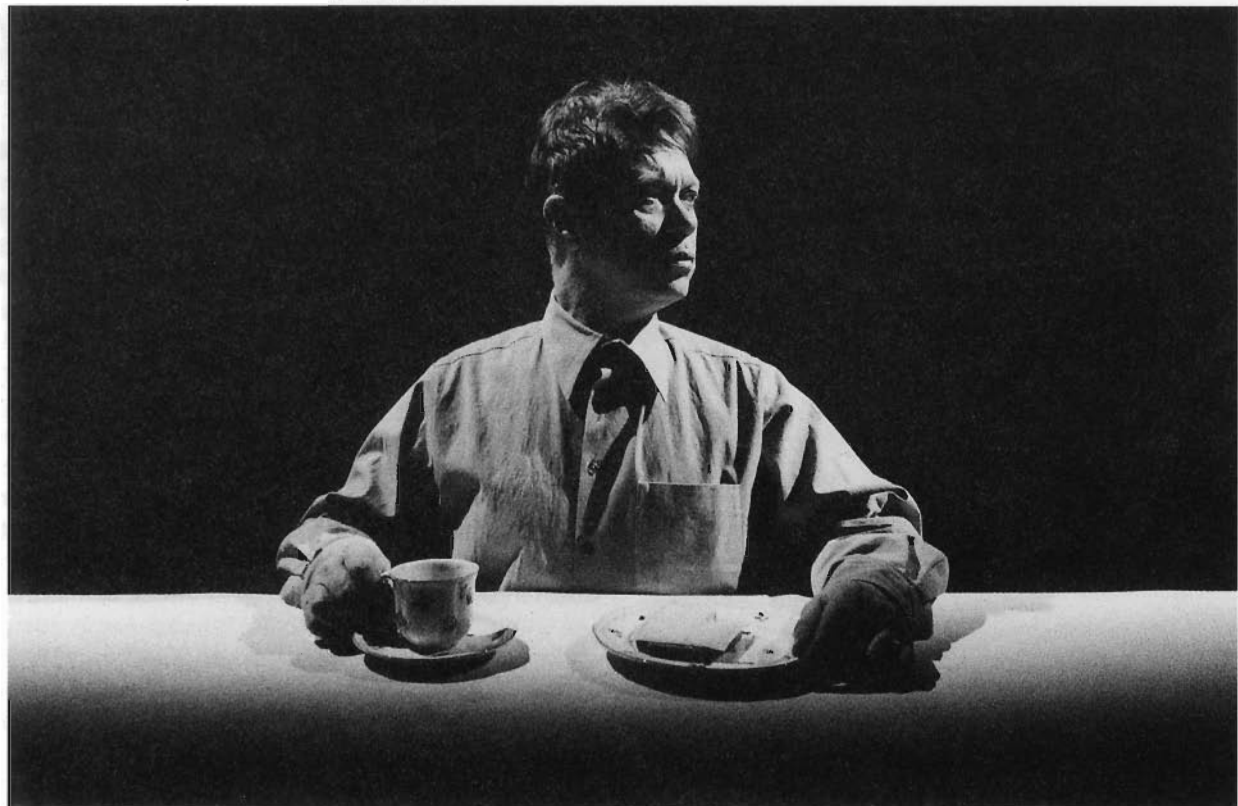


ERLEND J. BIRKELAND



FUGLANE (THE BIRDS)

ERLEND J. BIRKELAND, born 1964, is a visual arts graduate from The National College of Art and Design (SHKS) and The Academy of Fine Arts (SKA) in Oslo. He has worked as a stage designer for some 10 years in various theatres in both Norway and Sweden. He has also had his own work exhibited on several occasions. Birkeland directed Oslo Modern Theater's first performance in 1996 and he did the stage design for this



PHOTO: LOUISE NESSIM

year's praised dramatisation of Knut Hamsuns *Sult* (Hunger), which will be shown at the National Theater in Oslo until christmas 1999. He has worked closely with Ole Anders Tandberg (director of *Fuglane* – The Birds) on a range of productions. His latest, Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* (The Magic Flute), premiered on the 3rd of April, 1999 at *GöteborgsOperan* (The Gothenburg Opera). The visual dimension he and costume designer Maria Geber added to *Fuglane* was received enthusiastically by public and press alike.

The press writes:

«Tandberg has exceeded himself in this collaboration with stage designer *Erlend J. Birkeland* and costume designer Maria Geber. They have created an on-stage minimised naturalism, a convention based upon moments of ingenious make-believe magic, where lightening strikes down trees and toadstools appear out of nowhere.»

Anne Flindt Christensen. *Information*, Denmark

«This is a highly visual, associative and delightful piece of theatre, enhanced by *Erlend J. Birkeland's* polished and aesthetic stage set.»

Hans Rossiné. *Dagbladet*, Oslo

This side of the wind is calm

BY OLE ANDERS TANDBERG

Training to be an architect involved drawing a perfectly straight line. I spent several weeks doing nothing but engaging my right hand in the task. The feeling that struck me at that unique moment when my hand suddenly produced this simple image was that of encountering God. Erlend Birkeland's scenography for the staging of *Fuglane* (The Birds) attempts to achieve this feeling. Reading the book, one is confronted on the very first page with this dominant image of the world according to Mattis Tust:

Mattis was satisfied and said no more. It was using the word lighting that he found so tempting. Strange lines seemed to form inside his head when he used it, and he felt himself drawn to it.

Our initial urge to stage *Fuglane* was purely emotional, the novel having been the greatest literary love affair of our youth. However, when Mattis entered the theatre we were struck by the vivid theatricality that he brought with him. Staging *Fuglane* seemed to be a matter of transferring the poetic imagery of Tarjei Vesaas to the stage:

A lonely man rows his boat across the stage creating delicate lines across the water's surface.

A lonely man shipwrecked on stage, drifts off to sleep. He wakes to find himself stranded on an islet in the company of two lovely young sunbathers.

On stage, a lonely man stands gazing towards the edge of a never-ending turnip field. He longs for «the three things» that every young man must master: love, strength and the act of communication.

A lonely man writes love letters in the mud; lines and dots in answer to the woodcock's promise of «eternal friendship».

This is the life and death of Mattis Tust.

«What does your vision of *Fuglane* look like?» Maria asked Erlend at a crucial point in the working process.

«It's just this white rectangular box,» admitted Erlend.

«Oh, that's good!» Tarjei supported him from heaven, «that's what I've always wanted. Do you recall: *She remained silent the whole time – because she had a secret she wanted to tell him.*»

«Function follows form!» Maria exclaimed triumphantly, looking as if she had just grasped the essence of Vesaas.

I looked at Erlend, pleased but still a little worried.

«And will you keep the line?» I asked.

«It ought to stay on the water for days!» Mattis shouted from beyond.

«I would like it to be an edge,» Erlend replied calmly.

Paying respect to the difficulties involved in my profession he added, «You see, form sometimes even follows function!» I turned to Mattis for his approval but he had already bid us farewell:

With his finger he drew lines in the air above his head, in the same direction as the woodcock had been flying.

THE BIRDS (*Fuglane*) by Tarjei Vesaas
World premiere on Scene 2 – The Norwegian Theatre,
15th March 1997

Dramatisation: Ole Anders Tandberg/Nils Sletta
Direction: Ole Anders Tandberg
Stage design: Erlend J. Birkeland
Costume design: Maria Geber
Music: The Flesh Quartet (*Fläskkvartetten*)



N O R W A Y - P R A G U E Q U A D R E N N I A L 1 9 9 9

Tarjei Vesaas (1897 - 1970)

Tarjei Vesaas has long been considered to be one of Scandinavia's most important authors of the 1900s. He was born in 1897 in the rural Norwegian district of Vinje, where he also spent his youth and the greater part of his later life. Vesaas made his debut as an author in 1923 with *Menneskebonn*, and from that point on produced more or less a book a year. His prolific, cross-genre output covered everything from novels to poetry and short stories, several of which were awarded prizes. Among other recognitions, he received *The Nordic Council Literature Prize*, the most prestigious distinction for literature in Scandinavia, for his novel, *Is-slottet* (The Ice Palace), written in 1963.

The majority of his earlier works were written as lyrical prose, and draw heavily upon the Norwegian tradition of descriptive folklore. However, *Kimen* (The Seed) published in 1940, represented a turning point in his writing. His use of symbolism became more pronounced, and he further refined his economical style and keen eye for the nuances of inter-personal relations. Vesaas also received a number of scholarships and un-

dertook several trips to Europe during this period and followed developments in modern literature and theatre with great interest.

Nonetheless, it was probably not before he was in his sixties that Vesaas wrote what are commonly considered to be his best books. *Fuglane* (The Birds), published in 1957, tells the story of Mattis, who is mentally retarded, and lives with his sister Hege. The local people regard Mattis as a fool who is unable to carry out a normal day's work, though he is actually just a perplexed soul consumed with anxiety. Though those around him are unable to see it, Mattis' simple life is actually a rich existence that is full of poetry. This is especially so with regard to his connection to nature. The natural world speaks to him, and he can converse with it in its own language. However, in a world largely populated by clever people, his simplistic approach to life is often met with some brutal realities. The bird, which he has written so many letters in its native language, is shot. «Why must it be like this?» he ponders amid his suffering.

Fuglane is widely regarded as Vesaas' seminal work.

It is a peculiarly rich and vital novel, underplayed with deep sympathy for Mattis and elements of wistful humour that take some of the sting out of all the suffering. This portrait of the character Mattis Tust has retained its position as one of the most clear-cut and characteristic to be found in Norwegian literature. Vesaas has himself described Mattis (with certain reservations) as a self-portrait.

A film version of *Fuglane* has also been made by the Polish film director Witold Leszczynski. Entitled *Zywt Mateusza*, it had its premier in 1967. This popular novel has also been translated into Danish, English, Finnish, French, Faroese, Italian, Polish, Slovak, Slovene, German and Hungarian.

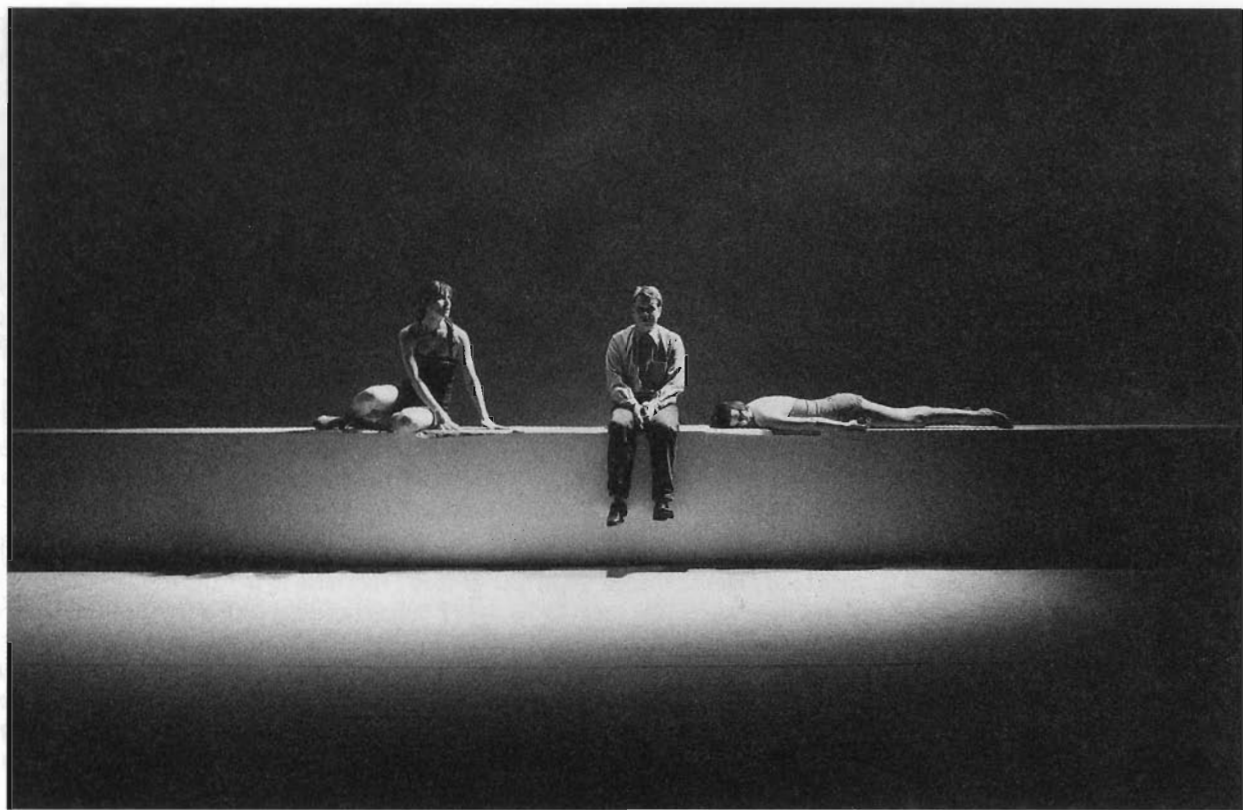
Similar to several of the characters in his stories, Tarjei Vesaas was often considered to be a somewhat shy and reserved person. When he was in Venice in 1952 to receive the award for the best literary work in Europe (for his short story collection *Vindane*), he uttered the following as part of his thank-you-speech:

«I must beg your pardon because I cannot say anything in Italian. And it will be a short speech. All my life I have had the habit of never saying anything. This is, perhaps, why I have written so many books instead.

We all have longings in us. A poem is a wave sent from one heart to another. It is hidden in the words, and is somehow a secret. The writer himself is far from understanding it.»

TARJEI VESAAS

Menneskebonn 1923 / Sendemann Huskuld 1924 / Grindegard. Morgonen 1925 / Guds bustader. Spel i tre skrift 1925 / Grinde-kveld el-ler Den gode engelen 1926 / Dei svarte hestane 1928 / Klokka i hauge. Short Stories 1929 / Fars reise 1930 / Sigrid Stallbrokk 1931 / Dei ukjende mennene 1932 / Sandeltreet 1933 / Det store spelet (The Great Cycle) 1934 / Ultimatum. Spel i fire akter 1934 / Kvinnor ropar heim 1935 / Leiret og hjulet. Short Stories 1936 / Hjarta høyrer sine heimlandstonar 1938 / Kimen (The Seed) 1940 / Huset i mørkret 1945 / Kjeldene. Poems 1946 / Bleikeplassen (The Bleaching Yard) 1946 / Morgonvinden. Play 1947 / Leiken og lynet. Poems 1947 / Tårnet 1948 / Lykka for ferdesmenn. Poems 1949 / Signalet 1950 / Vindane. Short / Stories 1952 / Løynde eldars land (Land of Hidden Fires). Poems 1953 / Vårnatt (Spring Night) 1954 / Ver ny, vår draum. Poems 1956 / Fuglane (The Birds) 1957 / Ein vakker dag. Short Stories 1959 / Brannen 1961 / Is-slottet (The Ice Palace) 1963 / Noveller i samling. Collected Short Stories 1964 / Bruene (The Bridges) 1966 / Båten om kvelden (The Boat in the Evening) 1968 / Dikt i samling (Collected Poems) 1969 / Liv ved straumen 1970 / Huset og fuglen 1971



N O R W A Y - P R A G U E Q U A D R E N N I A L 1 9 9 9

Designing for the stage in Norway

The number of theatres in Norway has increased enormously during the last twenty years. The country's many professional theatre groups and institutions are dispersed geographically and many of them have touring responsibility for their local region. Norwegian geography and climate constitute some special challenges for touring theatre. Ships have even been used as theatres in order to reach coastal communities. In the early 18th century, when Italian and French theatre groups began visiting Scandinavia, the lack of acceptable theatrical venues sometimes meant that private houses had to be used for performances. The Norwegian Touring Theatre (*Riksteatret*) was established soon after World War II for the purpose of bringing theatre directly to audiences across the country. At that time, only major cities like Oslo, Bergen, Stavanger and Trondheim had government subsidised theatres.

The development of stage design in Norway reflects to an extent its development in Scandinavia as a whole, although the level of activity was somewhat lower due to the country's small number of theatres. The first Norwegian stage designers were set painters who actually designed and painted the backdrops, borders and

legs, aided by assistants. They were paid for each painted metre of cloth. The only institution that taught decorative painting at the time was The National College of Art and Design (SHKS). We also know that these designers travelled abroad occasionally, drawing inspiration from and sometimes copying the modern styles they came across. The Norwegian Stage Designers Association (*Norske Scenografer*) was founded in 1935, at a time in which a new generation of painters influenced by the artistic development on the continent had begun to dominate the field of stage design. They remained at the forefront until the mid 1960's, when «scenography» was first introduced into Norway by visiting directors and designers.

Training to be a stage designer in Norway is not the easiest of tasks! The main route into the profession is still via the venerable SHKS, supplemented by studies abroad. Some students also come with architectural diplomas or via The Academy of Fine Arts. Many Norwegian designers have taken some kind of supplementary stage design training abroad, mostly in Eastern or Western Europe. Today, the association has some 80 members who work with costume design, stage design and puppet theatre design. A number of them are involved in designing for both stage and film/TV.

The Norwegian Theatre

The Norwegian Theatre – Det Norske Teatret (DNT) – opened on January 2nd, 1913. The establishment came as a result of a national movement concerned with the promotion of political, cultural and linguistic freedom. The DNT objective clause, dating from 1913, states that the theatre shall perform plays in New Norwegian in the country's cities and provinces. The language used on stage at DNT - New Norwegian (nynorsk) - builds upon the different dialects used in Norway and is an expression of the cultural diversity that represents one of the core elements in the theatre's working philosophy.

The theatre moved into its new premises in the centre of Oslo in May 1985. This large, modern building houses three stages; the main stage with a seating capacity that can be varied between 1200 and 750; Stage 2, which can hold 200 people, and a rehearsal theatre that seats 120.

The repertoire of The Norwegian Theatre builds upon a solid tradition focusing on the presentation of New Norwegian drama, openness to new interpretations of Norwegian and European classics, and maintain-

ing a keen awareness of the development of European drama.

Since moving into its new premises the theatre has developed into a vibrant cultural institution, offering poetry readings in the theatre's bistro at lunchtimes, along with concerts, art exhibitions and extensive subcontracting.

The theatre's 250 employees represent a high level of professionalism. Tickets sold each year range between 180 000 - 200 000 divided between 14-15 productions. The annual budget is NOK 100 mill.



PHOTO: THE NORWEGIAN THEATRE

The Norwegian Stage Designers Association (*Norske Scenografer*) would like to express our gratitude to all those whose support and contributions have made it possible for us to participate in the Prague Quadrennial 1999. First and foremost we would like to mention the kind and generous assistance of our principal joint venture partner:

THE NORWEGIAN THEATRE (*DET NORSKE TEATRET*)

THE FOLLOWING HAVE ALSO MADE WELCOME CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE REALISATION OF THIS EXHIBITION:

NORWEGIAN MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS (*DET KONGELIGE UTEENRIKSDEPARTEMENT*)

NORSK KASSETTAVGIFTSFOND

GYLDENDAL NORSK FORLAG ASA (TARJEI VESAAS' ORIGINAL PUBLISHERS)

AVAB CAC AS (SUPPLIERS OF STAGE EQUIPMENT)

THE NATIONAL THEATRE OF BERGEN (*DEN NATIONALE SCENE*)

THE MUNICIPALITY OF VINJE (VINJE KOMMUNE – TARJEI VESAAS' PLACE OF BIRTH AND RESIDENCE)

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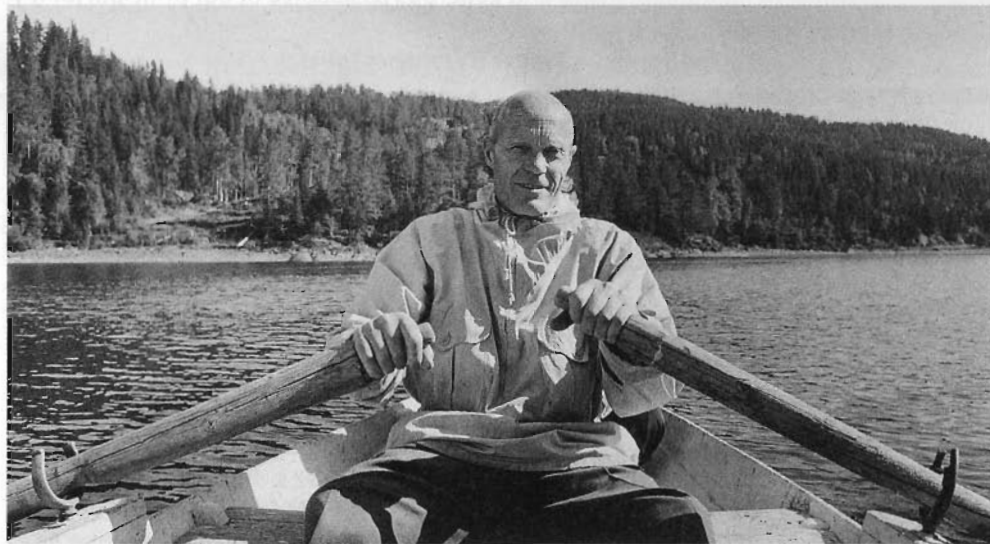


PHOTO: GYLDEBAL

TARJEI VESAAS