APPENDIX TO PLAYING PEER
AN ACTOR’S JOURNEY

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS in THEATER ARTS by Todd Pivetti

June 2013

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An actor’s preparation to play the role of Peer Gynt in the UC Santa Cruz production in the winter of 2013.
First Impressions and Introductions

The first time I encountered *Peer Gynt* by Henrik Ibsen was in my sophomore year at UC Santa Cruz in Professor Kimberly Jannarone’s course, Birth of the Modern. The texts ranged from Buchner, to Strindberg, Brecht to Beckett, and Lori-Parks to performance art. Ibsen’s *Peer Gynt* stood out as the only work I absolutely hated. I thought that it was far too long ever to be realized as a performable play. Along with an approximate seven-hour run time, (if performed in its entirety), were the un-realistic settings and fantastical jumps in time to encompass Peer’s entire life. Ibsen himself did not intend for it to be performed and wrote it to be a reading play much like Goethe’s *Faust*. Ibsen’s intentions of keeping it within the confines of the page and a play of the mind support my original notion of it being a play too large for any stage. I did could not see how a play meant for reading would ever find its place in a theater. One critique by Absjorn Aarseth refers to it only as a “dramatic poem,” (Texts in Performance) and not ever as a play. Even more incomprehensible was the title character himself. I did not see him as the hero or protagonist of the play. I could not find one redeeming quality about a man who traded slaves, exploited women, and left the person he loved alone on a mountain. As I turned the last page and closed the book I reflected on the idea of how a man such as Ibsen, the man who created *A Doll’s House* and *Ghosts* could possibly write a play in which the main character did not fulfill the depth that most of his main characters possess. It seemed as if everything was all wrong.
After a year of dramaturgical research on Peer Gynt, a workshop devoted to a production of Peer Gynt, and finally playing the role of Peer Gynt I have realized that I share many qualities of character with Peer. Or rather as human beings we all, in one way or another, share something with him. Upon completion of the production I have come to admire Peer. At first what I thought was an unruly bully was actually the victim of bullying. What I first saw as a reprobate then became a hero. Peer’s harrowing journey of self discovery is a journey we all take: from good moments to the dark nights of our soul, the ups the downs, love and loss, heroism and weakness. Peer now excites and energizes me to explore more depth in every character I might encounter from reading or performance. Even his relationship with Solveig turned from betrayal to one of the most active ways of loving someone. It was translated from, “I will wait for you,” to, “I will wait for you.” These translations from the text to performance are where I learned about the nature of playing a character like Peer. My in-depth involvement and research in this production allowed me to examine a character from mere ink on a page all the way to performing that character with a unique, informed understanding. The stages of my involvement included my dramaturgical work for Professor Jannarone, the Peer Gynt collaborative workshop, and the rehearsal process and performances.
Dramaturgy and the Workshop

A year before the production, I jumped into heavy research with first reading criticisms on the play with Shaw’s *Quintessence of Ibsenism*, Aarseth’s *Texts in Performance*, and Lyon’s *Henrik Ibsen: A Critical Study*, among others. Shaw’s, *Quintessence of Ibsenism* was the analysis that I found the most useful because I discovered that Peer’s journey was one of an existential nature. Kicking myself that I was so blinded by my misgivings about the play that I missed the actual meaning of Peer’s journey, I had discovered the first aspect of the character I needed to translate\(^1\) into performance. Peer’s apparently careless romping can be read as a metaphor for his journey of self-discovery.

Peer’s existential journey reveals itself when he is faced with decisions. The choices he makes from these are what fuel his passion to search for himself. Right at the beginning is an example of how Peer may be misread as a reprobate. After the thrilling story of his reindeer ride that he tells to his mother, Peer decides to steal a bride to be, Ingrid, away after his mother suggests that he weds her for her money. While en route to steal Ingrid, Peer has his first try at a relationship. He meets and attempts to impulsively woo Solveig after recognizing a part of himself in her, and subsequently she rejects him. Upon this rejection, he is then driven to accomplish his first impulse after encountering Solveig as an obstacle. What I originally interpreted as just a teenager jumping from girl to girl became a person who is driven by impulse and determination.

\(^{1}\) I will often use the word *translate* as a metaphor for creating my own connections and interpretations from text to performance.
Though playing a dramaturg at this phase of the process, I realized how much Peer is driven by impulse in his search for his self throughout the action of the play. This is very good information for an actor. He was projecting his feelings of rejection with acts of, as he perceives it, heroism. Each step Peer takes is doubled in size from the last, making his journey of self-discovery volatile and extreme. He is driven to become the emperor of every situation with which he is faced. Each movement and decision is affected by everything that came before him that is seen in what I call the “Process Monologues.” These monologues appear at key moments of the play where Peer’s attempts at being emperor of a situation fail him. These are after Peer hits his head and sees the glory of the Gynt Farm, after the Green Girl visits him and Solveig in the hut, Ase’s death, the “Ashes, mist, and dust and wind” (Meyer 97), he encounters upon his return to Norway, and the Onion speech at the end of the play. In all these monologues he revisits his actions, mistakes, and successes. For the action to rise and his story continue, each monologue grows upon the former with heavier importance on his choices since the last.

Dramaturgically, this existential journey yields a through line in Peer’s realization of self at the end of the play. Each action had an inherent need to be more extreme and life changing than the last for Peer to achieve his existential catharsis. At first I interpreted these actions as Peer being a bully, misogynist, and debauched villain to those around him. I discovered through taking both literature based and acting based approaches that his extreme nature was necessary to build a strong through line in text along with the performance of an existential character.
Part of my research was to read different translations of the play. I read the Michael Meyer, Colin Teevan, and Romulus Linney translations and adaptations of *Peer Gynt*. The translation I first read in my research, the same from Professor Jannarone’s course, was the Meyer version. Though accurate to the original Norwegian text, it was with this one that I took issue. The long drawn out monologues and the dated phrasing and colloquialisms hindered my connection with the story. It was not until I discovered *Gint* by Romulus Linney that I began to look at the story in a different way. Instead of the folksy, Norwegian caricature of Peer was a good-ole-country kind of Peer who went on to have the adventure of a lifetime after he escaped his stifling, angry mountain town. This was by far the greatest leap I made from my first reading. Any connection with Peer before was purely literary and metaphorical. Now I was beginning to understand Peer’s motives and choices. Perhaps it was the fact that I myself am a good-ole-country boy who escaped his small-minded town to go off to bigger and better things or simply the adaptation’s familiar country style that I was able to connect with more deeply than the others because of the simplicity of its language. There were no stanzas or rhymes that made me think I was reading a poem; instead it was a wonderful stream of consciousness text that let my imagination wander. Because there was no punctuation, I found the actor side of myself excitedly going through it like I would with any Shakespeare script where I usually replace the punctuation with my own. This hands on approach compelled me to ask questions like, “Why is he saying this? Why did he do that?” As I dissected the script to pair each *adapted* scene with that of the *translated* Meyer text I began to understand that my affinity for the Linney text was because it provoked the
actor side of my brain to work on its language artistically. I noticed how as an actor I would connect with Linney’s Peer who, instead of Meyer’s clean-cut language, uses crass humor and foul talk in almost every line. There were real world situations where a very human Peer would make his decisions. Linney’s adaptation provided a common language between his Peer and me. This gave me the opportunity to begin thinking just how I would perform the part of Peer Gynt with my own interpretation on the character and his journey.

My dramaturgical research yielded a great amount of understanding of the history, process, theory and critique of Ibsen’s Peer Gynt, which is what I expected to happen. I did not expect to understand Peer himself better by other people’s analyses and translations. Shaw provided information that changed my interpretation of Peer’s bad actions to understanding that they were necessary for Peer to find his identity. This also provided context for seeing Peer as a character that is driven by impulse in performance. Following this, Teevan sparked my imagination with seeing Peer with the perspective of an actor from his language and style. Taking Peer out of the historical, Norwegian landscape and putting him in the hands of Shaw and Linney opened my mind. Perhaps Peer was not the monster I believed him to be. Perhaps the folksy, and rustic nature of the first translation I read veiled the true oppression Peer experienced that eventually drove him away. Perhaps Peer was making the most human choices, hyperbolized for theatrical context, in his search for self. I finally had a grasp on the text and context of the play but still had no connection to or idea of how any of this research would be used in the production. The materials were
gathered but I knew of no concrete plans. I had my understanding of Peer and the play but had nowhere to put it to use. Then came the workshop.

The Peer Gynt workshop was a collaborative discussion of ideas with students, professors, and theater professionals. Each week we would get together and present anything we wanted. Somebody would bring in an idea and then others would offer a suggestion until it became concrete enough for Professor Jannarone to have the final word on whether or not this idea could blossom into an aspect of the play. The workshop participants mirrored the progress that a repertory company of actors would achieve when rehearsing a play. With the ability to offer ideas freely without impending deadlines allowed us to explore our artistic choices to their maximum potentials. One aspect that I greatly enjoyed was that I was not alone in having a bad first impression of Peer and the play. Others seemed to go through a similar process; they had to learn more about him and the play to accept his nature. It was in this stage of the process that the world of the play came alive. Set, costume, lighting, and sound design presentations all began to make a coherent setting for the action to take place. The design elements allowed my imagination of the character of Peer to build. By taking the literary theme of onion layers and then using the design of the onion in Peer’s costume paralleled my own journey of translating the literature into artistic choices. The use of projections and multi-media excited me because I realized that Peer’s larger than life experiences could be supplemented with larger than life technology to create a world in which his story is actually feasible. I was able to build upon my understanding of the play by allowing my mind to wander with these designs. They echoed the interpretations that came from my research.
The idea of Solveig being a male character was spoken of often in the workshop. This intrigued me because if Solveig and Peer were in a homosexual relationship their place in the world of the play would be noticeably altered. A gay Peer would highlight that he was drastically different than everyone else in his small town. He would be signified as a minority. If Peer were to stay as a heterosexual he would have likely been perceived to be the ignorant, overly confident bully that I first thought him to be. Making him different from everyone else in a way that signifies as a minority would open the doors of interpretation for the audience. An audience would be more willing to explore the possibilities of Peer defending himself from trouble and not causing trouble. He would be searching for his identity instead of trying to prove it. This also allows Solveig to be a fully realized and dynamic character instead of the static, lonely, bible-bearing girl we see on the mountaintop. Instead, we see Solveig’s love for Peer as a means to escape the oppression of the small-minded town. Instead of being a passive, reclusive memory of the love that once existed between them, Solveig becomes a beacon of active love and commitment to Peer. Being inspired by Peer, Solveig makes the active decision to wait, knowing he is safe and free of the stifling town from which he escaped with his love of Peer driving him. This affects the play in a way that makes it more modern to some audiences. An audience would not have the hindrance of dealing with classical notions of femininity and heroism. Bonding out of oppression, these two characters provide the true love that is needed for Peer to realize that Solveig is his other half: the part of him that he searched for his whole life. Without a deep connection between these two characters, Peer’s journey is not existential but merely an
adventure. This allows the audience to understand Ibsen’s intention of, as Shaw states, “Peer Gynt is both a romance and a critique of romance at the same time” (Shaw 50). Changing Solveig’s sex allowed a contemporary audience to understand Ibsen’s original intention of Peer’s journey being existential.

The production was beginning to take shape. We were going to produce Peer Gynt as a piece of environmental theater that changed locations for each major part of the play. The audience would see a more traditional version of acts one through three in the round and then move to breakout performances in another space for act four. They would then reconvene in another theater to watch act five. Taking this larger than life play into a venue that was larger than life brought the vast landscape of the story to life. My first impressions of the grandiose settings as a negative aspect of the play turned into this production’s greatest strength. Instead of condensing the play’s world to one stage, it gave the audience a first hand experience of Peer’s great journey. It brought the audience closer to Peer so they could understand his search for self. Peer Gynt’s form was translated from that of a play meant for reading into that of a production where the research, design, and execution supported the text and choices that were made to allow the audience to experience Peer’s authentic existential journey.

**Rehearsal and Performance**

Throughout the rehearsal process, I encountered challenge after challenge when learning more about Peer and how I would play him. How do I build a relationship with Solveig in two scenes? How do I show the audience the vulnerable
side of Peer so they understand what he is going through? The change from character acting to more psychological acting was always on my mind as I struggled to be sincere and honest in all my choices. I struggled to adapt quickly from scene to scene. The short, intense scenes coupled with me being on stage for most of the play challenged my endurance and ability to adjust. I continually had to reflect on my intentions, objectives, and decisions from scene to scene to make sure I was on track. I realize now that that was a very helpful reflection process because that is exactly what Peer was doing as a character in every scene. Other challenges I faced were the text, the style of acting I adopted out of necessity, and working with a diverse group of actors.

My first trouble was with the text. As a classically trained actor who focuses mainly on technique, what I thought would be the easiest part for me was the text with which I had already become quite familiar. Now a patchwork of texts from different adaptations and translations, all of which I knew, the text ebbed and flowed from classical language to modern speech. I began to encounter problems with connecting each text. The troll scene adapted by playwright and professor James Bierman was so drastically different from Professor Jannrone’s adaptations that I had to consciously change my performance from a classically driven machine to a more psychologically driven contemporary one. Instead of the text doing the work for me, I had to do the work for the text to come alive. I adapted a highly improvisational form of acting by changing style, tone, and mood in every scene. The ebb and flow of the action could not be compromised with my inability to adapt so I had to become actively dynamic with my choices that led me from scene to scene. At first it seemed
highly unnatural to change like this, but in a way it aided Peer’s journey. As an actor I had to adapt to situations with lightning fast choices so that the action of the play remained intact. My choices of how I would accomplish this by using technical skills became artistic choices compared with the character’s actions. Peer did these exact shifts and changing of actions in the world of the play. With every new interaction, relationship, or setting Peer had to improvise his choices. What seemed at first to be an unnatural way to perform was actually supported by the patchwork of the script and the intrinsic nature of the character.

The script was not the only aspect to fuel this improvisational form of acting. Working with a mixture of professional actors and students required me to be dynamic in the action. I found that when acting in a scene with the younger students, I was able to command the scene quite easily by becoming a larger presence than them. With Nancy Carlin playing Åse, (Peer’s mother), I was faced with a presence larger than my own. She was not actively trying to steamroll over me, but she had years of experience commanding the space and filling the room. During the first rehearsal of the opening of the play she had obviously performed in the round before. I had no experience acting in a space where the audience was on every side of me. She bolted from upstage to down and back again faster than I could keep up. Eventually through observation I was able to catch up and use the space fully. I still felt as if I needed more than anything to elevate myself more so to Nancy’s level, so I made bolder choices and raised the stakes in each beat of the action. Though I thought I was living in my head and not fully committing to the scene, I was actually doing something as an actor that Peer does as a character. He always tries to be the emperor of a situation.
As a character, he raises the stakes and makes bolder choices with every line to get what he wants just as I was doing in order to keep up with Nancy.

Sharing the part of Peer with Danny Scheie, like every aspect of my experience, provided challenges and rewards. Conceptually, I understand why this double casting was essential to the nature of this production. It provided a physical realization of Peer’s life. It demonstrated the dichotomy of living in the past and future at the same time, with each choice affecting the timeline differently. Though conceptually powerful, playing one part of a two-headed monster of Peer Gynt with Danny was very difficult. As with Nancy, I had to employ every technique to keep up in my scenes with Danny. What was most difficult was having Danny perform all but one of the “Process Monologues,” and having to start from scratch after each one with no pretense of being able to work through the action with thought. I was frustrated that I was not performing those monologues. Now understanding Peer more, I realize I just wanted to be the emperor of this part! However, in the end I was able to observe Danny perform the other half of Peer Gynt masterfully and learned more about the character from another actor’s point of view. It was a strange tradeoff that eventually paid off to create a character that was too large for one person with two actors. It fits with Peer’s existential journey to always have a mirror of his former self and an image of his future self. With this double casting, I was able to establish a three-fold understanding of acting the part of Peer Gynt. I was able to drive the action of the play, watch a master process that action, and understand Peer’s journey more fully with an outside eye gazing into the future of my character’s life. The most powerful moment for me was when Danny’s Peer came to my Peer in a dream after
hitting my head on a rock. In this scene he wrestled me to the ground. The vivid image of wanting to tackle your former self for everything they had done wrong struck me as a key moment in which Peer’s existential journey was brought alive with this production. During this process monologue, Peer is coming to terms with his actions and choices. The best example of coming to terms with one’s self is evaluating who they used to be. The ability to watch someone physically discipline his former self is a wonderful way to exemplify Peer’s search for identity through evaluation.

**After**

When the production closed, I had a feeling I had not succeeded in completing my work on the role and that I had failed as an actor. After thinking about the nature of the production and the character’s journey, I have realized that this is a normal response to playing a character with such complexity. It is not until the final moment of the play that Peer achieves realization of self with recognizing Solveig as his other half. Until that moment, Peer’s life is filled with failure upon failure in searching for himself. As an actor, I had to connect with these failures to play the part truthfully and as a result I felt that I had not accomplished my work in the same way as Peer had. My feelings of failure were actually signs of success. I had made a parallel with my character. Furthermore, I allowed myself to examine my work critically in order to build upon my education. If instead I felt as if I had succeeded I would not have the same opportunities of self-reflection as I have now.
Instead of labeling my involvement in this production as failure, I would label it as a perfect model for learning acting. My dramaturgical work provided a foundation to understand the key points in Ibsen’s text. Participating in the workshop opened my mind to the possibilities of employing these key points. Finally, performing the part using this knowledge while having two examples of masters in the craft of acting, I was able to learn how to prepare and perform a role in a large scale. Step one: learn as much as you can about the tangible text and its history. Step two: explore the possibilities of choice. Step three: learn from those to whom you admire. And step four: process the performance in a positive, structured way. From this production I took new skills such as acting in the round, being part of environmental theater, and how to work with an incredibly diverse cast consisting of students and professionals. With my involvement spanning over a year I learned the role of Peer Gynt like an actor in repertory company would. The actor would learn, train, and develop themselves with the rest of the company for the duration of their tenure with a theater. I went through the same experience with my research and with the collaborative workshop. I learned new skills and information and then put it to use with a company of artists. As I continue on into my professional career I will no doubt use this experience as the model for which I craft a role. I not only learned a great deal from playing Peer, but once I accepted him as a person, I enjoyed it immensely and realized Peer’s story is the most energizing, enthralling journey of the human spirit which I can only hope my life will be filled with such adventure and amazement. After the first read through I jotted this passage down in a journal.
The first read! Whew. I was so nervous at the table before beginning that I was shaking. My first leading role. My thesis. My kind of theater! Real acting: crazy production. The read through went okay. Danny and Kimberly said I did a great job. That made me feel really good. I think I’m in a good starting place. The only way out is up. I feel like this is going to be really good!

And it sure was.
Bibliography


