

-Astrid Saalbach and *Red and Green*: An Introduction

by Michael Evans

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Astrid Saalbach's plays have rocked the theatrical scene in Scandinavia the last two decades. Quirky, caustic, funny and sad. And always dramaturgically innovative.

She debuted as a playwright in 1981 with the radio play *Traces in the Sand*, which won the Nordic Award for best radio drama and was produced in 16 countries in Europe. She was twenty-five years old. Her career was off to a flying start.

After writing a few other radio and television plays, she turned her hand to the theatre. Her first two stage plays came in 1986. *Invisible City* is a look behind the walls of an institution for the elderly—a “city” where no one leaves except in a casket. *Dance Lesson* looks at a disparate group of seven women who meet regularly for ballet lessons from a former prima ballerina. Both plays did well in Denmark and the other Nordic countries, and *Dance Lesson* was widely produced in Eastern and Central Europe. A theatre in Prague played it in repertoire for 14 years.

Saalbach hit her stride in the 1990's with a breakout trio of plays, *Morning and Evening*, *Blessed Child* and *Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust*. They show a new sophistication in construction, a willingness to discover new dramaturgies, new ways of telling new stories. As she said in an interview: “Classically composed plays are fine and interesting, but they just don't mirror my reality, and I want to write plays that are like how I see things. If you want to construct a new reality—or show one that has always been there, but in a different way—then I think it's a big misunderstanding that you can continue using the old form.”

The same decade saw a remarkable resurgence in Danish playwriting, and a new generation of interesting playwrights appeared. Jens Kistrup, the doyen of Danish theatre critics, called Saalbach “the best of her generation.”

In *Morning and Evening* Saalbach intertwines several different plot-lines. Instead of a main plot (with a couple of sub-plots that illuminate it), we get a tapestry of nearly equally important plots. Some of these plots overlap, others do not.

For example: In the second scene we meet a man, Jonas, who visits his old flame, Cecilie. Jonas has left his wife and children and spends his nights on friends' and acquaintances' couches. He lugs around with him a red sports bag stuffed with all his belongings. He seems desperate.

On his way to Cecilie's apartment he saw a young couple waiting at a bus stop. The couple exuded a happiness that mocked Jonas's misery; kissing and hugging, they were obviously very much in love. Jonas tells Cecilie about this couple. But we saw them in the first scene—a young couple getting dressed for their wedding. That is, *we* draw the conclusion that the couple we met in the previous scene is the same couple that Jonas saw waiting at the bus stop. Strictly speaking, we don't know this for a fact; any big city will at any time have at least a few young couples happily smooching while waiting for the bus. But still, it seems a fair inference.

And again, in the second act, we meet some people who arrive late to a dinner party. They were delayed because the trains had stopped; a man had committed suicide by jumping in front of a train. They don't know who the man was, but they mention that he had a red sports bag with him. Was it Jonas? We don't know, but again: it seems natural to draw that conclusion.

Saalbach lets one plot-line impinge ever so slightly on the next, gathering up ever so tenuously the disparate stories. This is very different from the usual chain of causes and effects in the standard dramaturgical model—a causal chain designed to lead us inexorably to a conclusion. Saalbach's plays from the 1990's are reminiscent of the chance meetings and brief encounters of the big city. *Morning and Evening* is a loosely woven, yet tightly constructed, tapestry of modern life in a big city.

Saalbach isn't the only playwright to use this type of alternative technique. Botho Strauss' *Die Zeit und das Zimmer* (1989) was the first play I read that utilised a similar technique. Robert Altman's cinematic masterpiece *Short Cuts*, from 1993 (coincidentally the same year as *Morning and Evening*) would be another.

The technique of interweaving many independent and equally weighted plot-lines has proved to be a valuable way of capturing our modern, urban experience. As individuals, modern urban dwellers operate in many different and independent arenas. In one arena you're a spouse and parent, in another you're an employee; in a third a member of a bowling team and so on. A feature of life in big cities is that these arenas overlap very little, unlike the tightly integrated life of pre-modern rural societies or the small towns and communities of generation or two ago. To an increasing degree, one's identity has become the sum of the separate roles that one plays in different arenas. Like Peer Gynt discovers when he peels the onion: there is no core.

An epithet often attached to Saalbach's plays in Denmark is *sivilasjonskritik*—a critique of civilisation. In her explorations of the dilemma of urban man, she pinpoints the failings of life as we live it. Indeed, many of her characters long for a rural existence, a life more original, pure, unsullied than can be found in our cities. There is something rotten in the state of Denmark. But unlike the Danish prince, Saalbach's big-city denizens haven't a clue as to

what to do about it. It often seems as if Saalbach is asking: What kind of world are we creating? Where is this all going to end?

Something in the way of an answer can be found in her apocalyptic play *Blessed Child* (1996). The play depicts the extinction of all humanity—which, if it is to be believed, will take place already in the next generation. Toxic wastes and new, unnamed diseases cause infertility in men (indeed, their penises fall off) and the few children who are born, are misbegotten freaks. Women have taken over all power, and men are used as slaves and sex slaves. Ultimately, after a few hundred thousand years, a new species arises to fill the gap left by our demise.

Blessed Child paints a bleak picture of our future: the world as polluted, fascist-lesbian hell. This sounds like a tragedy, but in fact the play is hysterically funny (and delightfully politically *incorrect*). It also introduces a new type of content in Saalbach's work, which—for want of a better label—may be termed a nightmarish magic realism.

End of World, Saalbach's play from 2003, is constructed as a dream-play—although “nightmare-play” would be as appropriate. Structurally it can be seen as an homage to Strindberg. The play tracks a main character on her journey, an unusual feature in Saalbach's works. Xenia, a flight attendant suffering from severe jet-lag and premature hot-flashes, has just returned from a long and upsetting flight. Her passengers panicked for no apparent reason. Back home when the play starts, Xenia gets lost trying to find her house. She meets an autistic girl who leads her into a forest. In a series of fantastical scenes, Xenia has to confront her deepest fears and greatest longings. Among them, a woman who will undergo any treatment, no matter how painful, to hold onto her youthful looks.

End of the World is a remarkable play. At first reading, it seems that Saalbach has constructed a fictional world where anything can happen—the only limit is her imagination. But on reflection you see the tight construction: everything fits together, no flight of fancy is left untethered. What draws us into the play is the content: a story about an independent woman whose biological clock is running down resonates with us. But what keeps us fascinated are the patterns we begin seeing in her fantastical tale.

The play ends in a desert, with Xenia still trying to find her way home. She sees something that could be the tail of an airliner sticking up from the sand. Was the whole play Xenia's dream? Her thoughts in the seconds before her plane crashed?

Red and Green

Red and Green was commissioned by Stockholm's Stadsteater and premiered there in 2010. Since then it has been produced by the Royal Theatre in

Copenhagen and Aarhus Theatre in Aarhus, Denmark's second largest city. Several other productions are planned.

Saalbach garnered much of the material for the play while on a research trip to Nepal during the Maoist uprising there in 2005. The five characters in the play all work at the Danish embassy in Kathmandu, where they are responsible for various developmental aid projects. There are several non-speaking roles for the "locals"—maids, chauffeurs and the like. (In the Swedish production, they were represented by one actress, who became the eerily silent, ever vigilant Other.)

Red and Green is a trenchant criticism of government-run foreign aid and Saalbach's most overtly "political" play. It was hotly debated along these lines in Denmark. Denmark's public radio station aired a lengthy documentary about foreign aid in Nepal, using many of the same sources Saalbach used in her research for the play, and there were many panel discussions, op-ed pieces and the like in the time around the play's premiere in Denmark. Denmark's foreign office even sent their own journalist to Stockholm to review the world premiere there.

There's no doubt that Saalbach is claiming, in both interviews and in the play itself, that government-run foreign aid is nothing but a huge bluff. At best it's our way of feeling good, of paying penance for our sins against the Third World. At worst it does a great deal more harm than good.

But the play suggests other things we could do. As Petra says, we could, if we wanted to, share resources with Third World countries more equitably. But we won't. Or, the aid workers we send out into the field could stop living as potentates, in big houses with lots of servants; they could live in the dusty villages with the recipients of their aid. But they won't. The play never suggests that there is nothing we can do about Third World poverty. It simply shows how wrongheaded and self-serving our current policies are.

Yet *Red and Green* is no mere *drame à thèse*. Scratch the surface and you find a play that explores the notion of exile. All of the characters, including (to a lesser extent) the servants and the girls at the school, are removed from their own culture and thrust into a world where strange, new rules apply. By uprooting her characters, Saalbach shows us the impact of culture. Deprived of our culture, we flounder.

Saalbach, it is said, never writes the same play twice. After her successes with multiple plot-lines and dream-play dramaturgies, she moved on to explore other techniques. The hallmark of *Red and Green* is its jumbled chronology: twelve scenes presented in seemingly random order.

Some of Saalbach's first readers were put off by the lack of chronology. Perhaps it's the case that successful authors who adopt new techniques always disappoint some readers when their new plays don't resemble their earlier works. But the jumbled chronology proved not to be a problem in performance. On the contrary. I believe the strength of this technique, in this play, is that it

thrusts us into the chaos the characters experience, denying us the usual sense of security a normal time-line gives us. By doing so she recreates in the audience the anomie the characters experience. This, for me at any rate, increases our identification with these lost souls. *Red and Green* embodies in its structure some of the theme of the play.

But the big question is: How much of the chronology does the audience need to grasp? Hasn't Saalbach made her play impenetrable in performance?

I think not. *Red and Green* is not a puzzle that the audience has to assemble correctly in order to understand. Some confusion does arise, but in the two productions I've seen, the confusion was positive. The audiences "got" enough of the chronology to follow the story. Both directors did, however, prepare the audience for the jumbled chronology by starting the first scene with a projected text saying "Epilogue" or "South America – much later" or words to that effect. This signals the audience to expect the unexpected.

Expecting the unexpected is a good way of engaging with a Saalbach play.

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