

Progression and Return in Västanå Theatre's Retelling of the *Edda* (2019)

Anna Swärdh, Stockholm University, Sweden

Abstract

In 2019, Västanå Theatre staged Jon Fosse's *Edda*, a theatrical adaptation of myths from the *Poetic Edda*. This essay focuses on a number of formal devices used to adapt the Norse myths at Västanå, the dumb show convention perhaps offering the most stylized form of expression of these. The essay shows how the production helped the audience negotiate between a linear and a circular understanding of time, through formal and structural means: staging, selection and ordering of episodes signalled a strong initial focus on the inevitability of Ragnarök, while circularity and return were highlighted through the ending in which the world was reborn, but also through other features that stressed repetition and retelling. The essay argues that the dumb show convention could be taken as emblematic of the production's negotiation between the two timelines, but it also shows how the device helped adapt female characters into more powerful agents, how it added hope in the form of young love, and how it functioned to draw attention to narration, words, and poetry.

Keywords: Jon Fosse; *Edda*; *Poetic Edda*; Västanå Theatre (Västanå Teater); adaptation; dumb show

It has been suggested that the dumb show—'a passage of silently mimed action' (Dobson 2013: 398)—is 'no longer a meaningful theatrical convention' (Lopez 2017: 305), but Västanå Theatre's (Västanå Teater) 2019 production of the *Edda* showed that it is a device that can still be powerfully employed for theatrical communication. It might even be described as an ideal convention for a company such as Västanå, when taking on the Norse myths: Västanå is a company with influences from Nordic folk tradition as well as classical Greek, Elizabethan and East-Asian theatre traditions; over the years, their productions have transformed epic and narrative prose as well as drama into multimodal artworks in which spoken text is supported with music, dance, and choreographed movement.¹ Dieter Mehl traces the origins of the

¹ Västanå Theatre is a prize-winning regional Swedish theatre company active since 1972, from 1990 under the direction of Leif Stinnerbom.

Elizabethan and Jacobean dumb show to the popular tradition of civic entertainments (the Lord Mayors' shows, royal entries and progresses, festivals, revels, mummings, and of course morality plays), its mythological and allegorical figures being replaced with characters from the plays in which the dumb shows appeared only over time, until the decline of the device came with the increased realism of the seventeenth century and especially the Restoration (1965: 3–26, 167; cf. Lopez 2017: 291–92; Dobson 2013: 398). The combination of folk tradition and mythological characters in a mainly unrealistic setting made the convention work well in 2019, when Västanå staged an adaptation of the Norwegian dramatist Jon Fosse's *Edda*.

Fosse's play is in turn a stage adaptation of the *Poetic Edda*, one source of the tales of Norse mythology that includes among its songs or poems the *Völuspá*, the prophecy of the seeress, the Vala or Völva; and the *Hávamál*, the sayings of the high one, or Odin.² Jon Fosse's adaptation selects and abbreviates tales from the *Poetic Edda*, including material not in the Codex Regius manuscript but which is usually incorporated in modern editions and translations of the songs.³ The stage adaptation, simply named *Edda*, was first performed in Oslo in 2017 in a production directed by Robert Wilson. Photographs and reviews testify to an avant-gardist stylization characteristic of Wilson's work, but also the performance of a heavily reduced text (Ring 2017; Steinkjer 2017; Swedenmark 2017). As I have not been able to see Wilson's production, I will be referring to Fosse's published text when discussing Västanå's adaptation.

Västanå too made use of stylization of various kinds in their adaptation. Make-up, gestures, and movement were partly inspired by Beijing opera, particularly noticeable in the characters of the Völva and Odin, and especially in the opening scenes that established their power play.⁴ This essay, though, will focus on the employment of several

² The English spelling of names, place names, and titles of texts vary, and in this essay I follow Lindow's *Norse Mythology* (2002), except in quotations. For the Völva, I keep Västanå's name and spelling.

³ For an account of English translations between 1797 and 1997, including discussions about selection and style, see Larrington (2007).

⁴ My descriptions are based on a number of performances seen in 2019–20 (dir. Leif Stinnerbom): Berättarladan Rottneros, 22 Aug. and 6 Sept. 2019; Live on

structural or formal devices used to adapt the Norse myths at Västanå, the dumb show convention perhaps offering the most stylized form of expression of these. The production's repeated use of dumb shows followed by spoken comment was a structural device that encompassed repetition and variation, but also temporal extension and narrative direction. In what follows, I will argue that in these different ways the device could be taken as emblematic of the production's negotiation between a linear and circular understanding of time, but it also helped adapt female characters into more powerful agents, it added hope in the form of young love, and it functioned to draw attention to narration, words, and poetry. Discussing time in Norse mythology, John Lindow notes that 'Völuspá seems to show traces of a cyclic arrangement of time as well as a linear arrangement' (2002: 39; cf. Dronke 1997: 101–102). On the one hand there is the linearity of things foretold, of doom, death, destruction: the unavoidability of Ragnarök. On the other hand, there is circular time found in the telling and retelling of stories in the poem, connected to memory and remembering, and with it a sense of the circularity of existence. Both these time frames were present in Västanå's version, and both were highlighted. This essay focuses on how the production helped the audience negotiate between the two timelines through formal and structural means: staging, selection and ordering of episodes signalled a strong initial focus on the inevitability of Ragnarök, while circularity and return were highlighted through the ending in which the world was reborn, but also through other features that stressed repetition and retelling, centrally the convention of the dumb show but also through the employment of what Anthony W. Johnson has called 'metamorphic space' (2017), the imaginary flexibility afforded by a stage space more or less bare of props. In a mainly glowing review in *Dagens Nyheter*, Leif Zern was still disappointed, as he felt that Fosse's text was superfluous in a production that communicated in a very different manner ('talar ett helt annat språk' [2019: 10]). I would argue instead that the doubling of action and text, made possible mainly through the convention of the dumb show, allowed for a strong focus on the eddic poetry as precisely that; a compact, even harsh, yet elevated poetic

cinema, Elektra Västerås, 7 Sept. 2019 and BioRio Stockholm, 12 Jan. 2020; Riksteatern Play, 19 April 2020.

expression was given its due through the room created for it by the separation of action and word.

Progression

The production's focus on linearity came through in early—and lasting—attention drawn to death and Ragnarök with the help of spatial and textual focussing and revision, but also through dumb show to stage the death of Baldr, the son of Odin. Baldr, the most beautiful of the gods, is killed by his blind brother Höd (or Hoth), on the instigation of Loki. In the stories, Loki is a trickster character attracted to chaos and disorder, and by tricking Höd into killing his brother, he is the one ultimately responsible for Baldr's death, which anticipates Ragnarök.

Spatially, the world tree Yggdrasil dominated the stage, looming large in the background, its massive wooden branches rising all the way up to the roof. The musicians were placed on a balcony some way up its trunk.⁵ The actors in chorus defined it as 'trädet vi alla står under' (the tree under which we all stand) (Fosse 2019: 9),⁶ thus stressing its centrality for defining their place, and the place the audience would be watching throughout the performance.⁷ In the myths, Yggdrasil has three roots, and cutting through the central stage was the root that goes down to the land of the dead, where Hel lives:

I de dödas rike när sig ormen Nidhugg
av de dödas lik
och gnager ständigt på roten
för att få Yggdrasil att ruttna och dö. (9–10)

In the land of the dead the serpent Nithogg
feeds on the corpses of the dead

⁵ In this production, as in others at Västanå, there was music more or less throughout. Excepting a couple of details, lacking the right competence, I will not comment on music at all in this essay.

⁶ All other references are to this version of the script and will be included parenthetically with page references only.

⁷ I use the term 'place' to refer to a concrete locality, while 'space' refers to an extent or area in which something can be done (*OED* online, 'place' n. 5a–b, 8a; 'space' 7a–b, 11a, c, g).

and gnaws steadily on the root
to make Yggdrasil rot and die. (My translation.)⁸

At the end of this root was the trap-door from which the Völva appeared and down through which the dead Baldr was sent. Great attention was drawn to the central root in the opening dance sequence: the actors knelt on both sides of it, caressing it, twice moving away from it as if zapped with electric current. All action then took place around, near and on this root; it was a constant reminder of death. Loki (Jakob Hultcrantz Hansson), on a couple of occasions, balanced on the root, ran atop its length, visually allying himself and his firestarting with it and with destruction.

Yggdrasil, its root leading to Hel, and its association with death and doom gained further significance given that the *Edda* at Västanå was a comparatively stage-centred production. The main stage is a platform at one end of a large converted barn with the auditorium facing it, and without any curtains or walls between audience and stage. These conditions endow the proscenium stage with some of the more inclusive or immersive characteristics of the thrust stage, as actors can enter and exit from different levels and also along the walls of the barn and through the audience (influence from Elizabethan theatres for the design of the stage is acknowledged on the home page). In the *Edda*, though, the actual stage was very much the centre of action and activity; there were relatively few props, and there were few significant uses of height and different levels. The Völva appeared from below, and Baldr was buried through the same trapdoor, but this was fairly limited, compared to earlier productions in which the upper levels have been used to indicate relative power and agency.⁹ This kind of hierarchy was notably not allowed for the gods in the *Edda*, not even for Odin who stood on stage

⁸ In cases when the playscript deviates too much from the eddic texts, I translate into English myself. In other cases, I use the translations of Crawford (2015), Larrington (2014), and Auden and Taylor (1981), choosing the one closest to the Swedish for each passage. If possible, I give the number of the verse quoted, otherwise the page.

⁹ In the stage adaptations of Selma Lagerlöf's two novels *Charlotte Löwensköld* (2017) and *Anna Svärd* (2018), two levels beyond the stage were used, with dead, haunting, or particularly powerful characters appearing at the upper levels, sometimes as if directing events from above.

telling of how he hung on the tree Yggdrasil in self-sacrifice. Gods, giants, and monsters all existed on the same plane, on the same level of power—or lack of power—under the branches of Yggdrasil. Contrasting Norse mythology with Christianity, A. S. Byatt draws attention to how in the Norse myths ‘the gods themselves were judged and found wanting. Who judged? What brought Ragnarök about? ... No one ... had any doubt that Ragnarök was coming ... They were transfixed, staring at it, like rabbits with weasels, with no thoughts of averting it’ (122). Västanå’s adaptation communicated this powerlessness by focussing the action to the stage.

Textually, the foregrounding of death and doom was reflected in one of the shifts made in this version as compared to Fosse’s adaptation and also the *Poetic Edda*. While John Lindow is certainly right that there is ‘no requirement whatever that events within [Norse] mythology as a whole can be fit into a precise order’ (2002: 39), an adaptation’s selection and ordering of events will carry quite significant meaning. This became apparent in the death of Baldr, moved up and foregrounded by Västanå. The first words spoken on stage were uttered by Odin, after an initial dance sequence at the end of which the actor playing him (Paul-Ottar Haga) had been helped to put on the god’s costume and headgear. Odin summoned the Völva (Hanna Kulle), who rose unwillingly from her ‘dead’ state, speaking words taken from *Baldrs draumar* (Baldr’s dreams): ‘Nersnöad var jag, / slagen av regn / och våt av dagg. / Död var jag länge!’ (3); rendered by Crawford: ‘I was buried in snow, / pelted by rain, / drowned in dew, / I was dead a long time’ (2015: v. 5). Odin’s questions to the Völva then framed the rest of the performance, a kind of contest going on between these the two most powerful of characters in the events as staged here, visualised in his gestures of attack and hers of defence. In response to Odin’s demand to know for whom Hel’s realm was being decked with gold, the first information the Völva gave him—before telling of the creation of the world and Yggdrasil—concerned the coming death of Baldr, Odin’s son:

Allt bereds för Balder
Höder är den som
blir Balders bane.
Hans egen bror
ska ta livet av Odens son.

Balders död
varslar Ragnarök ! (4)

Everything is prepared for Baldr
Hoth will be
Baldr's slayer.
His own brother
will kill Odin's son.
Baldr's death
forebodes Ragnarök! (My translation)

This is quite a significant shift. In the *Poetic Edda*, Baldr's death is briefly mentioned in the first song, the *Völuspá*, but later in the song, in verses 31 and 32, while Ragnarök is mentioned in 43 and 56 (Crawford: 2015). The closest to the lines in Västanå's version is found in *Baldrs draumar*, which appears several songs later in most modern editions of the *Poetic Edda*:¹⁰

The mead is brewed
for Balder's arrival,

...

Hoth will bear
the long spear that will kill him,
he will be the killer
of your son Balder,
he will steal the life
of Odin's son.

...

But you will come
for a second visit
when Loki breaks free
from his chains,
and Ragnarok
comes to end everything. (Crawford 2015: v. 7, 9, 15)

¹⁰ *Baldrs draumar* is not in the Codex Regius but has become a 'more-or-less canonical' eddic text (Larrington 2007: 23).

The death itself formed the ninth scene of twenty-six in the production, and the words spoken in it stressed Baldr's death as foreboding Ragnarök, describing it as 'det värsta som har skett' (the worst thing that has happened), both things repeated (21).

While drawing attention to the lack of a rigid chronology for the events within Norse mythology, Lindow still notes that 'certain events do seem to have to precede or follow others' (2002: 40). Thinking of time within this mythology as divided into distant past, near past, present, near future, and distant future (2002: 40–42), he places the death of Baldr fairly late in this scheme:

Some events must be fairly late in the mythological present, and the foremost of these is the death of Balder. As the first death among the gods, it changed all the terms of the game. Even if it did not make Ragnarök inevitable, it made it possible, for now the death of any and therefore of all the gods is a possibility. (Lindow 2002: 42)

In Västanå's adaptation, Baldr's death occurred slightly earlier than Lindow's suggestion, after scenes that accounted for the creation of the worlds and the gods—occurring in the distant and near past respectively in Lindow's scheme—and the stealing of the mead of poetry, taking place early in the mythological present. In Fosse, the Baldr sequence appears later, after episodes of the mead, the creation, the description Yggdrasil, and Odin gaining runic knowledge. By restructuring the order of events, Västanå heavily underscored the 'possibility' of Ragnarök. It can be added that in *Völuspá*, the 'present moment' comes after the weeping and punishment for Baldr's death, and before Ragnarök; this is 'the "now" of every man's life, full of warning and guilt' (Dronke 1997: 102).

The staging of Baldr's death is a good example of several effects achieved through the production's repeated use of dumb show interspersed with commentary or narration, among them the highlighting of Ragnarök's inevitability. The sequence started with a dumb show in which the Norns tormented Baldr, representing his dreams. The Völva explained to the audience about the bad dreams we had just seen, after which Frigga told us how she made all objects in the world vow never to hurt Baldr so that the dreams would not come true. A second dumb show illustrated how everybody tried to hurt Baldr using various objects, unsuccessfully. Again, this was followed by commentary explaining

what we had just seen. Finally, in a third dumb show, Baldr's death was staged, with Loki tricking the blind god Höd into shooting an arrow of mistletoe at his brother Baldr—the mistletoe was the only plant that had not made a vow. Loki guided the pretended arrow daintily across the stage in slow-motion until it reached its goal: Baldr was hit in the eye and died. The Völva then explained what had just happened, and accused Loki who denied any responsibility. In his study of the convention, Mehl discusses the dumb show as a means mainly to add action to the static, rhetorically-focussed early Elizabethan drama, but also to increase tempo through telescoping. Action was certainly added at Västanå, and in this instance (showing Loki's activity and subsequent denial) the dumb show furthermore functioned to present or illustrate different angles or perspectives on an event, forcing the audience to 'put the act of interpretation into a kind of suspense, waiting for later action, accompanied by words, to help [them] sort out meanings' (Lopez, 294; cf. Mehl 1965: 116, 144). As for telescoping, the Baldr sequence rather slowed down the action, thus adding stress to the events shown and told, drawing attention to the scene as a key moment in the production. Nor could the dumb shows here be termed didactic or moral, as they often contained very complex action, needing narrative clarification. Mehl notes that with the introduction of a presenter commenting on the dumb show action, it was made possible 'to present more complicated incidents in pantomime and to explain them fully afterwards. There was no need for the audience to understand the dumb show immediately' (1965: 66). This observation could be used to describe the situation at Västanå, where the mixed audience's pre-knowledge would vary greatly between individuals. For those familiar with eddic poetry and sagas, this 'awareness of an underlying textual tradition [would act] as an anchor for theatrical excess' (Lopez 2017: 293), while for new-comers to the myths—'unknowing' viewers (Hutcheon 2006: 122)—the series of dumb shows just discussed helped to indicate the steps of the process inexorably leading to Baldr's death. In both cases, the protracted scene drew attention to the event itself, its connection to Ragnarök, and the sense of the inevitable progression of the one into the other.

Repetition and Return

While linearity in the form of progression towards Ragnarök and death was thus signalled in several ways by the production, so was circularity

noted with the help of selection, textual repetition, and the employment of metamorphic and metaphoric spatialising. While disparate in kind, all these strategies pointed towards repetition and return mainly in the shape of words and storytelling. The ending of the production comprised the most powerful return, as the world started afresh, after the old world had died in darkness. Västanå, like Fosse, kept *Völuspá's* description of Gimlé, the place or building with a golden roof brighter than the sun, to which Baldr and his brother will return again. At Västanå, this appeared as a second ending, after the total blackout and applause that followed Ragnarök.

Textually, the Ragnarök sequence was dominated by the Völva, who (fairly briefly) described the events leading up to the destruction of the world, with some lines spoken by Odin. These characters kept their positions relatively static at the front of the stage, while the rest of the cast illustrated physically what was narrated. Unlike the previously described use of dumb show, where mimic narration was followed by narrative explanation, here action followed spoken word. In words taken from *Völuspá*, we heard of the Fimbulwinter, earthquakes, strife, death, and how 'Sol svartnar, jord göms i hav. / Elden flamar, och Yggdrasil brinner, blir borta!' (74–76; 'The sun turns black, / the earth sinks into the sea, [...] / Flames scorch / the leaves of Yggdrasil' [Crawford: v. 55]). This was then illustrated in a choreographed sequence with powerful, churning music accompanied by light that changed from grey and blue to red before the stage was left in darkness. The actors and dancers were constantly moving, either in spinning and circling formations, or in waves, pulled and pushed back and forth as the Völva gestured, powerless against her directing force, and by extension, the force of fate, of story, of narrative. To differentiate between the employment of dumb show and what went on in this sequence, the concept of metamorphic space could be helpful. Drawing attention to the agreement or collusion needed between actors and audience to create an 'illusion of architectural palpability' on the Elizabethan stage, where few props were used, Anthony W. Johnson has used the concept of metamorphic space to denote the 'designation of the architectural meanings accorded (at different times) to different places on the stage,' or 'the meaning of an object on the stage (or seen from the stage)' (2017: 121). In the case of Västanå, such spatial meaning was often carried in and by the actors' bodies, especially notable in scenes such as the

Ragnarök one, embodying the forces let loose as well as their effects. (Johnson notices that the illusion can be 'generated as much by movement as by language' even in the late Elizabethan examples he discusses [121]). Also earlier, when the creation of the world was narrated, a similar use of bodies and movements to illustrate space and geography was employed, for example when the cold rivers from the north (actors lying on the stage) met the heat and flames from the south (arms and hands raised in flame-like movements) in Ginnunga gap. Another example was the three Norns, who formed a wheel-like circle when entering the stage, metaphorically spatialising time.

When Ragnarök had ended, the world and the gods dead, the stage lay in darkness and silence, tricking the audience to start applauding, only to be stopped by the light of a single match lit by the Völva, as she started to tell of the birth of a new world. This pause accentuated the ending and new beginning (cyclic time), echoed in lines telling of the return of the aesir who will recall and remember what happened: 'minner varann, om allt mäktigt som timat, / och minns åter, Odens forna runor' (77); in Crawford the equivalent lines go: 'and there they recall / the great events of Ragnarok, / and Odin's / old wisdom' (2015: v. 58). Arguing against Mircea Eliade's conception of cyclic time as applicable to the Norse myths, Margaret Cluneis Ross instead conceives the Norse view of time as 'essentially linear' but with 'traces of cyclic time,' pointing out that 'there is definitely not a return to the first age of the world' after Ragnarök (1994: 141). However, the lines that tell us of the future recalling of old events do also sum up what has just been told, or, at Västanå, what had just been staged, and thus gesture at a cyclic experience of time, at least in the form of storytelling.

There were also textual repetitions (as in Fosse's play and in the *Poetic Edda*). One repeated sequence was Odin's account of hanging on Yggdrasil in self-sacrifice in order to gain runic wisdom. This account constituted the first lines spoken in the production (taken from *Hávamál*):

I tidens början,
hängde jag på Yggdrasil,
i vinden, nio hela nätter!
Sårad av spjutudd
och given till Oden,
av mig själv.

Jag själv, given till, mig själv
[SD:] *ganska kort paus*
Jag hängde där,
inte blev jag bjuden,
bröd eller dryck,
och ord sökte ord!
Rätt ner såg jag
och ryckte upp runor,
skrek när jag tog dem,
och ramlade ner.
[SD:] *ganska kort paus*
Och ord sökte ord,
med ord igen (2)

I know that I hung
on a wind-battered tree
nine long nights,
pierced by a spear
and given to Odin,
myself to myself,
on that tree

...

No one gave me food,
no one gave me drink.
At the end I peered down,
I took the runes—
screaming, I took them—
and then I fell.

...

One word chased another word
flowing from my mouth (Crawford 2015: v. 138–39, 141)

As noted above, Odin did not hang on the tree at Västana, but the actor spoke his lines standing still with arms stretched out, then gripping the pretended spear as it entered his body; another example of how bodies were used to create the illusion of spatial palpability. ‘Ord’ (word) was spoken five times in the speech as a line was doubled (‘och ord sökte ord!; Och ord sökte ord, / med ord igen’), each time accompanied by a chime like that of a hammer on a bell or an anvil, and further accentuated

by a slight movement of all dancers, drawing attention to the word itself. Cut from Odin's speech was the catalogue of runes with its account of the knowledge he gains from hanging on the tree in self-sacrifice, knowledge or power that is largely magical. This omission could be understood as a reduction in Odin's power compared to the sources, something the revisions relating to Gunnlöd seemed to support (to be discussed later). Instead words were stressed, and with them the telling, and retelling, of stories. Fosse gives the sequence five times (8–9, 34, 91, 146, 226), and the catalogue of runes once (35–39). At Västanå, Odin's lines telling of his self-sacrifice were repeated once only, before the section on Baldr's dreams and death commenced, at which point Odin spoke them to a kneeling Baldr, with the five chimes for stress, as if he told the story specifically to his son this time; here Baldr and words were connected, death and (re)telling.

Similarly, the Völva's line 'Vet ni nu nog / Eller vad?' ('Well, would you know more?' in Auden and Taylor's translation) was repeated with accelerating frequency the closer to Ragnarök we got, the phrase occurring once in the first act, and four times in the last two scenes of Act 2. This mirrored her unwilling narration, an attitude that seemingly increased as the story progressed. In the second half of the performance, she often sat dejected, tired, watching what went on as if exasperated with the stupidity of the gods and their activities. Ellis Davidson writes about a kind of individualism reflected in the stories of the Norse myths: 'The myths are very much stories of individuals, and their reaction to one another; they show lonely gods, going their wilful ways, with certain responsibilities to the community or family to which they belong, but little more to hold them' (215). This rings true for the production's representation of the gods. While they seemed to like each other's company, all was games, challenges, jests and jokes, indicative of an individualism (within the factionalism of groups) that disabled them from facing the threat of Ragnarök in any organised way.

Repetition and return were found also in the actors' costumes, and their employment to carry metamorphic and metaphorical spatial meaning. Great care is put into costumes at Västanå, with a keen eye to authenticity in quality, and dramatic function in colour, style, and movement of fabrics. In the *Edda*, everybody on stage wore the same red

and black trousers and shirt as a basic ‘narrator’s’ costume.¹¹ They vaguely resembled a troupe of red-and-black ninjas with black caps hiding their hair. These costumes were worn underneath the added garments and head-gear of the gods. The costumes of the gods were on stage before the play began, hanging on what was later shown to be swords almost as tall as the actors. (The swords also looked like crosses, of course, and thus formed another image for death and rebirth when bared of the costumes, as well as indicating the creed that would replace the old myths.) The gods’ costumes consisted of a vest and cape of wool with decorations of metallic ribbons and embroideries—inspiration was taken from Norwegian traditional costumes. To the vest was attached a knee-length open skirt made from silk. The colours were strong: green, yellow, red, purple, in combinations that showed who was attached to whom. Odin’s costume was placed on the actor with help from the collective of narrators, after which he summoned the Völva. The rest of the gods’ costumes were taken on after the Völva had described the creation of the world and of Odin, and told us about Yggdrasil and its roots. Just before this, the three Norns had started measuring out threads of life, confirming their double functions as time and fate personified (the threads were gathered by the Völva after Ragnarök). All the gods’ costumes were taken off at the very end of Ragnarök, and through the Gimlé scene they were carried hanging from the narrators’ arms, to be replaced on the swords after the final words of the Völva had been spoken.

This ploy of having the gods’ costumes on stage all the time can be understood in a number of ways, functioning within the metamorphic space to carry several meanings. Meta-theatrically, it can be seen as commenting on Västanå’s expressed focus on storytelling or narration: They are a company strongly committed to a theatrical practice based in storytelling who ‘narrate’ or ‘tell’ their stories, their programmes and home page bearing the running title ‘Västanå Teater berättar’ (Västanå Theatre narrate). In the *Edda*, thus, the same basic costume might signal that narrators were interchangeable, inviting the illusion that roles were put on and taken off at random. From there the step to seeing the gods as interchangeable was not a big one; at least the gods were all roles to be

¹¹ Incidentally, these are the two colours mentioned in the Ragnarök section in the *Völuspá* (40; p 11; not included at Västanå).

performed or narrated. The gods could also be understood to be actors/narrators, as they are and were too, in the poem and in the production: Odin narrates his own stories in *Hávamál* and did so on Västanå's stage, but with comments and interspersions from other characters. And similarly for the others, who at times spoke in the voice of narrators. This employment of actors and costumes thus drew attention to narration and storytelling: in their narrators' costumes the actors functioned as listeners in the first and last scenes of the production, forming another audience for the Völva's tale, mirroring us, the audience, and thus presenting her as surrounded by listeners. Also as gods, in some scenes they flanked in the background, watching like us. In both cases, what was placed in centre was the story, and the storytelling, personified in the timeless Völva. The point I want to make here, though, is that with the gods' costumes constantly on stage, the story or myth or prophecy was metaphorically there too, before and after the actors (or gods) had performed their roles, thus indicating an eternal return. Compare Byatt describing her childhood self trying to make sense of cruelty, gods, and myths: 'The thin child, thinking of playground cruelty and the Blitz, liked to glance at the idea that gods were bad, that things were bad. That the story had always been there, and the actors had always known it' (123). The notable exception was the Völva who appeared in full costume from the beginning, and took it off not after Ragnarök, but after the second, hopeful ending, when the performance was over, and she removed it off stage.¹² This signalled her unique position as timeless or beyond time (she had seen nine worlds appear and go under), and again pointed to the myth, the prophecy, the story—and the (story)telling—as primordial, as being there before the creation and after Ragnarök.

Progression and Return: Seduction and Love

Västanå's adaptation ended with a string of episodes focussed on male-female relationships, before Ragnarök. Appearing together, these scenes came to make up a series, starting with Skade and Njörd's decision to part after their failure to establish a relationship, to Odin's failed seduction of Gunnlöd, to a transitional discussion on men and women, on to the successful seduction of Gerd, here staged as an active choice on

¹² The same is true of the three Norns.

her behalf. Again, structural conventions were used to adapt events: dumb shows drew attention to double perspectives as well as to a continued emphasis on narration and words, which together with selection and ordering of episodes allowed the production to present a more hopeful narrative of female agency and young love than any found in Fosse's version or the *Poetic Edda*.

The episode of Skade and Njörd established some of the issues at stake in this section. Njörd and Skade belong to different groups: Njörd is a vanir god of the sea, and Skade a giantess 'but still regarded as a member of the aesir' (Lindow 2002: 268), associated with hunting and the northern mountains. When her father was killed by the aesirs, she went to them to demand a husband in compensation for her loss, and was asked to choose one for herself, being shown only their feet. She wanted Baldr, the most beautiful of gods, but ended up with Njörd, whose feet were white from their constant washing by the sea. Having agreed to live nine days in the mountains and nine days at the sea, the couple soon parted ways as neither could feel at home in the other's environment. This was acted straightforwardly on the stage, showing Skade's initial anger, her satisfaction in being given the choice, her disappointment at being tricked into choosing Njörd, the couple's attempt to make things work, and their sadness at parting. The scene functioned mainly to initiate the section on complicated relationships between characters from different groups (gods and giants) in which some form of trickery or magic was at play.

The following episode offered Gunnlöd a second scene with Odin, a return not found in Fosse nor the source poem. This return fused two separate stories in the *Poetic Edda* and added narrative development to Odin and Gunnlöd's relationship. Odin's first meeting with Gunnlöd took place after he had crept into the mountain (in the shape of a snake) in order to steal the mead of poetry the giant Suttung kept there, himself having stolen it from the dwarves. Suttung had placed his daughter Gunnlöd to guard the mead. In Fosse, Odin spends three nights with Gunnlöd before he steals the mead and sneaks out while she still sleeps (14). Västanå's prosaically brief stage direction simply reads: 'HAN KÄMPAR MOT HENNE, VINNER HENNE OCH ERÖVRAR HENNE' (15; He fights her, wins her, and conquers her). This was staged in a dumb show, a tightly choreographed fight scene in which Odin and Gunnlöd fought equally until he threw her off balance and

she—about to fall—gave him her hands to be steadied. The two actors' complete seriousness throughout, together with intense music further supported by melodious chanting from the rest of the actors gave an ominous character to the scene. Having conquered her, Odin spun her away and sent her off to sleep. His following comment offered an explanation to the event just staged, but also indicated his remorse:

Med list och svek
tog jag skaldemjödets.
Ont återgäldade jag
Gunnlöds kärlek
och hon satt kvar i gråt. (15)

With deceit and cunning
I took the mead of poetry.
Badly I repaid
Gunnlöd's love
and left her in tears. (My translation)

Odin's feeling of deception was not seen in the seduction, making this is a good example of how the convention of dumb show followed by commentary can function to complicate an event, as described by Lopez: 'The expository superfluity of the dumb shows, and the prolific signs and analogues for meaning which they generate, seems to be an index of the theatre's power to provide multiple, disparate yet synchronous perspectives on a single event' (Lopez 2017: 299; cf. Mehl 1965: 116, 144).

Furthermore, Odin's comment could be taken to hint at his use of magic, in his reference to deceit and cunning, even if stated fairly generally. The flanking actors' choral chanting was used also in Odin and Gunnlöd's second seduction scene, and in both cases it could be taken to signify the god's use of magic—*galdr*, *seid* or possibly *ergi*. In Peter H. Salus and Paul B. Taylor's explanation, *galdr* is the Old Icelandic word for charm, while *seid* is defined as 'sorcery, magic,' used by Odin 'to bring misfortune on another.' *Ergi*, finally, is translated as 'unnaturalness, filth:' 'This power can be used to transform oneself (and Odin is a notorious shape-changer) or to bring about unnatural behaviour in another, such as cowardice or homosexuality. Odin's twelfth charm, reviving the dead which hang from the gallows, seems to be *ergi* (a filth-rune)' (Salus and Taylor 1970: 25; on *seid*, cf. Dronke 1997: 133).

The second scene between Odin and Gunnlöd took place as part of the sequence focussed on relationships toward the end of Västanå's adaptation. In the *Poetic Edda* and in Fosse, Odin fails to seduce Billing's girl (unnamed in Fosse [202–205]), not Gunnlöd, but Västanå used the Gunnlöd character for both scenes. The stage direction states that Odin tried to seduce her again but failed, and then goes on to describing how Gunnlöd lay down on a bed and disappeared under a cover made from plants; when Odin lifts the cover she is gone, and 'DÄRUNDER LIGGER EN BUNDEN TIK' (62–63; underneath lies a bound bitch). Again, this was acted in dumb show, and like the first meeting staged as an intense interpersonal encounter, performed at the front of the stage, supported by the same music and choral singing. We were thus invited to look upon this second encounter as connected to the first in a way not found in the sources. The episode on Billing's girl is often seen as one of the so-called 'Odin's examples,' his failure in this instance serving as a contrast with the later successful seduction of Gunnlöd (Billing's girl appears before Gunnlöd in the *Hávamál*).¹³ But rather than staging an example in a list of Odin's attempted sexual conquests, Västanå's adaptation re-employed the scene of failed seduction to build a very different narrative around Gunnlöd and Odin.

The fusion of characters and the shifting of order and delayed presentation of the second encounter made the scene read as an instance of retribution. Instead of Gunnlöd losing her balance, in this scene she first played along, seemingly entranced by Odin's power, but soon took over; she threw him down on his back and straddled him, before disappearing under a cover. The translation by Auden and Taylor gives agency to Billing's girl of a kind similar to that staged at Västanå:

Towards daybreak back I came.
The guards were sound asleep:
I found then that the fair woman
Had tied a bitch to her bed.

¹³ 'Sigurdur Nordal understood the episode as a display of the magic of Billing's girl, who thwarted Odin's advances by deflecting his magic powers onto a dog on her bed. In this light, the binding of the dog would be a magic binding imposed by Odin in anticipation of a rape. Most other observers content themselves with contrasting the failed seduction with the successful seduction of Gunnlöd in the following episode in the poem' (Lindow 2002: 79–80).

Many a girl when one gets to know her
Proves to be fickle and false:
That treacherous maiden taught me a lesson,
The crafty woman covered me with shame,
That was all I got from her. (Auden and Taylor 1981: 159)

Such explicitly stated agency is not present in the translation used by Västanå, where the passive construction in Odin's account following on the dumb show makes it impossible to know who bound the bitch on the bed:

Då låg på bädden,
där jantan hade legat,
en hopbunden hynda!
[SD:] *Paus Gunnlöd skrattar igen*
Aldrig fick jag den flickan äga! (64)

a bitch I found then tied on the bed
of that good woman.

...
and I got nothing from the girl at all. (Larrington 2014: v. 101–102)

However, while Västanå's script does not spell out who did the binding, Gunnlöd's scripted laughter (64) and confident attitude on stage together with assistance from the Völva (she invited Gunnlöd onstage in the first place, encouragingly) signalled the same level of agency as found in Auden and Taylor. Again, the convention of dumb show followed by commentary provided double perspectives on the episode, inviting the audience to 'accrue their understanding sequentially, starting with the visual image, moving on to the words, and finally providing their own analysis of the amalgam' (Stern 2012: 275).¹⁴ The fusing of the two stories, together with the staging of the second encounter between Odin and Gunnlöd, added a sense of narrative progression between the two Gunnlöd scenes resulting in a reckoning for Odin. It could be added here that the production's troubling of Odin's sexuality—he seemed genuinely pained by his interactions with Gunnlöd—was a refreshing contribution, and tied in with the empowerment of female characters.

¹⁴ Stern discusses the operation of dumb shows in early modern drama, especially the mousetrap scene in *Hamlet*.

Following on the second encounter between Gunnlöd and Odin was a discussion amongst the gods on men and women, Odin harping on the falseness of women and the comfort in male companionship, while Frigga retorted that men are no better, using fair words for false thoughts ('de talar fagrast, när falskast de tänker' [66]). 'De klokaste av kvinnfolk faller för det,' Odin responded (66; the wisest of women fall for it), ending the scene with thoughts on the power of lust to get even a wise man in trouble ('Lätt kan den mäktiga lustan / sätta den klokaste karl i klistret,' 67). The discussion gave place to the seduction scene between Frey, a vanir god, and Gerd, another giantess, placed last in the sequence of male-female relationships, and also last before Ragnarök (similarly placed late in Fosse, the episode appears earlier in the *Poetic Edda*, in *Skirnismál*). Such prominence of place awarded end-weight to the scene, signalling its importance to the production's vision, and at Västanå the scene was also extended in time through two dumb show dance sequences—the meeting and the tryst. The episode was yet another one in which magic was used to achieve seduction, and the *Poetic Edda* gives quite some space to Skirnir's use of *galdr*.

The story goes as follows: Frey has seen Gerd and fallen madly in love with her and it is decided that Skirnir will woo her in Frey's stead. Gerd refuses apples and golden bracelets used to sway her, nor does the threat of violence change her mind. She gives in only after having been threatened at length with *ergi*: 'Though other threats have failed, this one frightens her into submission, for she knows that *ergi* can transform her so that she will ever be loathsome for men, or so that her lust for men will be unnatural' (Salus and Taylor 1970: 25). Tommy Kuusela points out that the threat and curse are very powerful, and Gerd's situation hopeless in the sense that the curse is binding to the extent that she opposes it (2014: 46–47). Carolyne Larrington draws attention to the cruel irony of the situation in which Gerd finds herself: 'Paradoxically, the curse which has forced [Gerd] into submission recognizes what women do want – intimacy with a lover, social standing, autonomy, and choice – desires springing from the woman's sense of herself as subject. All these things can be achieved, but only through being a good girl, through co-operating with the patriarchal plan' (qtd. in Kuusela 2014: 47–48). Consequently, it might at first seem a little foolhardy of Västanå to select this scene to crown their triptych of male-female interaction.

Västanå's adaptation changed a number of details in the episode, starting from the characterisation of the messengers. Skirnir was replaced by two other characters, Bragi and Tyr (as in Fosse). Bragi was played as an old man (Björn Söderbäck), uncertain about his powers, and expressly described as afraid in the script (69). The threat with sword and violence was given to the younger actor who played Tyr (Daniel de Bruin), resulting in a fight scene between him and Gerd, in which she conquered him. After the fight scene followed Bragi's *gald*, in which he threatened Gerd with *ergi*. This was radically cut, only fourteen lines in the script compared to eleven verses (85 lines) in the *Poetic Edda* (Crawford 2015: v. 25–36) and 77 lines in Fosse (2018: 218–22), and these lines were interspersed with five stage directions calling for a fairly brief pause ([72–73]; '*Ganska kort paus*;'). The result is a hesitant impression already on the page, and on stage Gerd turned her sword towards Bragi while he spoke and started advancing on him, forcing him to back away from her. While the central content of his words was the same as in the sources, if lacking specificity, the power play on stage reduced any threat from them. Gerd snorted 'för att lugna ner honom' (73; to calm him down), and spoke lines that replaced submission with dismissal, offering welcome and drink (like in Fosse):

Jag hälsar dig hellre välkommen!
 Jag sträcker fram stopet fullt av forntids mjöd,
 [SD:] *ganska kort paus*
 fast aldrig jag trodde jag skulle älska guden Frej. (73)

Be welcome here, instead,
 and take this drinking-horn
 full of good ancient mead.
 Even if I previously said
 that I would never
 marry that god of the Vanir. (Crawford 2015: v. 37)

Compare this to for example Auden and Taylor's translation with Gerd's acknowledged submission: 'You have conquered warrior. This cup I pledge you, / Full of foaming mead' (Auden and Taylor 1981: 196). Notable too was the lack of musical and choral support of the kind found in the Gunnlöd scenes, signalling a lack of powerful magic. And, similarly to Gunnlöd's second scene, Gerd had the support of the Völva. Taken together, the several changes resulted in a heavily adapted scene,

whose successful seduction came across more as free choice on behalf of Gerd. She was surprised but she was never afraid.

It should be noted that in all three scenes discussed here, trickery or magic occurred, and the relationships were between gods and giants. As for trickery and magic, the scenes showed that such actions can be turned back on their instigator (Gunnlöd) or dismissed (Gerd). As for intermarriage, Lindow notes that ‘although the other gods sire children by giantesses,’ the marriages between Skade and Njörd, Frey and Gerd

are the only two marriages of gods and giantesses. It would therefore appear, as Margaret Cluneis Ross has shown, that because of their lower hierarchical status, the vanir cannot choose wives from among the aesir and must take them from the giants. (Lindow 2002: 268–69)

With this in mind, it would seem that *Västanå*’s adapted scenes not only raised the level of agency and independence for its female characters, but also offered a comment on, or suggested a remedy against, the general state of affairs: in this production, hope resided in young love across borders. Gerd and Frey were portrayed by two of the team’s best and most charismatic dancers (Margit Myhr and Ådne Geicke Kolbjørnshus), and their union was the most beautiful scene of the production, filling the space with happiness and light, delicate dance and music. This came too late to make any difference, though, or too early: Ragnarök had already been set in motion, and the two lovers were torn apart by Thor and a giantess, indicating that the world was not ready for a union of their kind. The glowing happiness of the two was replaced with cold light and mist as the Norns, the *Völva* and Odin took the stage for Ragnarök. However, it could be argued that what united the two scenes with Gerd and Frey (their meeting and union), understood as dumb shows, is that they ‘open up, and to some extent are, windows onto another space—one that materially and mimetically remains contained within, but which metaphysically and allegorically reaches beyond the contours of the main spectacle’ (Engel 2002: 42).

In a way capping the section on troubled male-female relationships, the staging of Odin’s death formed a reversal of the initial scene in which he used his magic to call up the *Völva* from the dead. There, he stood above and behind her reluctantly rising figure, aware of and almost gloating in his power over her. Now, the tables had turned, and she placed herself behind and above the kneeling Odin, mirroring the initial

posture. Whereas he had the power to awaken her from death, hers was the opposite power: he died, and was handed over to the Norns.

Conclusion

Västanå's adaptation of the Edda was a production that drew on a variety of theatrical traditions and impulses to retell the Norse myths to a contemporary audience, fearlessly mixing high and low, near and far, old and new. To return to Leif Zern and his disappointment at finding less of Fosse's text than he wanted in Västanå's production, in his review he comments that '[d]e kunde like gärna spela scenanvisningarna: de kan ju trolla och gå i luften' (2019: 10; they could just as well act the stage directions: they can do magic and walk on air). As I have highlighted in this essay, this was precisely what they did half of the time, in the dumb shows. It has been suggested that this device, when put into action, functions much the same way a text does: 'on stage, dumb shows seem to demand a form of "reading" that is nearly textual in its intensity and its simultaneously forward and backward movement' (Lopez 2017: 294). This is true, and it is one reason the device of the dumb show can be seen as emblematic of the production's negotiation between linearity or progression and circularity or return. But, as I have suggested, it is also a device that, perhaps paradoxically, allowed the production to let the eddic poetry ring out, undisturbed; 'Och ord sökte ord, / med ord igen.'

Finally, I will turn to another recent reteller of the Norse myths, Neil Gaiman. He describes his surprise 'when [he] finished the stories and read them as a sequence, to find that they felt like a journey, from the ice and the fire that the universe begins in to the fire and the ice that end the world' (2018: xv). But he also touches on the circularity of telling and retelling when describing the working process behind his book on Norse mythology, where he read different translations and versions, 'picking and choosing what tales [he] wanted to retell and how [he] wanted to tell them, blending versions of myths from the prose and from the poems' (Gaiman 2018: xv). There seems to be something in these myths that invites retelling, and in Västanå's version the desire for, or inevitability of, retelling formed a powerful contrast to the linearity of the journey towards Ragnarök: the story, like the costumes of the gods, will always be there.

References

- Auden, W. H. and Paul B. Taylor, transl. 1981. *Norse poems*. [1969] London: Athlone.
- Byatt, A. S. 2011. *Ragnarok: The end of the gods*. London: Canongate.
- Cluneis Ross, Margaret. 1994. *Prolonged echoes: Old Norse myths in Northern society*. Vol. 1 The myths. Odense: Odense University Press.
- Crawford, Jackson, ed. and transl. 2015. *The Poetic Edda: stories of the Norse gods and heroes*. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Davidson, Ellis. 1964. *Gods and myths of Northern Europe*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Dobson, Michael. 2003. Dumb show. In *The Oxford encyclopedia of theatre and performance*, edited by Dennis Kennedy. Oxford: Oxford University Press: 398.
- Dronke, Ursula, ed. and transl. 1997. *The Poetic Edda: volume II. mythological poems*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Engel, William E. 2002. *Death and drama in Renaissance England: shades of memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fosse, Jon. 2018. *Edda: den elder Edda i ein scenisk versjon*. Skald. E-book.
- Fosse, Jon. 2019. *Eddan*. Transl. Lars Andersson, adapted by Leif Stinnerbom and Susanne Marko. Version 6, 12 June 2019. Typescript.
- Gaiman, Neil. 2018. *Norse mythology*. [2017] London: Bloomsbury.
- Hutcheon, Linda. 2006. *A theory of adaptation*. New York: Routledge.
- Johnson, Anthony W. 2017. 'Shakespeare, architecture, and the chorographic imagination.' *Shakespeare*. 13(2): 114–35.
- Kuusela, Tommy. 2014. 'Med trehövdad turs skall du leva:' sexuellt betvingad trolldom i nordisk mytologi och religion. *Chaos* 62: 41–74.
- Larrington, Carolyne. 2007. Translating the *Poetic Edda* into English. In *Old Norse made new: essays in the post-Medieval reception of Old Norse literature and culture*, edited by David Clark and Carl Phelpstead, 21–42. [Viking Society for Northern Research, UCL] Exeter: Short Run Press.
- Larrington, Carolyne, transl. 2014. *The Poetic Edda*. Rev. ed. [1996] Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Lindow, John. 2002. *Norse mythology: a guide to gods, heroes, rituals, and beliefs*. [2001] Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lopez, Jeremy. 2017. Dumb show. In *Early Modern theatricality*, edited by Henry S. Turner, 291–305. [2013] Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mehl, Dieter. 1965. *The Elizabethan dumb show: the history of a dramatic convention*. London: Methuen.
- Ring, Lars. 2017. Suggestiv färd mot Ragnarök. *Svenska Dagbladet*, March 7. 32–33.
- Salus, Peter H. and Paul B. Taylor. 1970. Introduction. *The elder Edda: a selection*. [1967] New York: Random House.
- Steinkjer, 2017. Slår et slag for 'Edda.' *Dagsavisen*, March 5. Web, np. Accessed 27 Jan. 2020. <https://www.dagsavisen.no/kultur/slar-et-slag-for-edda-1.932181>.
- Stern, Tiffany. 2012. The dumb show in *Hamlet*. In *Shakespeare up close: reading Early Modern texts*, edited by Russ McDonald, Nicholas D. Nace, Travis D. Williams, 273–81. London: Bloomsbury.
- Swedenmark, John. 2017. Jon Fosses Edda: Robert Wilson på Det Norske Teatret. *Dixikon*, April 9. Accessed Jan. 27 2020. <https://www.dixikon.se/fosses-edda-wilson/>.
- Zern, Leif. 2019. 'Eddan' på Västanå är en teknisk triumf. *Dagens Nyheter*, June 24.