

## **“I’M ALWAYS SOMEHOW PRESENT IN THE LANDSCAPE WHERE I GREW UP”. A CONVERSATION WITH JON FOSSE**

**Diana CIOT-MONDA<sup>1\*</sup>**

**Diana Ciot-Monda:** I would like to start by thanking you for the opportunity to interview you. Your works are known and read in Romania. Recently, your book *The Other Name – Septology I-II* has been translated into Romanian and several of your plays have also been adapted and staged in Romanian national theaters.

**Jon Fosse:** Thank you for the kind words!

**D.C.M:** Myths are constantly changing and taking on new forms depending on the literary and cultural context that alters them. For example, the creature *gjenferdet* has undergone a number of transformations. They have now become something new, internalized. Why do you think people always turn to myths, reinterpret, and rewrite them in a form that fits their context?

**J.F:** You’re probably right to notice that. There are certainly some fundamental stories or fragments of stories that people have carried with them through thousands and hundreds of years, and that are transformed this way from representations that are changed by historical assumptions. *Gjenferdet*, the ghost or wraith (or, in old Nynorsk, *skrømtet*) – the dead, who in one way or another are still among the living, more or less – is such a mythical image, often linked to myths or stories. I have never thought that I interpret myths in a new way when the living and the dead pass each other by. I have simply just tried to

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\* This interview taps into the connection between the Nordic landscape, the past, and artistic inspiration in Jon Fosse’s works. Now appearing in Diana Ciot-Monda’s English translation, it was first published in Norwegian, under the title “Samtale Med Jon Fosse”, in *Studia Philologia*, 2/2023, pp. 291-296.



write works, as best and as genuinely as I can. And I find it difficult to define the annulment of the distinction between the living and the dead as the encounter between living people and ghosts. I probably have a kind of Catholic notion, perhaps influenced by the belief in saints, that the distance between the dead and the living is smaller than one might think. And that there may also be contacts between the living and the dead in ways we are not aware of.

**D.C.M:** Do you believe that landscape can be a trigger for artistic inspiration? Is it an element you always return to, no matter where you are?

**J.F:** Yes. I grew up in a small village community by the Hardangerfjord, in a small town called Strandebarm. There was one house after another along the fjord, some of them were on small farms, others with just a patch of garden, and between them, alongside the fjord, lay a narrow country road. The waves crashing against the shore could always be heard, stronger, weaker, with gradual or rapid movements. And then light round the clock in the summer, and dark almost the entire day in the winter, when the only light that could be seen streamed from one house to the next. And all this in a mighty fjord landscape with high mountains, one after the other. And there, on the other side of the fjord, was the glacier, Folgefonna, with its eternal ice and snow. In this landscape I met language, I met the world. It has had a fundamental impact on me and my writing. In a way, I always write starting from this scenery, even though the actual landscape can turn out to be different; for example, it can be a street in a city. The rhythm of the waves, the light, the dark. The stillness. The overwhelming mountains.

**D.C.M:** The book *Det er Ales* (2004) is, among other subjects, about visions of the past, about reliving and reinterpreting the past. Where did the idea for this book come from?

**J.F:** I never think anything out before I start writing. I just sit down and begin. And if it's a good beginning, then, in a way, the rest of the text is already there. I keep writing, keep listening to what I have already written, but of course also through, so to speak, now and then listening to what I write. My work writes itself, if I write well, so to speak. I have a feeling that what I write comes to me from the outside, not from the inside. And at a certain stage in the process, I get the feeling that the text has all been written somewhere out there, I just have to write it down before it disappears. So, it's not like I get ideas to write something and then "enforce" these ideas. If there are ideas in my writing, they must show themselves afterward. Ideas can certainly be interpreted from *Det er Ales*. But

they are not conceived by me. And I probably also have difficulty understanding what kind of ideas they might be.

**D.C.M:** The whole book has a peculiar melancholy. Asle is always looking at the fjord, but it is never clear what the mystery behind the landscape is: "Og han ser mot Fjorden og den er ganske stille [...] og nå må han snu, gå heim att [...] han vil ikkje sjå mot henne, der ho står [...] han ser mot Fjøra," as the text says on page 24 of the 2004 edition (*Det Norske Samlaget*). This landscape also creates a certain specific melancholy, a Nordic melancholy. How do you think these feelings – melancholy and loneliness, together with the specific landscape – give rise to this new term, Nordic melancholy?

**J.F:** It is, after all, a Nordic melancholy, but this is probably easier to notice for someone who does not come from the Nordic countries. For me, it's just the way it is, if I can put it that way. There was probably a sense of loneliness both in the landscape and in the relationships between people in the village where I grew up. And I may have both a good and a bad feeling of loneliness in me. Just as I experience melancholy both as a good and a bad feeling. It is quite possible that both melancholy and loneliness have something to do with Nordic culture and the landscape, as if they were inherent to them. But I find it difficult to say much about it. We're also talking about Nordic light, and it's easier to notice how it differs, for example, from light in Central Europe.

**D.C.M:** The past has the quality of being ghostly, of haunting. In *Det er Ales* the characters are also haunted by the landscape, not only by the past. Could the fjord be a way of communicating with the past, with the ancestors, a tunnel connecting past and present?

**J.F:** What you wrote here is probably correct. In my writing, the past is always close, it is a part of something, so to speak, without me feeling that there is anything "ghostly" about it. I actually think that's the way it is, that the past is close to us all the time, in both remarkable and unremarkable ways. At least that's how it is in my writings. People are connected to landscapes, for example to a fjord landscape, and in a way, the landscape also bears experience. I have a cabin at the mouth of the Sognefjord, from where Viking ships often set sail as historical facts show, and it can sometimes feel as if there is a direct connection between the landscape as I see it, Sognesjøen, and those who have traveled at sea for hundreds and thousands of years.

**D.C.M:** Thinking about readers from outside the Scandinavian countries, do you think they might understand your work in a different way?

**J.F:** It's difficult to say. All good literature can be interpreted and understood in many ways, yet there is something definitive and unique about it that is unquestionable. The simple fact is that my writing is understood, and it is understood very deeply, in completely different cultures – in Tokyo and in Shanghai, in Paris and in Berlin, and so on. I have seen productions of my own plays practically all over the world, and it is extraordinary how fully what I write can be understood in completely different places. Sometimes I feel as if someone far away understands best what I have written.

**D.C.M:** How do you feel when you read translations of your books? Do you find that the mood is different from what you wanted to convey? To what extent can a translation reproduce the meaning of a book?

**J.F:** I rarely or never read translations, but I have seen my plays performed in many languages, and I have often been almost amazed, as I said, at how fully people from completely different cultures can understand my writings. Could it be the case that what is most specific to a place is also the most universal? It's difficult to say anything about my prose. But I would believe that a good translator can write what I create in his or her own language, in the way it is possible to write it in his or her cultural context. Of course, it doesn't always work out, I have also seen bad and misconstrued theatre productions, and I'm convinced that there are bad translations of my prose and theater, but that's another thing.

**D.C.M:** Do you have a favourite place that you use for your creative process?

**J.F:** Not really. I can write anywhere. What I need is peace and quiet, and the opportunity to write for at least a week at a time. But as I said in the introduction, I'm always somehow present in the landscape where I grew up, and which has fundamentally shaped me and my language.