

Can Transcultural Theatre Raise the Dead? Exploring Kaj Munk's *Ordet* (*The Word*) via Peter Brook's Essentialist Aesthetic

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Ordet (*The Word*) from 1925 by the Danish priest, poet and playwright Kaj Munk is a modern miracle play with a powerful resurrection scene at the core of its dramatic structure. The text itself contains explicit Christian and theological discussions and a strong appeal to the personal faith of its audiences. Such content, combined with a resurrection theme, often presents an awkward challenge to present-day directors wishing to stage the play within a Danish context, when Denmark itself may be said to defend its secular position with almost fundamentalist fervour. The positioning of the play within the Danish canon is therefore a sometimes uncomfortable business, as is the examination of the literary and historical figure of Kaj Munk himself, to which I shall return. My purpose here is to examine whether there may be hope for a dramatic text that has come to be considered at best problematic, at worst anachronistic, within its own national and canonical context, if it were submitted to notions taken from transcultural performance theory and practice. I will examine this question mainly by focusing on the transcultural aesthetic of Peter Brook's theatre, particularly his mythopoetic, ritualist and essentialist approaches to performance, and then, with Brook's notions in mind, I will look at a recent production of *Ordet* by Swedish director Lars Norén for The Royal Danish Theatre in 2008. This production did *not* engage with transcultural performance practice, but may be seen rather as an attempt to accommodate the religious messages of the play within a Danish/Scandinavian context by, as we shall see, undermining the moment of the resurrection. I will argue that such an 'accommodation' diminishes a vital part of the play's dramaturgy, whereas an imagined transcultural *mise-en-scène* inspired by an aesthetic vision such as Brook's with the potential to remove the play in part or entirely from its national/historical context and to highlight the enactment of ritual in the resurrection scene might result in an alternative, but possibly very powerful revival of this miracle play.

Intercultural Theatre and Transcultural Theatre in Theory and Practice

Firstly, we should here distinguish between transcultural theatre and intercultural theatre. Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo's article 'Toward a Topography of Cross-Cultural Theatre Praxis' is helpful in defining the term transcultural as a sub-category of the larger intercultural framework, which also comprises intracultural and extracultural theatre practices.¹ Intercultural theatre may be described as a hybrid process, in which dramatic texts, acting styles, settings, designs and performance traditions operate and negotiate between their respective cultural contexts, in order to bring about a *mise-en-scène* that encompasses a range of aesthetic elements from both

¹ Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo, 'Toward a Topography of Cross-Cultural Theatre Praxis', *The Drama Review* 46 (2002) 6-8. Definitions and discussions of intercultural theatre in this section are also found in C.F. Sorgenfrei, 'Whose *Mahabharata* is it, anyway? The Ethics and Aesthetics of Intercultural Performance', *Theatre Histories* ed. P B Zarrilli, B McConachie, G.J. Williams and C.F. Sorgenfrei (London & NY: Routledge, 2006) 562-72.

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the 'source culture' and the 'target culture'. Intercultural theatre should therefore, when staged properly, result in a form of mediation, or an encounter, between the script, or other form(s) of dramatic source(s), from one cultural framework and the performance traditions from another (or several) cultural framework(s). In transcultural theatre, however, we may add the particular purpose of reaching what we might call a pre-cultural layer via this encounter. The conviction of an existing pre-cultural pattern, a universalising essence of culture, is evident in the work of well-known directors like Eugenio Barba, and certainly Peter Brook, and the endeavour to reach and express this abstract notion in performance by shedding superficial cultural layers is fundamental to the notion of transcendence in a transcultural performance.² Intercultural as well as transcultural performances ought to avoid appropriations, meaning that one cultural framework should not merely be adapted and modified in order to meet the expectations of the other. This is certainly not a simple quest, perhaps it is even a doomed one from the onset, if founded on simplistic assumptions. The implications of transcultural performance are evidently considerably more complex than the mere exchange of one set of codes for another. Particular care should be taken by approaches that depart from as well as terminate within a Western framework exemplified in the familiar image of the Western traveller who embarks on a journey and returns, thinking of himself as enlightened after his encounter with the Other, who nonetheless remains precisely an Other. This approach may be said to build essentially on a wish to traverse rather than to transcend.

Additional problematic aspects of transculturalism as a theatrical practice occur when productions fail to clarify the terms on which they are attempting to create the cultural encounter. The term transcultural performance naturally creates a certain set of expectations in an audience, which may ultimately be incompatible with the director's intentions. Such expectations might be of a more anthropological nature: the audience approaches the performance expecting to gain an insight into diverse cultural elements, but finds that these elements are primarily utilised in an aesthetic framework, such as in the setting and costume, light and sound designs of the production. These may delight the senses, but do not necessarily offer profound cultural insights. In the worst case scenario, this form of transcultural theatre employs cultural elements in a superficial and preconceived manner and succeeds in presenting no more than an eclectic mixture of cultural clichés, which have a trivialising effect in even the most convincing performance.

Peter Brook and 'The Culture of Links'

In postcolonial contexts the implications of transcultural performance naturally appear even more problematic when we wish to pay particular attention to whether the cultural encounter takes place on equal terms and when we are searching for instances in which original texts are decontextualised with a view to selling them to (Western) audiences. The adaptation of an Oriental text to suit a Western cultural reference

² For a discussion of the term 'pre-cultural' and the quest for a universal essence of humanity, see Patrice Pavis, 'Introduction: Towards a Theory of Interculturalism in Theatre?' *The Intercultural Performance Reader* ed. Patrice Pavis (London: Routledge, 1996) 6-7. The importance of the notion of transcendence to Brook's work is also emphasised by Gilbert and Lo 7.

framework was also claimed by some critics to be the main problem in Peter Brook's well-known and controversial production of *The Mahabharata* from 1985, which is one of the first and best known examples of a director's attempt to create a transcultural performance in the West. The critique of Brook's nine-hour-long staging of *The Mahabharata* was primarily founded on the fact that he appeared to focus on the overall mythical elements in the epic text rather than deal with its particular cultural and historical background. This was registered by some critics as a typically westernised textual approach, which disregarded the kind of authenticity that is predominantly founded on fidelity to the particular historical and cultural contexts of a dramatic text, even if Brook's final productions (meaning both the stage production and the subsequent film) were acknowledged for their aesthetic vision and effect. Rustom Bharucha wrote scathingly that 'Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* exemplifies one of the most blatant (and accomplished) appropriations of Indian culture in recent years.'³ What, in Bharucha's view, was most disturbing about the representation of Indian culture in Brook's work was not so much its being a Western approach, but the fact it 'exemplifies a particular kind of Western representation which negates the non-Western context of its borrowing'.⁴

In order to comprehend (but not necessarily justify) Brook's work, one must make allowances for his autonomous authenticity concept, which is defined via essentialism rather than particularity. The perspective of Brook's transcultural theatre is essentialist in the sense that it proposes to transcend cultural differences and explore 'the great narratives' that may link people and their differentiating cultural expressions at a profounder level. Although often considered postmodernist in his directorial approach, Brook's aesthetic springs from a deep-seated humanism and, at the same time, what some might deem, a Utopian view of communalism. Brook himself describes his so-called 'culture of links' thus:

It is the force that can counterbalance the fragmentation of our world. It has to do with the discovery of relationships where such relationships have become submerged and lost – between man and society, between one race and another, between the microcosm and the macrocosm, between humanity and machinery, between the visible and the invisible, between categories, languages, genres. What are these relationships? Only cultural acts can explore and reveal these vital truths.⁵

This vision is expressed in his choice of texts, in his theatrical settings and designs, his multi-national casting and in his use of global acting styles exemplified in his actors' training of speech and movement. He has repeatedly sought out texts that have provided him with material for re-enacting transcultural myths. Myth is, in fact, Brook's preferred narrative trope with which to indicate the above-mentioned global human truth, because myths represent, in Brook's view, the great narratives of the

³ Rustom Bharucha, *Theatre and the World: Performance and the Politics of Culture* (London & NY: Routledge, 1993) 68.

⁴ Bharucha 70.

⁵ Peter Brook, 'The Culture of Links', *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, ed. Patrice Pavis (London: Routledge, 1996) 66.

world. However, they are not to be seen as fixed entities as much as open dynamic structures, invisible patterns underlying our everyday phenomenological perception. The purpose of the theatre then becomes to perceive this mythopoetic vision and to re-enact and impart it via performance practice. In this sense the theatre becomes (again) a place for communalist interpretations of ritual and its art, not an end in itself, but a means to apprehending the what Brook calls 'the invisible'. It is important here to note that Brook's universalist aesthetic should be understood primarily in terms of theatrical performance, that the communalist idea of a shared space across cultural differences is confined to the theatrical space. In other contexts it may well be torn to pieces by postmodernist theories in which universalism becomes a highly self-deceptive vision, an overruling of otherness in the name of communalism. I am, of course, aware of the numerous ways in which to point out the instability of Brook's concepts, even when they remain within a theatrical framework. The ways in which Brook explores his essentialism, however, prove his own awareness of the dangers implied in it, because his textual approaches and setting designs may be said to be continuously striving for semantic confrontation rather than closure. His casting policy too, although multicultural, is meant to avoid racial stereotyping. His actors are not cast in order to represent their respective race and culture, at least in the superficial sense of such conceptions. Instead they are asked to employ their differences dynamically and to create an ever-evolving semantic process, which must proceed beyond stylised cultural mannerisms. As David Williams writes in 'Transculturalism and Myth in Peter Brook's Theatre', Brook's actors are 'individual performers, rather than racial metaphors or cultural representations – makers, rather than bearers, of signification'.⁶ A perhaps slightly predictable example of this was seen in the casting for his 1990 production of *The Tempest* in which the part of Prospero was played by a black African actor and Caliban by a white German actor in order to forefront the usual post-colonialist reading of the text.

In order to allow them to retain their individuality, Brook has taught his actors to inhabit a space between impersonation and story-telling. By allowing them to be individual narrators, while at the same time impersonating their part, they should be able to retain their own personality and particularity even within the act of performance. Brook describes this technique as being 'detached without detachment'.⁷ The actor shows full involvement via physical and psychological empathy, but, simultaneously steps back from his own performance in his function as an individual storyteller. He retains that part of his own personality which enables him to transmit his narrative, without losing himself in the process and appearing to the audience as a mere representative cultural emblem.

Transcultural Defamiliarisation

Thus, Brook's theatrical practice does not try to suppress notions of otherness in an all encompassing universal embrace; that would be a simplistic reading of his aesthetic, as well as one that might soon enable us to dismiss it. Instead he aspires to link cultural differences rather than erase them and thereby heightens our awareness of

⁶ David Williams, 'Transculturalism and Myth in Peter Brook's Theatre', *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, 73.

⁷ Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: Penguin, 1968) 131.

them. Brook asks his audiences to look for the 'Culture of Links' beyond the familiar brackets in which they situate themselves as well the Other. Defamiliarisation thus becomes a key mechanism in his performances. Maria Shevtsova has said of Brook's approach that it 'obliges performers and spectators alike to review routine assumptions about their own culture through its prism of cultures'.⁸ Transcultural theatre, within Brook's aesthetic framework, should therefore set up a negotiation with elements that may at first appear alien to us, but which are intricately linked to elements from our own culture, elements that may otherwise be forgotten, repressed or taken for granted, so that in that encounter with the Other, we are ultimately invited to examine our own otherness.

When approaching transcultural performance mainly from an essentialist perspective such as Brook's, which is what I shall attempt to do shortly by focusing on Kaj Munk's text, the process of dealing with our own otherness through a transcultural encounter becomes useful in the process of drawing out and highlighting elements within a dramatic text that have become problematic or lost their thematic values, because they have been confined within a national and/or canonical cultural context. Some of the elements best suited for transportation between cultures are then, according to an aesthetic perspective such as Brook's, rituals, myths and/or religious concepts. Such elements may successfully transcend national, historical, even linguistic boundaries when viewed from an essentialist (or universalist) perspective, and by representing these via performance modes and/or conceptual contexts that aspire to a transcultural encounter, we may be able to re-evaluate their significance and approach the texts in which they are presented afresh. We are therefore not only looking for a performance mode that is capable of transmitting issues of the human condition recognisable to all cultures, especially as some would argue the instability and utopianism of such a venture; rather we are looking for a performance mode that is capable of heightening our own awareness of – and critical engagement with – such issues.

It is also this last point that may ultimately define the purpose of transcultural theatre, if it is to go beyond a mere representational cultural re-enactment. Transcultural performance may not be able to represent unfamiliar cultural elements to an audience in an authentic manner because, like all other modes of theatrical performance, it establishes its significance in close negotiation with its recipients: its audiences, whose preconceived values are ubiquitously present in the theatre. An audience faced with various cultural elements within a performance has very different prerequisites for understanding – or indeed failing to understand – these elements. Some audiences will immediately detect inauthenticity in the presentation of, for example, mock-oriental elements, because they are able to bring a clear conception of 'the real thing' to their understanding of the performance. Other audiences will simply not be able to recognise certain elements unless they are actually represented in a manner already familiar to them, in other words: as cultural clichés. From this perspective, we ought to evaluate transcultural theatre less on its ability to teach us something about the Other and more on its ability to teach us something about ourselves. If we are to validate the advantages of transcultural performance we should therefore attempt to explore it as a process of defamiliarisation that provides an

⁸ Quoted in Williams 72.

opportunity to reintroduce and re-evaluate elements that might otherwise have lost some of their cultural value. In addition to this, we would thus also permit transcultural performance to define itself within an aesthetic context (rather than, say, an anthropological or, even worse, a political), which significantly emphasises its artistic autonomy and offers a safeguard against misuse and misinterpretation.

Kaj Munk's *Ordet*

In order to further explore some of these arguments, I will now turn to *Ordet* and examine whether this particular dramatic text and its highly mythopoetic content might benefit from an encounter with certain aspects of transcultural performance, as exemplified in Brook's aesthetic.

The play depicts a religious feud within a small community of villagers on the west coast of Denmark. The feud is between two characters: the comfortable and respected farmer Mikkel Borgen, who has made himself an advocate of the great Danish theologian Grundtvig's rational and rather earth-bound approach to Christianity; and the village tailor, who is a follower of the highly spiritual, some might even say fundamentalist movement, 'Indre Mission' ('Inner Mission'). The feud between these two fathers influences the lives of their children: Mikkel has three sons, all still running the farm together with the father. The youngest son, Anders, is in love with the tailor's daughter, which forms the basis for the initial conflict of the play, and Mikkel's other son, appropriately named Johannes, appears to be insane, believing himself to be a prophet, a reincarnation of Christ, in fact. This state has been brought on by a combination of the traumatic memory of his fiancée's death in a car accident and his profound and exaggerated studies of the Bible and the works of the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard. His lines are oblique, but poignant and often quoted directly from Scripture, which creates both tragic and comic effects when confronted in the dialogue by the more 'rational' faiths of the other characters, including the village vicar. Johannes thus functions as a constant reminder of Munk's notorious refusal to 'play it safe' in all existential matters by continuously challenging the half-hearted modifications and relativism of the other characters with his own call for an uncompromising – and sometimes uncomfortable – faith. Finally, Mikkel's third son, also named Mikkel, is happily married to Inger, who is expecting their third child.

The initial conflict thus springs from the love between the two young villagers made impossible by their fathers' religious differences, but this conflict is quickly replaced by the pregnant Inger's sudden illness. Her child is still-born and she herself dies soon after, despite the local doctor's efforts and everyone's prayers. The play thus undergoes an abrupt change from the popular comedy of the first acts to tragedy and subsequently to a miracle play in the last. The play's final scene takes place in the living room of the farm where the dead Inger is placed in an open casket, the family in deep mourning beside her. Johannes enters, seeming to have regained his sanity. He no longer speaks through biblical citations, but addresses the mourners directly, blaming them for their lack of faith in the miracle of the Resurrection. Everyone is naturally appalled by this ill-timed and irrational sermon, but then Inger's youngest daughter takes her uncle by the hand and asks him to bring her dead mother back to life. In an extremely powerful theatrical moment, Munk lets Johannes, aided by the

pure faith of the child, awaken Inger from the dead – she literally rises from her casket and is reunited with her family. Although the doctor, also present in the final scene, is given a line to explain away the miracle as a result of an error on the part of the medical examiner, the miracle carries the scene, both performatively and thematically.

Munk has calculated the effect on the audience extremely well. By staging a miracle in a simplistic and familiar everyday setting, he is able to create a very powerful contrast between physical and metaphysical elements. The effect of the mythopoetic re-enactment of the Resurrection is heightened via the contrast to the very tangible and naturalist context represented by the setting. In this sense, Munk's text and his use of the theatre as a space in which to re-enact a ritual as powerful as the Resurrection calls for an immediate emotional and intellectual reaction from the audience as spectators to this re-enactment. I shall return to this important point of the theatrical implications in the following, as it exemplifies the difficulty in reviving the play dramatically without affirming its content.

***Ordet* in its National Context and Lars Norén's 2008 Production for The Royal Danish Theatre**

The play's uncompromising religious message, with the miracle as a central thematic and dramatic device, has, ever since its premiere in Copenhagen in 1932, received sceptical reactions from critics and audiences. Munk's call for a fervent, unquestioning faith in the possibility of a religious miracle, realised in the play through Inger's revival, simply proved too much for several of his Danish contemporaries, both within the church as well as in culturally enlightened circles. This sort of theme appeared anachronistic to a society that believed itself to be completely secularised – much in the same way as Munk's own uncompromising behaviour (which first led him to flirt with fascist ideology in the early thirties and later to fervently support the Danish resistance movement during the Second World War and the German occupation of Denmark) earned him an ambivalent epitaph in a national-historical context. Munk was executed by German soldiers in 1944 after having repeatedly defied a ban on preaching openly against the occupation and collaboration, and he immediately came to be seen as a martyr and as a symbol of the Danish resistance. In the 50s and 60s, however, this status became slightly more ambiguous, partly because of Munk's aforementioned early fascination with fascist ideology and rejection of democratic ideals, partly because his religious aesthetic had trouble competing in a post-Beckett theatre.

The inclusion of *Ordet* in the *Culture Canon*, which is a widely debated and much criticised project initiated and published by the Danish Ministry of Culture in 2006 as part of an attempt to create an anthology of Danish culture, was therefore a surprise to some, as was indeed the choice of the play for one of the opening performances for the Danish Royal Theatre's grand new playhouse in Copenhagen in 2008. This production by the Royal Danish Theatre and its subsequent critical reception may be said to epitomise the awkward relationship between the play and its Danish critics and audiences. The play was chosen as one of the opening productions on the premise of its being a Danish classic (exemplified by its inclusion in the *Canon*), but The Royal Theatre then proceeded to hire the Swedish playwright,

director and affirmed atheist Lars Norén, to direct the play, perhaps expecting him to modify the religious message in order to better suit the sensitive secular palate of the Danish audience. However, the critical reception of Norén's production was mixed. His inevitable modification, or rather undermining, of Munk's religious content certainly agreed with some reviewers, but offended others, not so much because it was anti-religious (very few Danes would openly admit to having anything as Medieval as uncompromising faith today), but because it was simply an unfulfilling performance, arguably even caricatured and overly intellectualised.

Norén's production design was minimalist, but unmistakably Nordic, and the acting naturalistic; thus Norén, as was previously mentioned, made no attempt to transfer the production into unfamiliar cultural contexts. If anything a certain mock-national nostalgia could be seen in the production design, presumably inspired by the Danish film director Carl Th. Dreyer's version of Munk's play for the screen from 1955, of which Norén is said to be a great admirer. In fact, in an interview given shortly before the opening of the production, Norén expressed regret that he had to stage Munk's text rather than T.H. Dreyer's script.

However, what was unusual was Norén's decision to stage the miracle of the last act in a purely symbolic as well as understated mode, rather than in the intended overwhelming naturalist mode implicit in Munk's text. This ultimately resulted in an undermining of the play's entire dramatic structure. After the revival of Inger, Norén simply let her walk dreamily off the stage, leaving the mourning men behind, an unmistakably symbolic gesture demonstrating that the miracle was to be perceived as nothing more than a dream or a metaphysical suggestion. This decision may indeed be seen as a modification and thereby a modern appropriation of Munk's religious message, but this interpretation presents a problem in that the miracle of Munk's text is not solely confined to the thematic structure of the play, it is pivotal in establishing a performative enunciation, without which the energy of the entire structure remains unresolved. The ritual of resurrection was re-enacted in the *mise-en-scène*, but immediately emptied of significance by denying Inger's corporeal presence.

Norén's interpretation of the text may have been postmodernist in its deferral of semantic conclusions and its insistence on a pervading relativist point of view. His ending is meant to be semantically open, which might make sense in a post-Beckett theatre, but, as opposed to Beckett, this relativist approach ultimately comes across as cowardly in the clash with Munk's dialogue, because the dialogue itself carries an implicit response to relativism that forces the audience to face faith and doubt in equal measure. Norén may have attempted to relieve the audience of this task by presenting doubt as the only possibility, but without taking into account the fact that the text refuses to allow its audience a passive response.

Of course a myriad of complex implications exist in author, text and director relations as well as in the unsolved concepts of fidelity and faithful representation that might be taken into account in this page and stage clash. I will not explore those in detail here, but only point to Norén's production as an illustrative example of a failure to revive or reaffirm the position of *Ordet* as a dramatic text by leaving out the one element that may have been approached from an essentialist perspective, namely the religious and ritualistic concept of the miracle, whilst still retaining the surrounding elements of the setting that only make sense within a Danish national-historical

context. Such an interpretation only offers a dead end, because it refuses to face the mythopoetic element of the text, preferring to 'play it safe' instead.

Transculturalism, Myth and Ritual

However, a way in which to bring about a *mise-en-scène* from a text like *Ordet*, which both allows the performative enunciation of the miracle to live and offers a nuanced vision of the religious content, might be sought in Brook's transcultural aesthetic centred around myth and ritual. Brook's approach to the myth as an open and dynamic structure may apply to Munk's re-enactment of the Resurrection, when this re-enactment is recognised as a ritual rather than as a semantically closed statement. It is of fundamental significance to point out the fact that Munk's text does not necessarily argue the miracle of the Resurrection as a physical possibility. However, it does claim that the yearning for that miracle is a natural part of the human condition and this yearning is then re-enacted as a theatrical ritual demanding that the audience re-examine their own reaction to it. The idea of the resurrection as a theatrically re-enacted ritual may be related to Brook's idea of the 'Holy Theatre' and in particular to his idea of 'The Happening'. Brook writes about the 'Happening':

It can be anywhere, any time, of any duration: nothing is required, nothing is taboo. A happening may be spontaneous, it may be formal, it may be anarchistic, it can generate intoxicating energy. Behind the Happening is the shout 'Wake up!' [...] the theory of Happenings is that the spectator is jolted eventually into new sight, so that he wakes to the life around him.⁹

First, it is interesting to note how Brook's pseudo-religious rhetoric in this paragraph is centred on the theme of revival and how that may be applied to *Munk's* idea of revival both thematically and dramatically. Secondly, Brook claims that the revival may take place any time and any place; in other words, the re-enacted ritual may be removed from its immediate context and be re-enacted elsewhere to the same powerful effect, if indeed it carries within it certain essential human traits.

In order for an idea like that of Brook's 'Happening' to be successfully applied to the *mise-en-scène* of a text like Munk's, it is perhaps not only possible to remove the text from its immediate national/historical/cultural context, but actually necessary to do so. At least, if its spectators are to experience the re-enactment of ritual as the performative shock it was originally intended to be, as well as forcing them into a subsequent dynamic reflection of questions of faith and doubt. The process of defamiliarisation offered by transcultural theatre might enable us to encounter Munk's resurrection ritual in an unfamiliar context that makes us re-examine the ways in which this ritual is embedded in our cultural perception of ourselves and why. When encountering it in the familiar national/historical/cultural (and of course, Christian) context, we are likely to either take its semantic implications for granted or downright dismiss them as anachronistic. To repeat the earlier quotation of Maria Shevtsova: we might therefore need to look for a performance mode that 'obliges performers and spectators alike to review routine assumptions about their own culture through its prism of cultures'.

⁹ Brook *Empty Space* 61.

At first glance *Ordet* may certainly be characterised by its national context, that is, its ‘Danishness’. This is evident in the aforementioned setting of the play among farmers and villagers in the West of Jutland as well as in its particular language, in which Munk uses colloquialisms and dialect to emphasise the setting’s contrast to the heightened metaphysical theme. The religious feud between the followers of Grundtvig and the followers of the more fundamentalist Christian segment ‘Indre Mission’, which makes up the outward structure of the play, is likewise only relevant within a Danish historical context. However, these elements have little relevance to a contemporary Danish audience and may ultimately appear just as ‘alien’ as the religious element, or even more so. But whereas no immediate solution can be found for the representation of these contextual elements, the essentialist concepts of faith and the ritual embodied in the miracle of reviving a dead character may easily be approached from outside and beyond a national context. By doing so, one might imagine a production that ultimately brings about a revival of Munk’s play, not via a relativist postmodern modification and appropriation, but via a transcultural encounter. In a production that fails to transport *Ordet* beyond its national context, the play could truly become a ‘dead’ text, irretrievably buried within the Danish canon.

A Potential Revival of *Ordet*?

Thus we may attempt to re-read Munk’s miracle via Peter Brook’s essentialist aesthetic, which is a fundamental aspect of what has here been described and understood as transcultural theatre. I have argued that a production such as Lars Norén’s presents a ‘safe’, but ultimately deeply problematic reading of Munk’s text because it situates its mythopoetic content in a national historical context that has outgrown that content, or rather has become unable to understand and respond to it. Instead I have suggested that a production which would attempt to transport the way in which its religious and ritualistic elements operate both on thematic and dramatic levels outside its national context, by employing defamiliarising non-Danish (or even non-Western) performance modes or conceptual interpretations, might be appreciated both by international and Danish audiences and, most importantly, highlight the intended effect of the miracle. By comparing Norén’s *mise-en-scène* with imagined alternative practices founded on Brook’s principles, I have tried to open an entirely new set of questions and I want to emphasise the open manner of my enquiry, because this openness is vital to the engagement with transculturalism in theatrical practice. If we are to imagine a potential revival for Munk’s text, transcultural theatre, of the kind that understands the value of theatrical space as a space for the re-enactment of ritual, shock and reflection, may offer us valuable new ways of enquiring whether this play may claim its deserved status as a classic dramatic text and ultimately be brought back to life.