

Article

The Montage Rhetoric of Nordahl Grieg's Interwar Drama

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Abstract: This essay explains the modernist montage rhetoric of Nordahl Grieg's 1935 drama *Vår ære og vår makt* in the context of the playwright's interest in Soviet theater and his Communist sympathies. After considering the historical background for the play's depiction of war profiteers in Bergen, Norway, during the First World War, the article analyzes Grieg's use of a montage rhetoric consisting of grotesque juxtapositions and abrupt scenic shifts. Attention is also given to the play's use of incongruous musical styles and its revolutionary political message. In the second part, the article discusses Grieg's writings on Soviet theater from the mid-1930s. Grieg embraced innovative aspects of Soviet theater at a time when the greatest period of experimentation in post-revolutionary theater was already ending, and Socialist Realism was being imposed. The article briefly discusses Grieg's controversial pro-Stalinist, anti-fascist position, before concluding that *Vår ære og vår makt* represents an important instance of Norwegian appropriation of international modernist and avant-garde theater.

Keywords: theater; modernism; avant-garde; Norwegian literature

1. Introduction

The dramatist, poet, and novelist Nordahl Grieg was in many ways the most internationally oriented Norwegian writer of the first half of the twentieth century. He sailed around the world in late adolescence (in the years after the First World War), he studied at Oxford in the early 1920s, and he published travelogues from Greece and China in the late 1920s. Grieg went on to spend almost two years in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s, and he later visited Spain as a war correspondent during the Civil War in 1937. During the early years of the Nazi occupation of Norway in the Second World War, Grieg served the Norwegian government in exile before being shot down in an aircraft, at the age of 41, while observing an allied air raid over Berlin in December of 1943.

While in the Soviet Union in 1933–1934, Grieg responded with enthusiasm to new theatrical styles and techniques that he would later utilize in *Vår ære og vår makt* (first published in 1935, translated to English as "Our Power and Our Glory"). With this drama, Grieg brought avant-garde and modernist impulses to Norway in one of the decade's most significant and controversial theatrical events. *Vår ære og vår makt* employs a montage technique of contradictory juxtapositions, abrupt scenic shifts, and innovative musical, sound and lighting effects. The play shifts wildly in tone, from elegiac solemnity to darkly comic satire. Soviet theater was one of several international influences; other notable reference points include Erwin Piscator's documentary drama and Bertolt Brecht's Epic theater, as well as Noël Coward's 1931 play *Cavalcade*, which Grieg saw on the stage in London before it became a popular film in 1933. This article explains how *Vår ære og vår makt* employs what I will call a "montage rhetoric" to depict war profiteering and class divisions in Norway during the First World War, and to advance a revolutionary anti-capitalist and anti-war agenda in its own beleaguered historical moment.

“Montage” is a key term associated with Russian avant-garde film and theater, with Sergei Eisenstein as its central theorist in film and Vsevolod Meyerhold an important practitioner in the theater. While the play’s borrowing of a montage technique from the Soviet avant-garde has long been noticed by commentators, the rhetorical function of Grieg’s particular usage of montage has not been specified. By using a montage technique characterized by grotesquely contrasting juxtapositions, Grieg emphasizes inequalities and conflicts between the different social groups depicted in the play, the ship-owners and the sailors of Bergen. These politically charged contrasts are also communicated through musical and stylistic incongruities, as Grieg draws on a range of musical genres, from folk song to jazz. Ideologically, the play reflects Grieg’s conviction that Stalin’s Soviet Union was the admirable land of the future that Norwegians should emulate: a bulwark against capitalist warfare and exploitation, in which class divisions had been eliminated and a new worker’s society was being built.

In what follows, I will first explain the historical and political contexts of *Vår ære og vår makt*, before moving to a reading of the play’s montage rhetoric and use of grotesque contradictions. Then I will consider the impact of Grieg’s two-year stay in the Soviet Union in the early 1930s and discuss his writings about Soviet theater, as well as his controversial pro-Stalinist position throughout the decade. There is a historical irony, I suggest, in Grieg’s embrace of avant-garde Soviet theater, in that it took place at a time when Stalinist repression and censorship was increasing, Socialist Realism was already being imposed as an official style, and the groundbreaking period of experimentation was coming to an end.

2. Sailors and Ship-Owners

Vår ære og vår makt puts forward a scathing critique of Norwegian ship-owners who earned a fortune as war profiteers during the First World War. Before moving to a discussion of the play’s techniques, a bit of historical background is in order. Norway has sometimes been referred to as a “neutral ally” in the First World War, due to its popular sympathies with Great Britain and France, and its reliance on British control of the seas for security (Derry 1979, p. 303). These sympathies only increased as Norwegian ships were torpedoed by German U-boats in the course of the war. Through neutral, Norway derived profits from the warring great powers, who purchased raw materials and requisitioned ships. Norwegian pyrite and copper became highly valuable in wartime, while the value of ships could often increase by up to six times (Furre 1992, p. 57). During the boom years (*jobbetiden*) early in the war, Norwegian war profiteers and ship-owners could make heaps of money while wage rates remained static. The cost of living grew by 280 percent over the four war years (Derry 1979, p. 305). As *nouveaux riches* ship-owners and investors gained handsomely, they ignored the social and economic conditions of the workers and crews. Nine hundred Norwegian ships were lost in shipwrecks during the war, and 2000 Norwegian sailors lost their lives (Furre 1992, p. 57). In 1918, the Norwegian labor party (*Arbeiderpartiet*) gave voice to the social unrest heightened by this situation and passed a motion supporting “revolutionary mass action” (Derry 1979, p. 306). By the time Grieg was writing his play in 1935, however, *Arbeiderpartiet* had changed its course and become a reformist, Social Democratic party.

In selecting this difficult aspect of recent Norwegian history as the topic of his drama, Grieg was intentionally spotlighting a tense issue, especially for the local Bergen audience. As part of his archival research when writing the drama, Grieg studied old wartime issues of the Bergen-based leftist newspaper *Arbeidet*. Here he encountered reports about an espionage case that he remembered from his youth in the city, which he then incorporated into the story (Hoem 1989, p. 198). He also scoured the right-leaning newspapers from the war years to find arguments to give to the bourgeois character in his play. In an interview with *Arbeidet* in March of 1935, Grieg observed that “reality is in its grotesque brutality so much worse than anything anyone could sit and think up, that you would have to be stupid not to make use of old newspapers and archives” (“virkeligheten er i sin groteske råskap så meget veldigere enn noe menneske kan sitte og fønske ut at man måtte være meget dum om man ikke tok avisågangene or arkivene til hjelp”) (Vold 1983, pp. 110–11). Another aspect of

his research involved spending time talking to old sailors at the homeless shelters and near the Fish Market in Bergen.

At a more general level, *Vår ære og vår makt* sounds an alarm for its own time about a looming war desired by capitalists, investors, and profiteers. It was the first piece of literature Grieg wrote after his Soviet trip, and the first of three political dramas he wrote in the 1930s, followed by *Men imorgen*—(*But Tomorrow*—, 1936) and *Nederlaget* (*The Defeat*, 1937). Although he originally planned it as a film manuscript, the theater director Hans Jacob Nilsen at *Den Nationale Scene* in Bergen convinced Grieg to write a play instead, overcoming his doubts about theater after the bad reception of *Atlanterhavet* (*The Atlantic*) in 1932 (Hoem 1989, p. 195). Nilsen has been credited with turning *Den Nationale Scene* into a significant site of avant-garde theater in 1930s Norway, and he was instrumental in bringing *Vår ære og vår makt* to the stage for its Bergen premiere in May 1935 (Dahl 1984, p. 427). As the theater director from 1934 to 1939, Nilsen showed an interest in anti-fascist plays, having started his directorship with Pär Lagerkvist's *Bödelen* (*The Hangman*), a drama that highlights the barbarism and evil of Nazism (Lagerkvist [1934] 1956). Nilsen took an active role in the formation of the play, and without his support during the controversy before its premiere, the play never would have made it to the public (Hoem 1989, p. 208). Police were present at the premiere, and amidst the enormous applause, booing and outbursts of anger were also heard. Grieg's drama clearly touched a raw nerve, and some even saw it as a treasonous attack on a nationally vital industry. Nonetheless, the Bergen production went through 60 performances with a full house, and it was praised by many critics for its daring and innovation (Skjeldal 2012, p. 199). The play was performed in the fall of 1935 at *Nationaltheatret* in Oslo and the following year at *Det Kongelige Teater* in Copenhagen.

3. Post-Naturalist Theater

The use of montage, music, song, and dance in *Vår ære og vår makt* would not have been thinkable without the post-naturalist “retheatricalization” of theater that took place in early twentieth-century Scandinavia, as elsewhere in Europe (Marker and Marker 1975, p. 205). In the Nordic context, Pär Lagerkvist's essay “Modern Teater”, from 1918, was an important anti-naturalist manifesto. Lagerkvist called for a move away from the domestic “conversation” drama associated with Ibsen, and toward a theater that employed a wider range of art forms and effects. His main precedent was the expressionism of Strindberg's post-Inferno drama. Lagerkvist thought that naturalist interior dramas went against the very essence of theater. He faulted naturalism for being totally indifferent to the presence of the audience, and for being overly focused on the spoken word at the expense of the modern theater's visual and lyrical possibilities (Lagerkvist [1918] 1956, pp. 11, 15).

In the Russian context, Vsevolod Meyerhold's essay on “The Reconstruction of the Theatre” contains a similar denunciation of naturalism, while it also shows an appreciation of contradictions, confrontations, and polemics. Writing in 1929, Meyerhold contends that the modern masses desire an emotionally rich and varied experience at the theater, not an intellectual discourse or a “debating chamber” (Meyerhold [1929] 1995, pp. 98–99). The task of the theater is to awaken and strengthen the life-affirming optimism of the revolution, and to give an invigorating emotional shock to the audience (Meyerhold [1929] 1995, p. 100). Meyerhold also notes that the taste of the modern spectator has been re-educated by the stylized productions of post-revolutionary Constructivist design, and that realistic scenery and characterization are unnecessary.

Post-naturalist theater for Meyerhold, as for others in the interwar period, was becoming musical and multidimensional, taking in cinema, revue songs, dance, and gymnastics. His famed style of acting, biomechanics, emphasized the physical dexterity of the actor's body and the reduction of story elements into tasks that could be performed efficiently (Pitches 2003, p. 73). The Italian futurist F. T. Marinetti had already in 1913 pointed to music hall, variety theater, and popular entertainment as the model for a vibrant theater in his Manifesto. This use of popular entertainment and energetic physical movements became a dominant feature of the Soviet theater aesthetic in the post-revolutionary years, in what has been called a “circusization” of theater (Senelick and Ostrovsky 2014, p. 185).

Similarly, the Norwegian *arbeiderteater* (worker's theater) of the 1920s moved away from naturalism to incorporate a broader range of theatrical effects, including agitprop and music hall songs (Dahl 1984, p. 422). As we will see, *Vår ære og vår makt* draws on these interwar theatrical trends by incorporating music hall, revue, jazz, and dance elements. It also makes ample use of diegetic music and song, including traditional Scandinavian sailor's songs and drinking songs.

In the avant-garde Soviet theater and film of the 1920s, montage was theorized and practiced by Sergei Eisenstein and Vsevolod Meyerhold, the latter of whom was especially influential for Grieg. Montage in the theater refers to an episodic structure of successive, self-contained scenes, which are linked by abrupt and contrasting transitions, with breaks in continuity to keep the audience alert and surprised. In theatrical montage, stylized scenes and images are often juxtaposed to surprising or polemical effect, and two or more parallel storylines are possible (Pitches 2003, p. 75). Grieg's use of a montage technique is not radically experimental; the rhetorical purpose of montage in *Vår ære og vår makt* is never ambiguous or subtle. In addition, the play consists of a fairly continuous narrative told in a linear and causal fashion, and it does not approach anything like a radical breakdown of storytelling syntax that other forms of modernist montage might attempt. However, *Vår ære og vår makt* does have an episodic structure of two contrasting parallel storylines, linked by dissonant and explosive transitions. The shifts between scenes of sailors and ship-owners, labor and capital, produce a *grotesque* effect, in Meyerhold's sense of the term: a style based on sharp contradictions and incongruous elements that shock the audience and resonate in their minds (Pitches 2003, p. 61).

4. Grotesque Contradictions

Vår ære og vår makt opens with just such a grotesque moment of incongruity. The orchestra plays "Syng meg hjem", a sentimental sailor's song based on a text by Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, while onstage a sailor's coffin is shown covered by a Norwegian flag. The elegiac image does not last, however: "The music suddenly breaks into a wild dissonance, like an explosion. The date '1917' is projected in flames." ("Musikken sprenges plutselig i vill dissonans, som en ekplosjon. Årstallet "1917" flammer imot oss.") (Grieg [1935] 1975, p. 123).¹ Grieg uses the device of dissonant sound to interrupt the commemoration of the fallen soldier and go back in time eighteen years, to a challenging and even traumatic topic in the collective memory of the original audience. This interruption suggests that the fallen sailor cannot yet be buried, because the reckoning with the past has not yet taken place. In this way, the play uses a visual and musical jolt to announce its intentions to explore a touchy wartime subject.

The curtain is drawn aside to reveal the office of the greedy ship-owners. Ditlef S. Mathiesen and his brother-in-law Freddy Bang have grown rich from war profits (ships, stocks, and speculation). In the opening scene, we see Ditlef refuse to consider a raise for the struggling wage-earning seamen, only to immediately give his secretary more than twice the seamen's monthly earnings so she can take a restorative vacation to the mountains (Grieg [1935] 1975, p. 124). Even more offensive is Freddy Bang, who has just arranged for a teenager he impregnated to have a secret abortion (ibid., p. 127). He convinces her brother, Konrad, to keep the affair secret in exchange for getting in on a money-making ship deal (ibid., p.129). Ditlef, who speaks in a broad Bergen dialect, is depicted as a sentimental family man who uses his children to soothe his bad conscience about profiting from war and putting sailors in danger, while Freddy is a lecherous cartoon.

Grieg's characterization has little psychological complexity, but this was not the point. He was perfectly content with the pedagogical and tendentious use of characters, since he was not interested in naturalism, but in social structures and class guilt. Contrasting with the unsympathetic portrayal

¹ *Vår ære og vår makt* was translated to English as "Our Power and Our Glory" by G. M. Gathorne-Hardy (Grieg 1971). The English versions provided here are based on that translation, but usually modified. All other translations from Norwegian are my own.

of the ship-owners is Grieg's sentimental and admiring depiction of the sailors and their families. One harsh critic of the play, Alf Larsen, even described Grieg's attitude toward the sailors as "servile" (Egeland 1953, p. 169). Such partisanship was not an artistic flaw, but an essential part of Grieg's polemic. During his time in the Soviet Union, he learned to shun ambivalence and the gray zone, praising what he saw as the purity of the post-revolutionary constructive will and the clear distinctions between contrasts. Grieg wrote in the essay "Teatret og livet" that Russia was a place "where love and hate do not flow together; where the climate is fire and ice" ("hvor hat og kjærlighet ikke flyter sammen; hvor klimaet er is og flammer") (Grieg 1947, p. 167). I will discuss this essay further below.

Many of the play's most interesting scenic shifts and juxtapositions occur in the second act. This act takes place on board a German U-boat (scene 2), then on board the "Vargefjell" during the torpedo attack (scene 3), then in a restaurant where Ditlef, Freddy, and others are having a party (scene 4), and finally in a lifeboat on the cold seas (scene 5). When the ship "Vargefjell" is hit by the torpedo, a scream is heard, the sailors Henry and Vingrisen identify the victim as Ingolf, and the scene ends with these instructions:

(The scream grows into a moaning, wailing death cry. As the curtain falls, the orchestra strikes up a music-hall tune. An actor, full of health and high spirits, comes forward quickly, and sings the popular song of the boom years: "Who goes there? Who goes there?" During the last verse he is accompanied by six chorus girls, masked as jovial sailors.)

(Skriket stiger til et stønnende, jamrende dødskrik):

(I samme øieblikk teppet går sammen, smeller orkestret i med en revymelodi. En skuespiller kommer ilende frem, frodig, full av humør og synger jobbetidsvisen: "Hvem kommer der? Hvem kommer der?" I siste vers har han med sig seks chorus-girls, maskert som muntre gaster.)

(Grieg [1935] 1975, p. 152)

The theatrical use of a popular melody from the boom years becomes part of the blunt political message: the greedy ship-owners enjoy their profits, invest in copper stocks, and gain insurance money from shipwrecks, while underpaid sailors risk their lives and fall victim to German torpedo attacks. The festive song and dance routine literally conceals the death of a sailor on stage, while the chorus girls wear masks that project the lie of happy sailors to the audience. The use of the chorus girls in this transition is both entertaining and confrontational. Being entertained by the chorus girls and the song makes the audience complicit in an act of concealment and forgetting.

In the next scene, the ship owners enjoy a dinner party at a restaurant with musical entertainment. Konrad plays the simple drinking song "Gubba Noah" ("Gubben Noak", by Carl Michael Bellman) on the piano, and soon the chorus girls join the party and engage Konrad and the uncouth Birger in "a grotesque dance". Also present is a Russian violinist, Sascha Erdman, who plays melancholy folk music for the group, after which Birger smashes the violin to use as firewood to warm up the room. The general message of the scene is that the ship-owners are uncultured and destructive *nouveaux riches*, enjoying their war profits and women while the wage-earning sailors are torpedoed at sea. After his violin is destroyed, Sascha Erdman gives a revolutionary warning: "There are many like you in the world: one day, I believe, you will all have the same fate!" ("Det er mange som dere i verden; én dag, tror jeg, skal dere alle få samme skjebne!") (Grieg [1935] 1975, p. 157).

The restaurant scene ends with a segue to the next scene via the word "øs", the imperative form of a verb that can mean "to pour" or "to bail out" (as a boat). The ship-owners want to help Konrad stay awake for the debauchery by pouring more wine: "Øs, Konrad, øs!" shouts Birger. At the start of the next scene, the sailors Vingrisen, Henry, and others are trying to remove water from their lifeboat; three men on the boat have already frozen to death. A frantic sailor shouts "Øs, øs!" (ibid., p. 158). Between these scenes, the musical accompaniment is a jazz rendition of the sailor song "Siste reis" ("Sailor's Last Voyage"), which is based on a Romantic poem about a dying sailor by Henrik Wergeland. The musical style gradually changes from jazz into "the real tune, played with all its painful solemnity" ("den virkelige melodien, spilt med hele sin orgelsmerte") (ibid., p. 157).

The use of jazz music in this case carries the connotation of popular entertainment, frivolity, and festivity, in contrast to the mournful tones of the organ and the solemn sea-romanticism of the original dirge. A moment of grotesque visual continuity accompanies the music, according to the following stage instruction: “the dead-drunk figure from the party have a sort of echo in the men frozen to death in the lifeboat” (“de døddrukne skikkelsene fra festen, har et slags ekko i de ihjelfrosne i båten”) (ibid., p. 157). The montage rhetoric could not be more pointed: some are dead-drunk, others are just dead. As the second act concludes on the lifeboat, the sailors are freezing and longing for home, so Vingrisen sings a tune to hold up their spirits: the song “Eg har forlotte Bergen for bestandig” (“I Have Left Bergen For Good”). The young father Henry dies, but the others don’t give up. Defiant in the face of the bitter wind, Vingrisen continues to sing his song as the curtain falls. In the final act of *Vår ære og vår makt*, Olsen’s espionage is discovered, and a debate ensues among the characters about whether to blame the spies or the capitalist ship-owners for the deaths of the Norwegian sailors.

More important for the present discussion is the epilogue Grieg gave to the play, to ensure that the 1935 audience could not view the wartime events from a comfortably historicizing distance. He explained the intention of the epilogue in the following terms: “Now that a new war is threatening the world, I have wanted to address the problems from the previous one. I believe that in 1914–1918, we lost our high ethical position among nations. And if we have any hope to avoid repeating our complicity, then a real *recognition* is necessary”. (“Nå da en ny krig truer verden, har jeg villet ta op problemene fra den forrige. Jeg mener at vi i 1914–1918 forspilde vår høie etiske stilling mellem folkene. Og skal vi ha noget håp om ikke å gjenta vår delaktighet, er erkjennelsen nødvendig.”) (Egelund 1953, p. 164). The epilogue raises the question of who Norwegians should be in the future: complicit war profiteers, or ethically laudable workers against war. First, an actor planted in the audience stands up and claims that all this nasty business during the war was lamentable, but it was long ago. In this way, Grieg anticipates the defensive reaction of the Norwegian theater-goers and answers it preemptively with additional scenes set in the present. After the fake audience member speaks, a gong strikes and the year 1935 glows on the curtain, just as 1917 did at the beginning of the play. The audience then sees a scene from depression-era Norway: a homeless shelter full of out-of-work sailors, among them Vingrisen (who was based on an actual sailor Grieg met during his research in Bergen.) The next part of the epilogue shows Ditlef and Freddy standing in front of the curtain, discussing the desperate economic situation. Ditlef states that only *one thing* can improve the depression; it is implied that this would be the empty ships anchored in the harbor being requisitioned in a new war. Ditlef then opens a newspaper and reads headlines aloud: “Better Outlook for Shipping.” “Will There Be War in the East?” (“Det lysner for skibsfarten. Blir det krig i Østen?”) (Grieg [1935] 1975, p. 179). A wild drumroll starts up and the curtain is thrown aside. The stage directions read: “the whole play seems to explode in an atmosphere of speculation and war. On a moving band, soldiers approach with steel helmets and bayonets” (“det er som hele stykket eksploderer i en atmosfære av børs og krig. På et rullende bånd kommer soldater imot oss, med stålhjelm og bajonett”) (ibid., p. 179). On one side of the soldier assembly line are the ship-owners and “børsmennesket” (called “Stock-Exchange Creature” in Gathorne-Hardy’s translation), and on the other side are the sailors, a young worker, and a woman.

The play ends with the opposition of capital and labor clearly rendered in the division of characters into groups. While those on the side of capital shout slogans about the enterprising spirit and personal initiative, soldiers are shot down by machine guns positioned above the audience in the theater hall. Again, the audience is made complicit in the violence and death they witness onstage. An idealized woman-figure, representing peace, harmony, hope, youth, and human dignity, voices her opposition to the capitalists’ greed and opportunism. “Stock-Exchange Creature” repeats “Better Outlook for Shipping”. “Will There Be War in the East?” (“Det lysner for skibsfarten. Blir det krig i Østen?”), to which the sailors and workers shout a resounding “No!” (“Nei!”) from a stylized ship-construction flying a Norwegian flag, as the sirens start to blare in a call for a general strike. Norway cannot be neutral in this struggle, Grieg suggests, and it is the responsibility of the working class to avert the

coming capitalist-driven war. The concluding sirens send a warning to the audience about the fateful, contradictory choices ahead, rather than an unambiguously positive ending or simple victory.

5. Soviet Dreams

Naturally, Grieg's play was accused of being revolutionary Communist propaganda and even "violating the neutrality of the stage" (Hoem 1989, p. 208). This is a predictable reaction, especially since Grieg had become known to the Norwegian public as an ardent supporter of the Soviet Union both during and after his visit there. To properly contextualize Grieg's tendentious play, we need to understand his aesthetic appropriation of Soviet theater as an integral part of his larger ideological embrace of the Communist project. When Grieg decided to visit the Soviet Union, he was not yet a convinced Communist. The trip turned out to be an experience of conversion and revitalization after period of exhaustion and pessimism. His 1932 drama *Atlanterhavet* (The Atlantic) had been a struggle and a flop, and it pointed to an artistic impasse. The turn to Soviet Communism gave him a new grounding: he wrote to his mother in January of 1934 that, "my stay in Russia has given me so much, new belief and new joy" ("Mitt Russlands-ophold har gitt mig meget, ny tro og ny glæde") (Vold 1983, p. 102). In the same letter, Grieg explained that the classless, patriotic Soviet Union should be Norway's new role model for revolution, just as the French revolution had inspired the Norwegian constitution of 1814. He began to understand his previous ideas about the Soviet Union as misrepresentations. Toward the end of his stay, he wrote in a letter to his sister Ingeborg that everything written in the Norwegian press about Soviet conditions—both for and against—was incorrect (Vold 1983, p. 102).

When he arrived early in 1933, the Soviet Union had just been through an intense period of rapid industrialization and massive forced collectivization under the first Five-Year Plan. Much suffering and hardship was caused in farming areas, including the persecution of the *kulaks* (relatively well-off peasants). In addition, Grieg's arrival in the Soviet Union coincided with the systematic starvation of millions in The Great Famine or *Holodomor* in Ukraine. The early 1930s in Stalin's Russia were also a time when cultural control was being centralized and social repression was heightened. Grieg was in fact present as an observer at the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934, when socialist realism was proclaimed as the only acceptable artistic style, ending an incredible period of experimentation and innovation in Soviet theater and initiating a return to the classics. There, he might have heard Maksim Gorky define the official style in terms of "the uninterrupted development of the priceless individual faculties of man" and the unification of humanity (Senelick and Ostrovsky 2014, p. 361). Socialist realism was opposed to modern developments that were considered bourgeois or lumped under the epithet "formalism", and it was supposed to educate the public in the socialist spirit. On 1 November 1935, only half a year after the Bergen premiere of *Vår ære og vår makt*, official Soviet censorship was reconfirmed in a decree: all plays, films, and other performances would be reviewed by censors at least ten days before opening, and two seats at each performance would be reserved for censors (*ibid.*, p. 350).

While in the Soviet Union in 1933–1934, Grieg attended performances at the Moscow Art Theater and Meyerhold's Theater, among other locations in Moscow and Tbilisi. He communicated his understanding of Soviet theater—and of censorship and freedom of expression—to Norwegian audiences in his 1934 article "Teatret og livet" ("Theater and Life") and his 1935 lecture "Teater i Sovjetunionen" ("Theater in the Soviet Union"). In the latter, which was printed in *Arbeidet*, Grieg enthusiastically discusses the Russian directors Vsevolod Meyerhold, Alexander Tairov, Nikolay Okhlopkov, and the Georgian director Sandro Akhmeteli. In "Teatret og livet", originally published in *Tidens Tegn* on 2 June 1934, Grieg praises Soviet theater for its constructive will and its positive, edifying social role: "the same appeal is heard in everything: onward" ("gjennom alt smeller en appell: videre") (Grieg 1947, p. 166.). He claims that "criticism is tolerated in the newspapers here, but never skepticism" ("kritikk tåles i avisene her, men aldri skepsis") (*ibid.*, p. 168). Grieg does not pause to consider who decides what forms of skepticism and doubt are intolerable but moves on to praise the

instrumental use of theater in Russia: “theaters are in the service of the new dawn that will come tomorrow, after the stage lights are put out” (“teatre tjener den nye morgendagen som skal gråne efter at rampelysene er slukt”) (*ibid.*, p. 168).

Noting that the present age is depicted rather simplistically in Soviet art, Grieg considers whether this might be due to censorship, as others in Norway might think. He corrects this false impression: rather than censorship, “it can be more correctly explained as a new life-feeling” (“det kan riktigere forklares som en ny livsfølelse”) in which many cherished truths are dead, including those of Ibsen’s bourgeois individualism (*ibid.*, p. 173). A new country is being built, and also a “new man”, and the theater has a role to play in forming this new world. “Teatret og livet” contains little about specific theatrical methods and techniques. Rather, it is concerned with the role of theater in communist society, and it shows both Grieg’s openness to the political or didactic instrumentalization of theater and his defense of censorship in the name of affirmation and “the constructive will.”

Part of what appealed to Grieg about theater and literature in the Soviet Union was that it represented an alternative to what he called “*forsiktighetsdikningen*”, a cautious, skeptical, and pessimistic kind of writing that he thought had become the dominant current in the West since the 1920s. In the essay “En ny verdensvei” (“A New Path for the World”), written in Moscow in the summer of 1934, Grieg named Ernest Hemingway and Sigurd Hoel as representatives of this tendency ([Grieg 1947](#), p. 180). Opposed to such caution, Grieg lauded the Soviet literature of enthusiasm and action, exemplified by the futurist Vladimir Mayakovsky: loud, thundering words, at full throttle. His enthusiasm and faith in the Soviet future was at its height as he returned to Norway before Christmas in 1934. Earlier that same month, the Communist party central committee member Sergey Kirov was murdered in his office. This became the event that marked the beginning of the Stalinist purges, arrests, and executions. Grieg defended the purges that ensued after the murder of Kirov: writing in *Arbeidet*, on 9 January 1935, he dismissed H. G. Wells’ concerns about the lack of freedom of conscience and speech, writing, “Of course, I can take no part in the dismay that most humanist-minded people feel about the mass arrests” (“Jeg kan selvsagt på ingen måte delta i den forferdelse som de fleste ‘humanistisk’ innstillede mennesker føler over massehennettelsene”) ([Grieg 1982](#), pp. 41–42).

When considering this era, it is important to bear in mind that the rise of Hitler’s Third Reich and the Great Depression brought pressure to bear on many people’s understanding of Stalin’s Russia. As the historian Mark Mazower has written, the Soviet Union appeared to many sympathetic, anti-fascist observers on the left in the 1930s as “a striking contrast to the West—an image of energy, commitment, collective achievement and modernity” ([Mazower 1998](#), pp. 124–25). In Britain, for example, leading figures in the British Labour Party Sidney and Beatrice Webb famously published a tract in praise of Stalinism in the same year that *Vårære og vår makt* had its premiere: it was called *Soviet Russia: A New Civilization?*, and it was reprinted in 1937 without the question mark ([Kershaw 2015](#), p. 450).

Even after colleagues on the left such as Arnulf Øverland openly shed their Communist sympathies, Grieg maintained his vision of the Soviet Union as the sole agent of peace and justice in a Europe threatened by fascist destruction and capitalist war. Tragically, both Vsevolod Meyerhold and Sandro Akhmeteli, key influences for Grieg, were arrested, tortured, and executed within five years of the Bergen premiere of *Vårære og vår makt*. Meyerhold’s theater was liquidated in 1938 for being “alien to Soviet art”, and he was arrested, tortured, and executed in 1940 ([Senelick and Ostrovsky 2014](#), pp. 402, 407–8). Akhmeteli was arrested on charges of espionage, then tortured and executed in November 1936 (*ibid.*, p. 441). This took place only a few years after Grieg was entranced in Tbilisi by his production of Schiller’s *Die Räuber* ([Grieg 1982](#), p. 56). Of course, Grieg could not have predicted any of this, and it is not clear how he reacted if he found out. It remains the case, however, that Grieg went significantly further in his defense of Stalinist repression than many other Norwegian writers with Soviet sympathies, both dismissing concerns about censorship and defending the notorious show trials. When the first news of Stalin’s show trials came out in the summer of 1936, a group of leading Norwegian authors that included both Sigurd

Hoel and Arnulf Øverland made a public declaration decrying the death sentences as a miscarriage of justice (Dahl 1984, p. 60). Hoel printed a sober critique of the trials in Grieg's anti-fascist periodical *Veien frem* early in 1937, to which Grieg and the Danish communist author Hans Kirk responded in the next issue. Kirk mocked Hoel for having an overly aestheticized and academic relationship to Marxism (ibid., p. 61). In his February 1937 article "Dramaet i Moskva" ("The Drama in Moscow"), Grieg portrayed one of those sentenced in the trials, Karl Radek, as "a sacrifice for a historical necessity" ("et offer for en historisk nødvendighet") and saw in the trials a tragic inner conflict of Stalin's "will to victory" ("seiersvilje") (Grieg 1947, pp. 126–27). It was a task of the worker's democracy, he suggested, to minimize such collateral damage. For Grieg, Soviet Russia continued to be the bright spot of hope in a time of fascism, economic depression, and hypocritical bourgeois humanism, a position he expressed clearly in his 1938 political novel of ideas, *Ung må verden ennu være*.

6. Conclusions

Vår ære og vår makt is both a product of revolutionary enthusiasm in a politically turbulent decade and an instance of energetic, tendentious theatrical experimentation. Although *Vår ære og vår makt* has long been recognized for its use of a montage technique, Grieg has rarely been understood as an avant-garde or modernist writer. For example, he is not mentioned in John Brumo and Sissel Furuseth's 2005 overview *Norsk litterær modernism* (Brumo and Furuseth 2005). This absence is understandable, given that there is little that would count as modernist in Grieg's interwar poetry, which tends to be quite traditional in form, or in his novels. In addition, as a critical and historical term, "modernism" in both English and the Scandinavian languages has focused on poetry and prose, having a limited and imperfect application to theater and drama. It bears remembering, however, that the term "modernism" first entered the Norwegian language, in Grieg's own time, with a comparatively broad aesthetic and geographical scope. Introducing the concept in his 1931 *Modernisme*, Haakon Bugge Mahrt cast a wide net across the arts and across national boundaries: architecture, theater, film, design, and literature are all discussed, including Le Corbusier, Matisse, and Chaplin, as well as post-revolutionary Russian theater. Common to the disparate figures and trends Bugge Mahrt includes is an attempt to create new symbols and forms for the emerging modern civilization: all are signs an "en epoke som søker sig selv" (Bugge Mahrt 1931, p. 16).

In addition to its montage rhetoric, *Vår ære og vår makt* engages with interwar avant-garde and modernist culture in its anti-naturalist theatricality, its predilection for grotesque and dark satire, and its incorporation of jazz, dissonance, explosions, and music hall songs. Much of this was the result of Grieg's exposure to Soviet theater, although some of it belonged to developments in interwar theater and film more generally. Though not always a radical experimentalist or innovator, we might conclude that Grieg, with *Vår ære og vår makt*, became an important agent of appropriation and transfer, bringing aspects of international modernist theater and culture to the Norwegian stage in the service of a revolutionary political agenda.

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