

► *The actors of Norway refuse to collaborate with Nazis.*

SABOTAGE BEHIND THE FOOTLIGHTS

BY ALBIN E. JOHNSON

FOR almost four years Norway's actors and actresses have been driving the Nazi propaganda authorities to frenzied and futile distraction. Despite threats, imprisonment, torture, and even murder, they have revised the theatre's traditional slogan to read, "The Nazi play must *not* go on."

The first German attempt to harness the Norwegian theatre to Goebbel's propaganda wagon was sly. Groups of so-called guest actors were imported from Berlin and Hamburg, to fraternize with Norwegian actors and create "cultural solidarity" between the nations. These German performers were snubbed completely in Norway, and soon retreated to the Reich in disappointed confusion.

The Nazi and Quisling authorities then tried bribery, promising financial rewards and stardom to actors who would take part in stage, screen or radio productions boosting the Master Race. The net catch in Oslo: a measly two Quislings. Even the poorest "ham" and the most ambitious understudy refused to com-

promise his patriotism for fame and fortune. The lives of those who yielded to temptation very soon became unbearable, and their stage careers ended, as far as appearance before the footlights was concerned. There was too much danger that a heavy piece of scenery might unaccountably drop upon their heads. Such "unavoidable accidents" have more than once been reported.

Angered over these rebuffs, Reichscommissar Terboven, the German Governor of Norway, issued an official decree ordering all actors to participate in propaganda pieces. The penalty for refusal was severe: debarment from all theatres in the country, and loss of unemployment benefits. But the actors, at a secret meeting, voted unanimously to ignore the proclamation and continue their non-cooperation.

The Nazis now countered with a peremptory order for all actors to return to the theatre. They warned that recalcitrants would be considered saboteurs and punished accordingly — meaning that they would be killed.

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Still, with scarcely a break in their ranks, the actors stood firm.

In May 1941, the Nazis personalized their efforts to whip the Norwegian stage into line. They officially "requested" eight leading actors and actresses to assume propaganda rôles. All refused. They were promptly barred from all theatres, deprived of relief funds, and told, "Go and starve." But they didn't exactly do this. The Quisling police and the Gestapo would give much — if only to complete their records — to know the source of the unlimited funds that have supported through four long years and that continue to support the Norwegian Theatre Guild's fight against Nazification.

The actors' guilds in Oslo, Trondheim, and Bergen rallied round their colleagues and called a strike which emptied the city theatres. All members of the Oslo guild signed personal pledges to support one another to the bitter end. These documents are safely hidden in the underground archives, awaiting the revelation of the honor roll at the end of the war.

The next move of the Nazis was to arrest as hostages the actors' delegates — who are liaisons between the players and directors — in each of Oslo's eight theatres. Nevertheless, the strike continued. Finally the authorities released the hostages. But at the same time they arrested the National Theatre's three directors — Harald Grieg and Professors Bull and Sejersted-Bödtker — and threw them into the Grini concentration camp.

These men were replaced with Quislingites headed by playwright Finn Halvorson. Bull and Sejersted-Bödtker are still rotting in Grini. Grieg was recently paroled.

Sejersted-Bödtker, sixty years old and physically feeble, is rapidly becoming a national symbol of resistance. Nightly, before the guards order lights out, he sits on the edge of his bunk surrounded by fellow prisoners, recites from his inexhaustible memory scenes from Ibsen and other playwrights, and quotes the patriotic passages from Norway's famous writers. Said one escaped prisoner, "He is the embodiment of Norway's unbreakable spirit."

At Trondheim, Henry Gleditsch, leader of the city's aggressive theatrical saboteurs, was among ten prominent citizens designated for execution by the local Quisling führer, Rogstad. The Gestapo men arrested him at the theatre.

"Can I get a sweater?" he asked his captors.

"You won't need it where you're going," was the reply.

"I know what that means," Gleditsch told the actors in bidding them farewell.

That night the Gestapo men forced him to dig his own grave, shot him in the back of the neck with a revolver, and pushed his naked body into the pit. But Gleditsch has not been forgotten, by either his friends or his enemies. Almost nightly Quisling Rogstad's telephone rings. When he answers he hears a sepulchral voice,

"This is Gleditsch calling." Gleditsch is dead, but his ghost walks backstage in the theatres of Norway.

As the autumn 1942 season approached, the Quisling theatre commissar, Finn Halvorson, submitted new contracts to the actors. When they refused to sign because they would not participate in propaganda pieces, Halvorson genially remarked, "That won't be necessary. We have decided on other kinds of productions." Although skeptical of Halvorson's sincerity, the actors decided to accept the contracts. But before they signed they had the delegates put in writing their understanding of the Quisling director's statement. "We have good memories," says Jern Ording, one of the Oslo National Theatre's leading men, "and we separately, almost word for word, wrote down our interpretation of what he had promised." To his contract each actor attached a copy of the memorandum. Halvorson refused to initial them. Thus ended the strike phase, with an apparent victory for the actors.

The theatres reopened in September featuring Ibsen and similar acceptable plays. But peace was short-lived. Before Christmas the Nazis started putting the screws on the actors to appear in radio and screen propaganda sketches. Again they encountered stubborn resistance. One actor was lured into the broadcasting station with the understanding that he was to take part in a Christmas sketch by Hans Christian Anderson. He found there only a few Quisling hirelings

and derelicts, and immediately withdrew followed by insults and threats such as, "Send him to Germany. Kill the dirty Jossing." Unable to obtain prominent artists, the Nazis resorted to the subterfuge of broadcasting prewar recordings made by the stars without announcing that the programs weren't personal appearances. This strategy failed utterly either to deceive the public or to break down the actors' solidarity. It resulted only in a new jocular greeting amongst the actors, "I heard you on the radio last night, you Quisling."

The public wholeheartedly supports the actors. When the Germans staged a show they were particularly anxious to popularize, the tickets sold like hot-cakes. But when the curtain rose, the theatre was empty except for a few score Germans and Quislings. The patriotic ticket-buyers had stayed home. Gestapo men scoured the streets, sweeping in soldiers on leave to fill the boycotted spaces.

Another typical instance of subtle resistance was the première of *The Happy Election*. The leading man, Quisling Jens Holstad, spent the afternoon at a Nazi reception at Oslo's suburb of Drammen. When he started for the theatre, local police arrested him, alleging drunkenness. Despite his frantic protestations and attempts to identify himself, he wasn't "properly recognized" until after midnight, too late to play his rôle.

At the theatre, Holstad's place was taken by the Nazi prompter, Johan Hauge, who tried to read from the

script. The actors indulged in horse-play throughout the show, engaging in onstage controversies with the discomfited Hauge as to whether he should sit or stand while reciting his lines. One scene was re-enacted three times.

The actresses are often as courageous as the men. In one play, a disreputable character was named Adolf. The authorities ordered the name changed. The leading lady, however, persisted through "force of habit" in calling the man Adolf until she was summoned to Gestapo headquarters for a memory course.

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A classic example of the tribulations of the Norwegian actors is the experience of Jern Ording, now a refugee in Sweden. It is best related in Ording's modest and undramatic words:

I was first arrested three hours before the premiere of *Water Spirit*, in which I was to play the lead. They took me to Gestapo headquarters, where I was subjected to unremitting questioning. I refused to admit that I had distributed relief payments to my striking colleagues. So they took me to Moellergatan Prison. Here they threatened torture, such as the thumbscrews and spreadeagle, unless I told them the source of my finances. I still refused, and finally they gave up and released me. I arrived at the theatre at 1 A.M., and found that the audience was still patiently waiting for me. I got the greatest ovation of my life — but it wasn't on account of my performance on the stage.

In March 1943, Ording was arrested for the second time. The Quisling

directors inexplicably offered to cancel the contracts of all who were discontented, and Ording was among those who notified Director Berg-Jagger that they desired release.

"I had left the theatre and started homeward," he relates, "when I was seized by three already familiar Gestapo men. They conducted me to headquarters again, and pushed me into the third degree room. A single hardboiled official confronted me. He looked me up and down silently and then said, 'Keep quiet and just listen. You haven't been here, you haven't been arrested, you've seen nobody. You don't want to cancel your contract, you're going right back to the theatre and tell Berg-Jagger you've changed your mind.' Then he added sinisterly, 'And if you don't, we're going after your pretty wife.'"

They literally threw the now frightened, nerve-shattered Ording into the street. His wife — a beautiful, twenty-year-old girl — was expecting a baby.

"I knew what they meant," says Ording. "Half blind with anger and impotence, I returned to the theatre and told Berg-Jagger I had changed my mind. He thanked me effusively, then casually enquired what had happened and whether I had been mistreated. I didn't tell him I had seen him with Gestapo men that morning. The significance of his company had only just dawned upon me."

The supposedly repentant Ording soon figured in an event about which all the Northland is still laughing.

A traitor named Per Reiderson wrote a play called *New Dawn* which won the Quislings' nationwide propaganda play contest. It was scheduled for production in the Oslo National Theatre in April 1943 with an all-star cast in which Ording was assigned the leading rôle. The part called for continuous stage appearance throughout the four acts, declaiming the marvels of the Nazis' New Order dawning over the world.

"After interminable rehearsals and complications," says Ording,

everything going wrong and driving Reiderson and Director Berg-Jagger into nervous wrecks, the night of the première arrived. It looked pretty hopeless for us. A handpicked Quisling and German audience assembled. The curtain was ready. And then a mysterious fire broke out backstage. The scenery and stage machinery were completely destroyed before the slow-moving firemen arrived. The damage was perfect, just enough to render the National Theatre useless for probably the length of the war. The Gestapo men blamed me for the fire. They said I had smoked backstage.

Ording is reticent regarding the aftermath. Perhaps he desires to forget. With three fellow actors he was accused of possessing illegal newspapers and was confined in the dreaded Moellergatan for several months, often in a dungeon, on bread and water.

Meanwhile the cast of the play was re-formed with Lars Nordrum, a matinee idol and a close friend of Ording, taking the lead. Another theatre was made ready. The night of the second première arrived. The same hand-picked audience of Quislings and Ger-

mans assembled. Again the curtain failed to rise. Nordrum had mysteriously disappeared en route to the theatre. "You know it wouldn't be sporting to play the lead with Jern Ording in prison," Nordrum told me on his arrival in Sweden after a spectacular escape from Norway.

With Reiderson semi-crazy, Berg-Jagger tearing his hair, and Terboven threatening the now thoroughly frightened Finn Halvorson with dire consequences if *New Dawn* was not produced immediately, the Quislings tried once more. In order to save face, they changed the title of the play to *The Last Cry* — which couldn't have been more appropriate. And unable to obtain another leading man, they persuaded the Gestapo to release Ording temporarily, provided he would resume his part.

He seized the long shot chance at liberty. All day and all night Gestapo men guarded him, both at home and at theatre rehearsals, until the third première night arrived. Again the self-same hand-picked audience awaited, this time suspiciously expectant. And again "the play did not go on."

Accompanied by two husky Gestapo men, Ording left his room for the theatre. But somewhere en route the Gestapo relaxed their watchfulness for a few seconds. "Something must have gone wrong," says Ording enigmatically. "They must have been careless. Anyway, I never reached the theatre. A week later I crossed the border at night, carrying my three-months-old baby through the snow drifts in sub-

zero weather." Interjected his pretty young wife, "And the baby, who had always been good, squalled loudly when we crossed the frontier. Like its daddy, it probably didn't want to leave Norway." What happened to his guards is a story to be revealed after the war.

This story has an epilogue. *The Last Cry* was finally produced a few weeks ago. After Ording's disappearance, armed Gestapo men guarded every member of the cast day and night. But the players still had the last word. When the show opened in an obscure suburban theatre they mangled their parts so badly that even

the handpicked audience couldn't take it. The critics panned the show vigorously, and the actors happily hailed their verdict. Then, when the struggling patriots of the Norwegian stage appeared to be beaten down on their knees, Fate took a hand. The last leading man was stricken with pneumonia and hospitalized. The play did not go on, and after just three performances the show closed.

And today Reiderson, Halvorson, and Berg-Jagger hate to answer their phones. They're more than likely to hear that mysterious message: "This is Henry Gleditsch speaking — soon I'll hear your 'last cry!'"



DOUBT AND REASSURANCE

BY CHARLES ANGOFF

SOMETIMES I think beauty's
A false heaven,
Where peace of soul
And the void that is sorrow
Are eternally in cold embrace.

Then I see the early morning sun
On a high wooded mountain,
Or a child smile at a star,
Or feel the first faint autumn breeze,
And I know beauty's
The only true heaven.