotic thriller”, parodistic with a dark phantastic side.³ However, as described in the short summary of the play above, Ivaškevičius' play is much more than a thriller. It turns out to challenge the image of Scandinavia as exceptional.

3. THE OTHER SIDE(S)

The first scenes of the drama take place in Svante and Annika's house in Malmö; through the windows the lights of Copenhagen can be seen. The couple's conversations revolve around the city across the sound, which Svante visits every weekend with his friends Ulf and Gösta. The speechlessness of the broken marriage manifests itself in the subject of the conversation: Annika, who has never been to Copenhagen, tries to find out what her husband is doing there. His answers remain vague and at the same time ambivalent. On the one hand, Copenhagen is described by Svante as nothing special: “Copenhagen is such a city.

² Performances of the drama took place in Latvia, New Zealand and France, among other places. Special attention was paid to the production of Kiril Serebrenikov at the Latvian National Theatre in Riga in 2017. The author himself directed the play in 2005.

³ Retrieved from <https://henschel-schauspiel.de/de/werk/6578>. Accessed 2 August 2023.

Ordinary, I mean. Ordinary. Scandinavian. But we don't live there" (CC:13).⁴ On the other hand, however, it is also described as a place that offers possibilities that go beyond the stability of the life at home, or rather an opportunity that exists in order to create the home in Malmö in the first place:

Annika: You go to Copenhagen every weekend and every weekend it's fine.

Svante: What can I say, Annika? How else could it be for three Swedish family men who take the ferry to Copenhagen every weekend?

Annika: It could be different every time.

Svante: I've been quite successful over there. Perhaps even more so than here. Though, as you know, I've been quite a success in Malmö, too. That's what the other shore is all about, to ensure the stability of success in Malmö. (CC:12)

These ambivalent spatial dimensions are further complicated because Annika finds herself unable to get to Copenhagen. The other side is out of her reach because she would get seasick on the ferry. According to her husband, she is the only woman in Sweden with this kind of problem. In a somewhat intrusive but rapturous suggestion, he formulates the ideas that she could fly to Copenhagen:

Svante: Annika, you're the only Swedish woman I know who gets ill just thinking about sea. There's never been a woman like you in the Svantensson family. You're the first ever in Malmö. In the world, who knows? If it bothers you so much, you could fly. Svante will pay. Except you won't find a direct flight. We're too close. (CC:12)

At the beginning of the drama, a spatial situation is thus set, which, charged in many ways, provides the framework for the *dramatis personae*. Although the action takes place in Malmö, Copenhagen is the actual arena of the drama's first act. The Danish capital functions as a thirdspace, both real and imagined. This concept, borrowed from Edward Soja (1996), can help to better understand the spatiality of the characters.

4. REAL-AND-IMAGINED – SOJA'S THIRDSAPCE

In the course of the so-called spatial turn, Edward Soja became one of the important (theoretical) figureheads who succeeded in transferring approaches from geography to other disciplines. Following in the footsteps of Henri Lefebvre and Michel Foucault, his main concern was "to develop a way of thinking about and interpreting socially produced spaces" (Borch 2002:113). This approach questions the hierarchy of time and space – that is, of history vs. geography and considers the spatiality of lives and human geographies as equally important and significant as historical and social dimensions. Bachmann-Medick emphasizes in her take on the spatial turn that concepts of (borderless) space, spatialization and the localization of culture have become particularly prominent guiding principles in various disciplines. They turn the focus on the "complexity, overlaps and superimpositions of spaces, the asynchronicities of the simultaneous, as well as the spatial counter-constructs that critically undermine the assumption of a center-periphery hierarchy" (Bachmann-Medick 2016:221).

This is true not only for real, physical or territorial spaces, but in the same way also for imagined geographies. A prominent example of this is Edward Soja's reading of Los Angeles as both real and imagined. A perspective that proves particularly fruitful with regard to the

⁴ I here refer to: Ivaškevičius, M. (2005). *Close City. A Drama in Two Acts*. English version by Edward Buffalo Bromberg after a literal translation by Laima Sruoginis.

cities of Ivaškevičius' drama – Copenhagen and Malmö. Soja sees in his approach the possibility of revealing, on the one hand, power structures and social conditions that manifest themselves spatially in Los Angeles. On the other hand, the extraordinary conceptual openness of his thirdspaces (Soja 1996:6) allows him to look at spaces beyond familiar demarcations and to accommodate previously not fully chartable spaces and communities. Real-and-imagined-spaces are described as spaces that are simultaneously material and symbolic, real and constructed, and represented in concrete spatial practices as well as in images (Soja 2003:281). Soja's concept has developed significance primarily in postcolonial contexts. However, Doris Bachmann-Medick has pointed out that this also offers the possibility of taking a look at diverse cultural transition and negotiation processes, for example when it comes to gender roles (Bachmann-Medick 1998).

If we look at Copenhagen in *Close City* from this perspective, it becomes clear, on the one hand, that the Danish capital exists as a real space, that the geographical proximity to Malmö is given. On the other hand, Svante's stays, his "men's journeys" by ferry to the other side of the Sound, Annika's impossible attempts to fully grasp his concept of Copenhagen manifest that the city so close – along with the activities it accommodates – is not fully chartable and a symbolic space in Soja's sense. Thus, Ivaškevičius' play does not deliver a description of places of desire, in a sense that the grass is always greener on the other side. Much more so it highlights power relations that are gendered. Copenhagen is the world of men (Svante, Gösta and Ulf), an exclusive pleasure to which Annika is denied access. As long as these power relations are intact, the spatial dimensions are stable. As Annika explores this world more and more in the second part of the drama and – similarly to Svante – builds a double life there, the spatial dimensions of the drama become more and more disordered, finally collapsing like a house of cards – only Annika's death seems to restore order. Let me explain in greater detail.

5. SPATIAL COLLISION

In the sixth scene of Act I, Annika boards the train to Copenhagen, where she meets Birgit. She tells her that she has no clue what to do in the Danish capital, except "to find out who my husband is" (CC:21) and what exactly he normally does there. Birgit recommends her to turn to Lars, a prostitute who is there to fulfill all his clients' wishes: "It's healthy for women in our climate to clear other places" (CC:22). Annika follows the recommendation, and an erotic journey of discovery develops, in the course of which Annika openly lives out her sexuality. Moreover, she appropriates Svante's perspective. Just as he used to do, she now looks from Copenhagen to Malmö and tells Lars:

Annika: Can you see the lights of Copenhagen from your window? If you could, I'd come here more often. [...] Svante showed me how he, Ulf and Gösta watch our city. Do you want to hear? They look at Malmö as if they'd never been there before. As if it wasn't our Malmö at all. "What's this all about?", I ask. I say, "Svante, pull yourself together. Eventually you get used to thinking about Malmö that way and you'll never come home." (CC:27)

From the moment Annika adopts the male gaze and establishes her own double life in Copenhagen, a change occurs in the spatial dimensions of the drama. While stable, clearly assignable spaces are presented in the first act, these become blurred in the second. Initially, the scenes here alternate again between Malmö and Copenhagen. With the difference, that now Svante is "at home" in Malmö and Annika establishes herself in Copenhagen. However, the speed of the scene-changes picks up in the course of this act, and the seemingly

clearly separable spaces – Malmö, on the one hand, Copenhagen, on the other – converge, becoming increasingly intertwined.

This is already indicated in the third scene of the second act. The stage directions describe Svante and Annika lying together in bed in their apartment in Malmö. Just as in the scene before, Annika shares a bed with Lars in Copenhagen. The parallelization of the bed scenes and the increasing spatial intermingling triggers nightmares for Annika; Ivaškevičius' text here foreshadows the catastrophe that will eventually ensue.

Annika: Svante, it's getting worse. Something's wrong. I have nightmares.

Svante: Is it your legs?

Annika: Not my legs, darling. Malmö and Copenhagen. In my dreams the cities move. They don't just move, they fly at very high speed. One city towards the other. A hundred and thirty or so an hour. Maybe even more. And I'm afraid to think... I'm afraid to dream because of what might happen if they collide. (CC:35)

This image of the looming collision establishes that this unstable spatial dimension, or in the words of Soja: the merging of the real and the imagined, are by no means told as a peaceful union or an overcoming of boundaries. Contrary, the inter-space that still exists at the beginning functions as protection – at least for Annika. The threat comes from Svante, who in the last part of the drama operates with a rifle in his hand. What is initially presented as a – supposedly typical Scandinavian – moose hunt turns into a hunt for the imagined, for Annika's newly acquired freedoms in Copenhagen.

At the very end, Annika's nightmare comes true. Svante shoots into the Malmö night, the police state that “the crime lab in Denmark thinks your wife was murdered with just this type of gun” (CC:57). However, as presented at the outset, the drama does not end with a realistic-looking murder; rather, the final scene gathers Svante and Annika at a table; it is Christmas and Annika is subdued at the table. Thus, in the spatial approach, the collision, Ivaškevičius does not portray a reconciliation of the couple, but the murderous failure of their life together, which is rooted in power relations that express an imbalance. Thus, the drama undermines the idea of Scandinavian exceptionalism; it does not celebrate a supposed equality. Ivaškevičius' Scandinavia is not exceptional at all. It does not “draw on a set of cultural values and discourses related to the idea of a specific kind of modernity” (Bjerring-Hansen et al. 2021:10). Svante and Annika are not equals. Sexual liberation is only an illusion, when at the beginning familiar role pictures are reversed, and Annika is meeting with the prostitute Lars after Svante had claimed the right to go to Copenhagen for more than 15 years. We readers are seduced, much like Annika perhaps, to witness a departure. With the opening of the metaphorical bridge, a symbol of possibilities, we hopefully board the train with Annika. But behind this supposed liberation lurks an unwanted embrace, the forced pushing back into little exceptional role models.

The plot circling around Svante and Annika and its spatial dimensions are further complicated by the multiple intertextual spaces in the drama, which I will discuss in more detail below. I want to argue that in the intertextual spaces of *Close City*, on the one hand, the seemingly realistic surface of the well-situated couple Svante and Annika is questioned, and, on the other, a literary situating of the drama between Sweden and Denmark takes place via the intertexts, which invites a critical questioning of the Scandinavian model.

6. INTER-TEXTUAL SPACES

The intertextual references of the drama are manifold – some more obvious, others more hidden. For one thing, Carlsson and the Mermaid are two famous characters from the Swedish and Danish fairy tale worlds, respectively. The brutal relationship between these two characters in *Close City* mirrors the relationship between Annika and Svante or Lars. In addition, the Swedish king and the Danish queen figure in a joint scene celebrating the similarities between the two countries. Finally, multiple references to Scandinavian literature are also evident in the form and design of the drama; here, the parallels to the works of the “great” playwrights August Strindberg and Henrik Ibsen are especially unmistakable. In the following, I will present the intertextual spaces in more detail and explore the question of how the interplay of the various spaces develops a literary depth that goes far beyond the character of the “erotic thriller”.

6.1 FAIRY TALE LANDSCAPES: CARLSSON AND THE MERMAID

Two fairy tale characters, or rather characters reminiscent of Scandinavian fairy tales, appear prominently in the drama. In the index of characters they are called “Carlsson – A Swede with a propeller” and “The Little Mermaid – Half woman, half fish” (CC:8). The two appear together for the most part. In a relationship increasingly marked by brutality, Carlsson delivers expansive monologues while the mermaid remains silent.

Carlsson, the Swede with the propeller, is reminiscent of the well-known Astrid Lindgren character Karlsson-on-the-Roof.⁵ In a series of books, the first published in 1955, Lindgren traces the adventures of the title character, a stocky man in his prime, who is no taller than a child and lives in a tiny house under a chimney. On his back he has a propeller, with the help of which he can fly. The books tell of his friendship with seven-year-old Lillebror, a friendship designed primarily for Karlsson’s benefit. Lillebror, which translates as little brother, is Svante Svantesson (!) by his real name. It is striking that Lindgren’s title character is only partially sympathetic: Karlsson is opinionated, narcissistic and quite manipulative. These character traits are further developed in the figure of Carlsson in *Close City*.

The Little Mermaid in Ivaškevičius’ text is reminiscent of H. C. Andersen’s most famous and most discussed character. Out of love for a prince, the Little Mermaid sacrifices her voice; in return, she receives legs and the opportunity to live on land for a limited time. However, the mute girl cannot win the prince’s heart, the last possibility of rescue – to kill him and the bride with a magic knife – she rejects and finally becomes foam on the sea.

The brutality that is often inherent in fairy tales (Röhrich 2002:231f.) develops a special scope in *Close City*. There are a total of four scenes between Carlsson and The Mermaid in the drama, two in each act. Thus, they figure prominently in the drama. The scenes are each set in the harbor of Malmö; what they have in common is that the Mermaid remains silent while Carlsson delivers monologues. The imbalance of speech shares finds a continuation in Carlsson’s violent assaults on the Mermaid. In their first joint appearance (Act 1, Scene 3) the Mermaid is caught in a fishing net, in the second (Act 1, Scene 8) Carlsson pushes a rock into her mouth, and finally, at the very end (Act 2, Scene 8) “Carlsson slices The Little Mermaid’s tail with a knife” (CC:53) before raping her.

Skillfully, Ivaškevičius initially borrows from the original. Carlsson introduces himself as “stocky and in the prime of his life” (CC:28), he boasts that he is the best at everything, eats with great passion, etc. At the same time, however, the author strips Carlsson out of the

⁵ Karlsson on the Roof is one of the most popular characters in childrens and youth literature, especially in Central and Eastern Europe, and three animated films featuring him were made in the Soviet Union.

children's book charm. He is an adult man who blithely commits linguistic and physical violence, abusing the Mermaid with narcissistic and sadistic glee:

Carlsson: (He pushes a rock into The Little Mermaid's mouth) You know, you're so much prettier with a rock in your mouth. [...] Your eternal silence doesn't even annoy me anymore. Now I can guess why you are quiet. Because a minute ago I shoved a rock in your mouth. As our relationship grows, I might trust you with more rocks. [...]

Of course, now you're wondering what this is going to cost you. Getting a rock in your mouth is no cheap pleasure. It's nothing extravagant, we'll just call it hospitality. In my opinion any Swede encountering a half-naked Danish woman should shove as many rocks down her throat as possible. (CC:29f.)

Excesses of violence, which may still be familiar in a fairy tale world, trigger a strong sense of unease in the dramatic setting of *Close City*. This is further reinforced by the close association of fairy tale characters with the main characters. Carlsson acts as a mixture of Svante and Lars, the prostitute who takes more and more possession of Annika and eventually rapes her, shortly before Carlsson does so with the Mermaid.

Even more striking are the parallelisms between the Little Mermaid and Annika. Already in the first scene, Annika addresses her fear that her legs might grow together. This motif is taken up again and again in the course of the play, extending – as described above – to the spatial dimensions of the dramatic setting. Last but not least, the drama ends with a direct encounter between Annika and The Mermaid. The final stage direction, with which the play ends on Christmas Eve, states:

Annika crawls towards the oven. The Little Mermaid crawls towards the fallen kitchen knife. They pass each other. The Little Mermaid reaches the knife, and standing with difficulty begins to stab herself in the tail. Screaming, she slices the tail up the middle. (CC:59)

The drama ends with the encounter of two women who have become victims of violence. With the screams of the Mermaid, until then silent, like Andersen's character an outsider, "deprived of the language to communicate her message" (Březinová 2019:45), the text sets an audibly painful final point. Annika and the Mermaid are subjected to physical assault on both sides of the Sound, both in real and imagined spaces. Exemplary for this is the knife: in Andersen's fairy tale still a magical means of salvation, even if it is not used, it is applied several times in *Close City*. The culmination of violence against women, which Ivaškevičius describes here and anchors intertextually, thus paints a somewhat different Scandinavia, far from the image of peaceful equality and exceptionalism. This is all the more effective in *Close City*, as the author reveals both the intertextual (fairy tale) spaces and the "real" places to be filled with violence.

6.2 ROYAL SELF-ASSURANCE: MONARCHS AT DUTY

In the fourth scene of the first act, Ivaškevičius illuminates supposed Scandinavian exceptionalism with a comic-satirical eye. The Danish queen and her Swedish counterpart celebrate the opening of the Øresund link with a joint stage appearance. The stage direction at the beginning of the scene states:

Swedish television is broadcasting the opening of the bridge between Denmark and Sweden. The crowned heads of both countries walk theatrically across the bridge towards each other. (CC:15)

The official opening of the bridge on July 1, 2000, was indeed marked by a picture-perfect meeting of the two royal couples, who greeted each other at a supposed demarcation line – marked by carpets in different colors (red for Denmark, blue for Sweden) – with cheek kisses, in keeping with protocol. In *Close City*, this bridge-building is comically broken by a litany-like enumeration of the similarities between Sweden and Denmark and the impact the new link between the two countries will have.

The Queen of Denmark: We have two eyes.
The King of Sweden: We have two ears.
The Queen of Denmark: We have hair.
The King of Sweden: Skin. [...]
The Queen of Denmark: We have a long neck.
The King of Sweden: We have white teeth. [...]
The Queen of Denmark: We think.
The King of Sweden: So do we.
The Queen of Denmark: We have belly buttons.
The King of Sweden: We have two feet.
The Queen of Denmark: We have a beautiful language.
The King of Sweden: We have good pronunciation. [...]
The Queen of Denmark: We are too similar.
The King of Sweden: We are of the same tribe.
The Queen of Denmark: Now we have a bridge.
The King of Sweden: We'll join our eyes.
The Queen of Denmark: We'll join our height.
The King of Sweden: We'll join our weight.
The Queen of Denmark: We'll join our belly buttons.
The King of Sweden: That's why we have a bridge.
The Queen of Denmark: We'll turn nation to nation.
The King of Sweden: We'll turn man to man.
The Queen of Denmark: We'll turn window to window.
The King of Sweden: We'll turn wave to wave.
The Queen of Denmark: Malmö and Lund to Denmark.
The King of Sweden: Europe to Scandinavia. (CC:15f.)

The litany-like literary form – characterized by repetition, rhythmization, and musicality (Schwens-Harrant 2015:355) – breaks with the seemingly realistic language of the other scenes in the drama. The comic refraction allows for a cheerful view of the portrayed Scandinavism. The text celebrates supposed Swedish-Danish commonalities, which form like a leviathan into a common, handsome, tall, healthy, abled body with two clearly definable genders. The exclusionary mechanisms at work here are obvious. The emphasis on legs and feet is representative: “We have legs” (CC:15), “We have two feet” (CC:16). Annika’s fear that her legs will grow together is thus also the fear of no longer belonging. The attempts of the mute Mermaid to cut open her tail must be interpreted as an effort to painfully buy participation.

However, the form of the litany also helps to create comic refractions in the image of commonalities. For in addition to the unity, the differences and Swedish-Danish animosities are simultaneously referred to. The “we” in the litany is, on the one hand, Scandinavian and thus unifying; on the other hand, it has a delimiting effect, because it can just as well be read as Swedish *or* Danish – in order to highlight the superiority of one over the other. Thus, it is the Swedish king who emphasizes his good pronunciation (in contrast to the Danish mumbling), and white teeth (in contrast to the teeth of the smoking Danish queen). The Danish queen, however, annexes Malmö and Lund (old Danish territories) and repeatedly

hints at her height (in contrast to the small Swedish king) – to name just a few examples. Moreover, the litany as a form offers the possibility of perpetual complementation (Schwens-Harrant 2015); it is thus also like a game aimed at outdoing each other. Only the passionate kiss, in which the scene ends – not really keeping with protocol – can stop the battle.

The Queen of Denmark: We'll unite our seas.

The King of Sweden: We'll unite our lips.

The royalty embrace and kiss passionately. They are greeted by boats sounding their horns, whistling trains, and honking cars. (CC:17)

In this doubling of the “we”, in the litany-like rhythm, the comedy arises as a central element of the drama. For in this way, the mechanisms of exclusion that are pointed out undergo a comic exaggeration. The laughter with and about the royal characters performs an important task: In this comic scene, not only a Scandinavian norm is expressed, but in the laughter, as Joachim Ritter explains, the norm is always affected. By excluding the non-conformist, Ritter argues, it does not necessarily make it recognizable as negative, but rather as something that the norm, or “normative seriousness”, cannot cope with, but which belongs to the “whole of life just as much as that which is considered positive and essential” (Warning 1976:325). In laughter – understood as a means of expression of “joy, pleasure, amusement, cheerfulness and whimsy” (Ritter 1974:64) – what is excluded is transferred into its own positivity, and in this way makes the norm visible in its limitations as an exclusionary principle. In this ambiguity of the comic scene, Ivaškevičius creates an intertextual space that at the same time points out normations, questions them, and damages them in an absurd turn.

6.3 BREAKING THE MODERN BREAKTHROUGH

Ivaškevičius opens up another intertextual space in his references to the “great” playwrights of the so-called Modern Breakthrough – first and foremost August Strindberg and Henrik Ibsen. The references are so manifold that I will only discuss a few selected examples here. Before the actual beginning of the play, the reader encounters an obvious and abundantly clear parallel to August Strindberg. Ivaškevičius opens *Close City* with a lengthy preface: “An introduction by the author” (CC:5). In it, he pictures what the drama would look like in cinema⁶ and he explains what will happen to the two heroes of the play. He discusses dreams that are important and yet can end tragically.⁷ He describes how relationships can slowly end when dreams die, and common ground is used up.⁸ And that a peaceful end to such a relationship does not necessarily materialize. Interrupted again and again by the sentence, “That’s what happens to the heroes of this play, Svante and Annika Svantensson from Malmö” (CC:5f.).

The author’s opening words must be read as a parallel to August Strindberg’s preface to *Fröken Julie* (*Miss Julie*), published in 1888. No Swedish statement on drama and theatre “has become so famous and has had such an impact” (Törnqvist & Jacobs 1988:39). In it, Strindberg sketches his ideas of modern drama and its realization on stage. At the same time, following Darwinian theories, he describes how the fate of the main characters should

⁶ “If someone would take up bringing ‘Close City’ to the big screen, I would offer such a final scene: in the expanse of the cosmos the globe is drifting, one that has been seen more than once in cosmic fantasy films.” (CC:5)

⁷ “Dreaming is indeed beautiful, maybe even healthy. It improves blood circulation. However, there comes an age when dreaming becomes dangerous, and if you don’t learn to reconcile your dreams with reality until that time, big problems await you. An unrealized dream swells up and crushes your life.” (CC:5)

⁸ “It can happen that two people love each other very much. Despite this, the husband takes the ferry every weekend to another shore and hides in his dream. The wife, noticing her husband’s absence, takes a ferry to the other shore so she can become that dream. They do not meet.” (CC:6)

be read, how Julie and Jean – the heroes of the drama – could become what they became. Besides its importance for the development of a new drama aesthetic, which I will leave aside here, this Strindbergian text develops its potential above all when it is not read as an explanation of the drama, but placed in a field of tension with it:

The general conclusion which we can draw from all this is that there is every reason to take Strindberg's views of the play in the preface with a grain of salt – however interesting they are in themselves and however seminal they have been for the development of modern drama. The relationship between the drama and the preface may teach us that we ought to be on our guard not only against the 'intentional' but also against the 'post-intentional' fallacy. (Törnqvist & Jacobs 1988:59f.)

This fallacy is also found in Ivaškevičius' work with regard to the relationship between preface and drama. And here the parallels with Strindberg's extensive oeuvre by no means stop: Svante's and Annika's marriage is reminiscent of *Dance of Death (Dödsdansen)* or *The Father (Fadren)*, right down to the design of the dialogue and the many pauses worked into the text. Furthermore, *Close City* ends on Christmas Eve, a "fateful part of the plot" popular with Strindberg (Lisovskaya 2016:164) in many of his texts, among others, in *By the Opens Sea (I havsbandet)*, *The Black Glove (Svarta handsken)*, and *Advent*. And not only in Strindberg's work, but perhaps even more prominently in Ibsen's, Christmas Eve experiences a special dramatic charge. Ibsen's *A Doll's House (Et dukkehjem)* can "almost be seen as an archetypical deconstruction of Christmas Eve in a bourgeois home" (Lisovskaya 2016:171), figuring the end of a marriage under the Christmas tree.

The similarities with Ibsen's probably best-known drama do not end there; they stretch to the question of the nature of authorship. The scandalous ending of *A Doll's House* led to several versions of the drama circulating and being performed on stage simultaneously – Ibsen himself wrote an alternative ending, but it did not remain the only one staged (Janss 2017). To this day, a performance of the drama is consistently linked to the question of how to end it. Thus, *A Doll's House* has become a play that allows to discuss authorship as a multi-layered process (Räthel 2020).

The same can be said for Ivaškevičius' drama. *Close City* is by no means a "completed" play; the text discussed in this article is only one version. The changes and adaptations are quite extensive: in the German translation from 2019,⁹ for example, the characters Carlsson and The Little Mermaid are completely missing, instead we meet Bill (a maniac, 40 years old) and Sirenetta (the victim, 35 years old). In the "German version" the play also does not end with Svante and Annika sitting down for Christmas dinner, rather it closes with a telephone monologue by Sirenetta. In an interview in 2022, the author described how he keeps reworking and adapting the play, adding and respectively cutting scenes and characters.¹⁰ As with Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, this again casts light on the concept of authorship, adding to the many layers of intertextual references. The play is a work in progress. To compare the different versions, to put them into dialogue with one another would be a promising project for future academic work.

The multiple intertextual references, and the textual constitution, allusions, and refractions that Ivaškevičius elaborates in his drama expand the spatial dimensions

⁹ The German translation was published by Henschel Schauspiel in 2019 under the title *Die andere Stadt (The Other City)*, translated from the Lithuanian by Arna Aley.

¹⁰ The conversation with Marius Ivaškevičius took place on June 2, 2022 as part of the 5th Nordic Challenges conference: *Nordic Neighbourhoods: Affinity and Distinction in the Baltic Sea Region and Beyond* at Södertörn University, Stockholm. Under the title *Baltic-Nordic Encounters in the Wake of 1989 – A Meeting with Lithuanian Writer and Playwright Marius Ivaškevičius*, Lill-Ann Körber, Ieva Steponavičiūtė Aleksiejūnienė and Clemens Räthel discussed his texts with the author.

in *Close City*. Once again, real and imagined spaces emerge, interstices in which new ideas, images, and narratives can develop, allowing us to take a new (dramatic) look at Scandinavia(s).

7. REFRAMING SCANDINAVIA OR: WHO IS IMAGINING?

This fresh (dramatic) view of Scandinavia(s), the narratives and images portrayed in *Close City* – and this brings me to the third point, as promised at the beginning – also results from the perspective from which the “North” is viewed here. North and south are, of course, relative classifications that always depend on the respective standpoint of the observer. At the same time, however, they function as reciprocal places of longing, which can be found again and again in literary and pictorial testimonies. German-language research on Scandinavia in particular has emphatically shown that ideas and images of longing for the North are as diverse as they are persistent. The North, as Bernd Henningsen puts it, does not serve as a point on the compass, but as an idea. The North of Europe seems to be “an ideal space rather than a real space” (Henningsen 2021:11), resulting in the idea of the North as “a better world, the South believes” (ibid.:35). A notion, that is no less virulent in Scandinavia itself.

This view of the North is a southern one, but above all a German-speaking one, and can therefore only be made fruitful to a limited extent for the view from Central Europe that Marius Ivaškevičius takes in *Close City*. In a very determined way, as I have already shown, he repeatedly breaks from common notions of Scandinavian exceptionalism(s), of equal treatment of the sexes, or of inner-Scandinavian discrepancies in his drama. The at times brutal fairy-tale landscapes spill over into realities; it is an uncomfortable space in which the characters move. Certainly not a better world.

At the same time, however, the drama’s many intertextual references show how Scandinavian cultural inscriptions are established as dominant. Of course, the audience is familiar with *The Little Mermaid* and Carlsson; at least literary scholars can hardly miss the many references to the authors of the *Modern Breakthrough*. This hierarchy of images and narratives should become abundantly clear at the latest when one investigates the question of whether the intertexts could function in the other direction – how many Lithuanian, Baltic references would Western and Northern European readers understand? The manifold intertexts thus produce a form of Scandinavian exceptionalism that has received little attention so far and which, at least in my reading, the text produces, exhibits, and thus puts up for discussion.

Unlike the North and the South, the North and Central and Eastern Europe do not condition each other in the same way, the (popular) cultural references that *Close City* exhibits, on which the drama is based, are not reciprocal. Of course, the East, perhaps more accurately the region that has been called “behind the Iron Curtain”, is also an invention (just like the North), impressively expounded by Larry Wolff in his book *Inventing Eastern Europe* (1994). However, this invention mostly lacks positive or desirable dimensions. The fact that with the disappearance of the Iron Curtain a good 30 years ago, these images and narratives continue to have almost the same impact must cause astonishment – not about the fact that such proven cultural quantities are long-lived, but rather the fact that they continue to be produced and further solidify the above-mentioned hierarchizations.

I would like to return to the beginning and the question of what lies between Malmö and Copenhagen. What is it that we encounter in *Close City*, in the space between the real and the imaginary, between text and intertext? It will come as no surprise that I cannot answer the question. The inter-spaces presented in this article in a variety of ways can be charged quite differently, and perhaps that is why it is exciting to pose the question of perspective

in central terms. The view of the north is never from nowhere, it is always directed. In the simultaneous (re)production and dissolution of the real-and-imagined-spaces between Malmö and Copenhagen, Ivaškevičius succeeds in bringing the imager into focus, and making him(self) visible.

REFERENCES

- Bachmann-Medick, D. (1998). Dritter Raum. Annäherungen an ein Medium kultureller Übersetzung und Kartierung. In: C. Berger & T. Döring (eds.), *Figuren der/des Dritten. Erkundungen kultureller Zwischenräume* (pp. 19–36). Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Bachmann-Medick, D. (2016). *Cultural turns: New orientations in the study of culture*. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter.
- Bjerring-Hansen, J., Jelsbak, T. & Mrozewicz, A. (2021). Scandinavian exceptionalism. An introduction. In: J. Bjerring-Hansen, T. Jelsbak & A. Mrozewicz (eds.), *Scandinavian exceptionalisms. Culture, society, discourse* (pp. 9–32). Berlin: Nordeuropa-Institut.
- Borch, B. (2002). Interview with Edward W. Soja: Thirdspace, postmetropolis, and social theory. *Distinktion: Scandinavian Journal of Social Theory* 3(1), 113–120. DOI: 10.1080/1600910X.2002.9672816.
- Březinová, H. (2019). A community incommunicado. On troubled communication in Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tales. In: A. K. Bom, J. Bøggild & J. Nørregaard Frandsen (eds.), *Hans Christian Andersen and community* (pp. 35–55). Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark.
- Henningsen, B. (2021). *Die Welt des Nordens. Zwischen Ragnarök und Wohlfahrtsutopie. Eine kulturhistorische Dekonstruktion*. Berlin: Wissenschaftsverlag.
- Ivaškevičius, M. (2005). *Close city. A drama in two acts*. English version by Edward Buffalo Bromberg after a literal translation by Laima Sruoginis.
- Ivaškevičius, M. (2019). *Die andere Stadt. Aus dem Litauischen von Arna Aley*. Berlin: Henschel Theaterverlag.
- Janss, C. (2017). When Nora stayed: More light on the German ending. *Ibsen Studies* 17(1), 3–27. DOI: 10.1080/15021866.2017.1324359.
- Lisovskaya, P. (2016). Christmas Eve in Strindberg's oeuvre. In: M. Ciaravolo (ed.), *Strindberg across borders* (pp. 163–178). Rom: Instituto Italiano di Studi Germanici.
- Räthel, C. (2020). Redecorating *A Doll's House* in contemporary German theater. Multiple authorship in Ibsen's *Nora*. *Ibsen Studies* 20(1), 67–87. DOI: 10.1080/15021866.2020.1757302.
- Ritter, J. (1974). Über das Lachen (1940). In: J. Ritter, *Subjektivität. Sechs Aufsätze* (pp. 62–92). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Röhrich, L. (2002). "und weil sie nicht gestorben sind..." *Anthropologie, Kulturgeschichte und Deutung von Märchen*. Köln: Böhlau Verlag.
- Schwens-Harrant, B. (2015). Literatur als Litanei. In: T. Lörke & R. Walter-Jochum (eds.), *Religion und Literatur im 20. und 21. Jahrhundert. Motive, Sprechweisen, Medien* (pp. 353–366). Göttingen: VR Uni Press.
- Soja, E. (1996). *Thirdspace. Journeys to Los Angeles and other real-and-imagined places*. Cambridge (Mass.): Blackwell.
- Soja, E. (2003). Thirdspace – Die Erweiterung des geographischen Blicks. In: H. Gebhardt, P. Reuber & G. Wolkersdorfer (eds.), *Kulturgeographie. Aktuelle Ansätze und Entwicklungen* (pp. 269–288). Heidelberg, Berlin: Spektrum.
- Törnqvist, E. & Jacobs, B. (1988). *Strindberg's Miss Julie. A play and its transposition*. Norwich: Norvik Press.
- Warning, R. (1976). Elemente einer Pragmasemiotik der Komödie. In: W. Preisendanz & R. Warning (eds.), *Das Komische* (pp. 279–334). München: Fink.
- Wolff, L. (1994). *Inventing Eastern Europe. The map of civilization on the mind of the Enlightenment*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Clemens Räthel

University of Greifswald
Department of Finnish and Scandinavian Studies
Ernst-Lohmeyer-Platz 3
17489 Greifswald
Germany

clemens.raethel@uni-greifswald.de