

Ibsen and me, Ibsen and Kasia, we.

Ibsen and me, we like to decorate our invoices.

Ibsen and me, we did not like our names at the age of early 20ties.

Ibsen and me, we wear glasses to read and our first city we lived in Norway was at Vestfold.

Ibsen and me, we both have dyslexia.

Ibsen and me, we treat the failure as our fuel.

“Ibsen and me” K.Sanak (material generated during the creation of Ibsenisland)

The failure.

In the kingdom of Mickiewicz, Reymont, or Wyspiański, where I come from, the name Ibsen does not resonate with great popularity. Yet, the recent Nobel Prize triumph of Jon Fosse has ushered in a wave of interest in Norwegian literature across Eastern Europe, a shift that was absent during my own educational journey. After moving to Norway, my attention was captivated by Viking sagas and medieval literature, leaving Henryk’s legacy somewhat neglected. This unfamiliarity with Ibsen’s work gave me the opportunity to discover this new-to-me author without a weight of presumptions or preconceived labels.

My investigation began with an unexpected revelation found in his handwriting—both Ibsen and I share the experience of dyslexia. This shared “failure” or rather challenge, sparked my curiosity and a personal connection, which ignited in further investigation. In seeking to understand Ibsen’s artistic identity, I hoped that he would help me answer my ongoing research question, “What is your label?”. I searched for that answer in various texts from Ibsen’s life, including drawings, contracts, postcards, dedications, childhood memories, dreams, and observations of contemporary society. In one particular text called, “Childhood Memories,” Ibsen describes himself with the words, “I was mostly present as an observer.”¹.

To me, his personal texts became observations of the world, filtered with irony and attention to detail. A unifying thread throughout his works is his use of symbols—both religious and secular, intertwined with his personal history. Delving into Ibsen's mind through his writings and perceiving the world through the lens of his imagination, allowed me to explore the realms of his thoughts,

¹ Ibsen, H., 1888. *Barndomsminner: Et litterært livsbillede*. Oslo: Universitetet i Oslo.

leading to a discovery: the biggest failure of Ibsen's writing, an obscure and forgotten play called "Norma."

"Norma" or "A Politician's Love Music Tragedy in Three Acts" is written as a political satire opera. The plot of this short love story revolves around the betrayal by Severus, who cheats on his lover Norma with her friend Adalgisa. The action takes place in the nature of the Norwegian forest and grove, where magic and the divine are integral aspects of everyday life. The preface provides insight into the deeper meaning of the story, revealing it as an allegory for real events. Norma driven by a desire for retribution, seeks to kill the traitor Severus, but ultimately fails in her attempt. In a dramatic turn of events, the other lover returns with an angelic presence and transforms the traitor Severus into a demigod. This transformation radically alters Severus's fate, prompting a shift in perception among all, including Norma. Consequently, Severus gets away with his betrayal and walks out in peace, continuing to rule the world.

To me, the text explores the paradox of how your societal position or hierarchy can determine your impunity for wrongdoing or accommodate and change the true meaning of the words you say. Ibsen himself ironically comments on this topic, stating, "Concepts change, what was considered liberal in the previous Parliament is now the opposite, and so on. From this, it can be seen that Stabell fundamentally has not changed his mind; his conduct is entirely consistent – the apparent inconsistency lies only in the external."² This observation remains relevant today, as we see political structures fluidly changing while retaining apparent coherence and stability. In modern society, those dynamics are evident in many countries. For instance, the Polish government and church, manipulate public opinion through propaganda, while maintaining their power and artificial innocence. Furthermore, my latest experience in Tbilisi, Georgia, provides another example, where government and its corruption act against the people. When I was attending one of the protest fighting freshly granted so called "Russian laws", I was told by one Georgian woman, "We have been in this circle for about 75 years. We are used to protesting. It's like repeating the same mistake and pattern over and over again. But why? Why can't we just be free?". Young Ibsen, despite lacking insight into Eastern Europe's and Caucasian's politics, had his own commentary on that matter, which aligns with current anthropological research on labelling historical events as "failures" or "progress" based on context and circumstances. Anthropologists Carna Brković and

² Ibsen, H., 1851. "Actions and Features of the Parliament" reportage. Kristiania: Manden/Andhrimmer.

Andrew Gilbert explains this in their article stating, “We are ‘going backwards’ rather than ‘moving forward,’ political and social forms widely represented as historical ‘failures’ are finding success, and historic victories are being reversed. All evince a sense of anachronism – a feeling that something is not in its correct historical or chronological time.”³ Ibsen's solution to this political paradox, which persists in modern times, was to place the action of “Norma” in a magical world, where logic or chronology can be simply explained through belief rather than reason. This example is illustrated through the character of Norma. Described as “a highly irritable woman, (...) strictly adheres to morality and duty.”⁴, Norma embodies personal integrity. She is a “mother with such little honour”⁵ of two weak sons. Throughout the play, the protagonist Norma defends the truth “in a berserker manner”⁶ standing strongly as an opposition to the wrongdoings and calling the people for revolution. There are no logical explanations or even presumptions on the possible change of characters standpoint. However, under the circumstances of magical power of the demigod Severus, even the strong-willed Norma changes her mind. Does that explain why politicians often blend religions into their work, using it to shape perceptions and maintain power? The play concludes with the an important statement, “Time will tell!”⁷ suggesting that the interplay of belief and authority in owning political power is an ongoing process that remains to be fully understood.

Despite its deep political meaning and clever script, driven by the “youthful flame”⁸ of Ibsen’s early writings, “Norma is an odd job of only marginal interest among Ibsen's works”⁹ and, unfortunately, “was never performed in Ibsen’s lifetime (the first official staging happened in 1994 in Trondheim).” Let the artist who has never experienced a failure like this, cast the first stone. Every year, numerous artists confront various types of rejections, which often translate into a sense of failure. Countless funding applications, scripts, project descriptions, or even finished works like performances, CDs and books fail to reach their intended audience and remain unsuccessful. Despite Ibsen's keen observations of political paradoxes, "Norma" was ahead of its time and yet

³ Brkovic Carna, G.A., 2017. "The Anthropology of Anachronism: On Failures, Reversals and the Space-Time of Political Possibility". *Association for Political and Legal Anthropology*.

⁴ Ibsen, H., 1851. *Norma, Severus Act 1 Scene 2*. In: *Henrik Ibsens skrifter*, 2005. Oslo: UiO.

⁵ Ibsen, H., 1851. *Norma, Norma Act 2 Scene 1*. In: *Henrik Ibsens skrifter*, 2005. Oslo: UiO.

⁶ Ibsen, H., 1851. *Norma, Norma Act 3 Scene 2*. In: *Henrik Ibsens skrifter*, 2005. Oslo: UiO.

⁷ Ibsen, H., 1851. *Norma, Norma Act 3 Scene 2*. In: *Henrik Ibsens skrifter*, 2005. Oslo: UiO.

⁸ Ibsen, H., 1851. *Norma, Norma Act 1 Scene 3*. In: *Henrik Ibsens skrifter*, 2005. Oslo: UiO.

⁹ Ystad, V., 2005. *Introduction to Norma*. In: *Henrik Ibsens skrifter*. Oslo: UiO.

failed to make an impact. What caused that failure? Was it Ibsen's lack of writing experience, an overly elaborate structure, the author's unknown name, or simply bad timing for publication? Regardless of the reason, this was Ibsen's first serious encounter with professional failure. This early setback in Ibsen's career exemplifies a common experience in the artistic community, underscoring the challenges and rejections that artists face on their path to recognition. "When we fail, our brains release cortisol, which does not leave us with feelings of acceptance and safety. (...) developing psychosomatic symptoms such as headaches and stomach aches that make it difficult to concentrate."¹⁰ Just imagine the sheer volume of cortisol produced within artistic community alone. While failure is subjective and defined differently by each individual, it is universally acknowledged that "long term, stress can literally 'kill brain cells' and 'erode higher-brain networks, inhibiting you from succeeding."¹¹ In light of this, given that failure is an inseparable part of artist's life, how can artists maintain their health and approach unsuccessful works with resilience? The internet offers plenty of advice on how to overcome the feeling of failure, including quotes from Kute Blackson, who says, "It's not the most talented who succeed. It is those who refuse to give up." What worked for me personally one day, was this Greek proverb: "The surgery was successful, but the patient passed away." This emphasises that neither failure nor success should singularly define the quality of one's work. In the art field, one can always carve out a niche, even if, during challenging times, the only supporters of your work might be your parents. Furthermore, failure, according to the sociologist Max Weber, might lead us to the "paradox of unintended consequences"¹². This concept refers to outcomes that are not foreseen or intended by purposeful action. Ibsen and his version of "Norma" touches upon the same principle "that one must more guess at than see and that finally stops at the end of the piece where, from the beginning, one would least expect it"¹³. Weber's broader analysis of social action and the complexities of modern society, further developed by other sociologists and anthropologists "Carroll, Jeevendrampillai, and Parkhurst suggest that "failure is when objectification ceases to adhere."¹⁴ Their general theory suggests that failure is "a moment of breakage between the reality of the present and the anticipated

¹⁰ Nakhlè, P., 2023. *Effects of Failure on The Brain: Here's How to Understand and Deal with It*. Dubai: PEN Consultancy.

¹¹ Goewey, D., 2014. *The End of Stress: 4 Steps to Rewire Your Brain*. Stanford: Atria Books/Beyond Words.

¹² Weber, M., 1905. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London & Boston: Unwin Hyman.

¹³ Ibsen, H., 1851. "Norma" Preface. In: *Henrik Ibsens skrifter*, 2005. Oslo: UiO.

¹⁴ Carroll, T., Jeevendrampillai, D., Parkhurst, A., & Shackelford, J., 2017. *The Material Culture of Failure: When Things Go Wrong*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

future” that provides a “rich space for the growth and development of new social relations.”¹⁵ A compelling example of this phenomenon is found in the trajectory of Henrik Ibsen’s career. His early failure with "Norma" laid the groundwork for later success with “The League of Youth,” which Ibsen wrote almost two decades later. Does this mean that failure, in principle or essence, can also be productive? How to “speak to the inherently productive nature of ‘failure.’”¹⁶

Paradoxically, what sparked my interest in working with “Norma” as part of the Ibsen project was not its plot or political context, but the specific professional failure of Ibsen associated with it. In my research, I aimed to uncover the reasons behind this failure, to determine if the play is genuinely uninteresting, and if so, whether there are any ways to highlight its strengths. Although I did not find definitive answers, I can clearly state what I found most inspiring and interesting: the choice of format for the play, which, as mentioned earlier, was political satire opera.

In exploring political satire, Colletta L. states that it “applies comedy as an approach to represent the ugliness of politics and politicians and to ridicule their follies.”¹⁷ To understand this genre further, I explored its different variants across various disciplines, including drawing. To expand my research, I interviewed Norwegian caricaturist and activist Trygve Andersen, who voices his political critiques through his artwork. Andersen explains that the political satire aims “to plant a picture inside your head, which later allows your imagination to work on it and reflect the matter.” When asked why creating political satire is important, Andersen emphasised, “artists should dare to speak up through their arts, or else there won’t be any changes.” By examining Andersen's perspective, I realised that the political satire serves as a powerful tool for social change, underlining the importance of artistic expression in political discourse.

In the context of Ibsen, “Norma” is rooted in contemporary negotiations and conflicts in the Norwegian Parliament, which, in the period 1844–51, oscillated between opposition and more conciliatory stances towards the government's policies. The preface to “Norma” refers to the parliamentary debates in May 1851 as directly triggering the creation of the text: "The other day, I

¹⁵ Carroll, T., Jeevendrampillai, D., Parkhurst, A., & Shackelford, J., 2017. *The Material Culture of Failure: When Things Go Wrong*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

¹⁶ Colletta, L., 2009. "Political Satire and Postmodern Irony in the Age of Stephen Colbert & Jon Stewart". *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Rome.

¹⁷ Ystad, V., 2005. *Introduction to Norma*. In: *Henrik Ibsens skrifter*. Oslo: UiO.

found myself in the parliamentary gallery [and] allowed [...] my imagination free rein [...]"¹⁸. In his early twenties, Ibsen, as a young author, worked as a reporter for the newspaper *Manden/Andhrimner*, where he provided commentary on the political climate in Kristiania. Shortly after attending the so-called "address debate," Ibsen was assigned to substitute for another reporter and write a review of Vincenzo Bellini's opera "Norma." It is worth mentioning that this era spanning the 1840s to 1850s, marked debut for opera on the Scandinavian scene, captivating audience with fascination. Experiencing the performance of the opera provided Ibsen with a profound source of inspiration, drawing a line between his political or social writing and the realm of fantasy. In the characters of Bellini's opera and their dramatic relationships, Ibsen saw parallels to the real names of the politicians whom he observed at the "address debate" in the Parliament. That moment sparked his ambition to craft a political satire with the same title as Bellini's renowned work. "The Storting is a dramatically gifted corporation!"¹⁹ writes the young Ibsen in his preface to the piece.

Ibsen's evening with Bernini's "Norma" deepened his relationship with music and the opera genre. In his review published in the article "Theatret" in *Manden/Andhrimner* on May 25, 1851, Ibsen offered a profound characterization of opera. He stated that opera achieves a sublime synthesis of music and drama, creating a higher unity that transcends the individual parts of each art form. "This medium is fundamentally a composition of two elements [...] The opera is the unity of both and cannot, therefore, reveal itself through a medium where one element is missing. [...] The deepest harmony must thus take place between music and text; the music is the soul of the opera, the text its concrete form, from which it is enveloped. Since we find ourselves in the ideal prayer of the opera, we demand here a complete harmony between content and form. [...] These absolutely necessary conditions for a pure and undisturbed enjoyment of the opera have hardly been so successfully united on any previous occasion with us as during the performance of 'Norma'."²⁰ Following those reflections, Ibsen notices that music helps to supplement words, shaping situations or emotions that words cannot capture. Shortly after, Ibsen became fascinated with music theories debating the "power of tones" by Heiberg and Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard states that "this Power, this Might, the Word cannot express; only Music can give us an idea of it; it is, in fact, unspeakable for Reflection and Thought. An ethically determined Seducer's Cunning I can distinctly set forth in Words; and

¹⁸ Ibsen, H., 1851. "Norma" Preface. In: *Henrik Ibsens skrifter*, 2005. Oslo: UiO.

¹⁹ Ibsen, H., 1851. "Norma" Preface. In: *Henrik Ibsens skrifter*, 2005. Oslo: UiO.

²⁰ Ibsen, H., 1851. *Theatret. Manden/Andhrimner, Kristiania. from Ystad, V.*, 2005. Introduction to *Norma*. In: *Henrik Ibsens skrifter*. Oslo: UiO.

Music would in vain venture to solve this Problem. With Don Juan, it is the reverse. What Power is it? – No one can say, even if I asked Zerline about it before she goes to the Ballet: what is the Power with which he captivates you? – she would answer: one doesn't know; and I would say: well spoken, my child! You speak wiser than the Indian wise men, richtig, das weiß man nicht; and the misfortune is, that I also cannot tell you.”²¹. With that in mind, Ibsen in his review writes a similar statement, linking it with the previously mentioned “paradox of unexpected consequences”: “I won't attempt to explain the sequence of reasoning that led me to this conclusion, for who doesn't know the power of tones, who doesn't know that music, wielded with Alexander's sword, can cleave the tangled knots of thought, propel us forward on the logical spiral journey, and place us at a point we least expected?”²². This commentary makes me wonder whether “unexpected consequences” became Ibsen’s red thread for writing “Norma,” resonating with both the plot and the format of the play.

Heiberg, on the other hand, states that “the opera music must, like the opera as a whole, be understood dramatically.”²³. As part of my research, I made an attempt to compose music for Norma's monologue from the first scene of the second act. This time, I tried to approach the composition by combining the reflections of Ibsen, Heiberg, and Kierkegaard with the principles of caricature drawing discussed with the aforementioned caricaturist Trygve Andresen. As an aesthetic and musical inspiration, I used the works of Caroline Shaw, who specializes in composing music for dramatic plays by Shakespeare. Incorporating these new principles gave me experience and reflections on the differences and similarities in creating music for stage performances - theatre or opera - versus symphonic or instrumental compositions. The initial phase of crafting the dramaturgy, which unfolds alongside Norma's spoken words, proceeded smoothly. My creative block, or rather a “failure” in composition, came with the line “Severus er Skyld i den hele Sag.”²⁴ To overcome it, I sought advice from Sandro Nikoladze, a resident composer at the Movement Theatre in Tbilisi, Georgia. Nikoladze’s method for overcoming creative blocks in music composition involves “leaving it alone for a couple of days, weeks, or months and then returning to

²¹ Kierkegaard, S., 1987. *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*. Translated by H.V. Hong and E.H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1843).

²² Ibsen, H., 1851. *Theatret. Manden/Andhrimner, Kristiania*. from Ystad, V., 2005. *Introduction to Norma*. In: *Henrik Ibsens skrifter*. Oslo: UiO.

²³ Heiberg, E. O. (1834) "Om Operaen og Syngespillet" from Ystad, V., 2005. *Introduction to Norma*. In: *Henrik Ibsens skrifter*. Oslo: UiO.

²⁴ Ibsen, Henrik 1851 "Norma" *Severus Act 2 scene 1*, *Henrik Ibsens skrifter*, 2005, Oslo, UiO

it, making necessary changes without sentimental attachment to the original work. Distance yourself from it and focus on something else.” Following Nikoladze's advice and trying to distance myself, I left the composition and redirected my efforts towards writing this essay on the topic of failure. While writing, I encountered a text by Carroll, Jeevendrampillai, and Parkhurst mentioned in the previous paragraph. In "The General Theory of Failure: Thoughts on the Material Culture of Failure," they write, "Failure is a pause before alterity (that is, a change in the subject/self), incommensurability (a state of stasis or a standoff between subject and object), or re-objectification (a change in the object position of the object)."²⁵ Drawing an allegory between these reflections and my music composition, I realised that just as a pause is an essential component of music articulated in each score, failure is an integral part of an artist's journey, serving the same function.

Keeping that in mind, I finished my composition with passion and pleasure. I could elaborate more on the music composing method developed in that project, but I feel I would require an entirely separate essay to express everything I discovered.

It prompts us to ponder whether all these processes, thoughts, and inspirations were indeed ignited by someone else's failure. Could it be that "Norma," far from being useless, serves as a catalyst for numerous artistic and sociological explorations? It seems likely that this phenomenon extends to countless other failures that traverse the universe.

²⁵ Carroll, T., Jeevendrampillai, D., Parkhurst, A., & Shackelford, J., 2017. *The Material Culture of Failure: When Things Go Wrong*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.