

GESPENSTER

A free adaptation of *Ghosts* by Henrik Ibsen

Music: Torstein Aagaard-Nilsen

Libretto: Malin Kjelsrud



Meiningen Staatstheater 23 February 2024

For more recent information

Contact :

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To be announced at: <https://www.meiningen-staatstheater.de/produktionen/index-100.html>

REVIEWS

Tbc after the premiere

PRODUCTION

(Complete information tbc)

Music	Torstein Aagaard-Nilsen https://www.torsteinaagaardnilsen.no/
Libretto	Malin Kjelsrud https://www.malink.no/
Translation into German	Dagfinn Koch https://www.dagfinnkoch.net/
Co-Editor German version:	Corinna Jarosch Meininger Staatstheater – Corinna Jarosch (staatstheater-meiningen.de)
Director	Ansgar Haag https://www.meininger-staatstheater.de/personen/ansgar-haag.html https://www.meininger-staatstheater.de/personen/corinna-jarosch.html
Dramaturg:	Julia Terwald
Orchestra:	Meiningen Hofkapelle
Musical director :	Philippe Bach https://www.meininger-staatstheater.de/personen/gmd-philippe-bach.html
Costume designer:	tbc
Choir director :	tbc

PERFORMANCE HISTORY

The piece was planned for a premiere at Meiningen Staatstheater in 2020, but with due to the corona pandemic it has been given a delay. The world premiere will be 23 February 2024 in Meiningen.

Information tbc. Contact Norsk Musikkforlag for updated information.

ABOUT

For several years composer Torstein Aagaard-Nilsen has been collaborating with the Meiningen Hofkapelle <https://www.meininger-staatstheater.de/ensemble/meininger-hofkapelle.html> and with their conductor Philippe Bach. They last worked together in 2017 when the orchestra commissioned and performed *Five Songs to poems by Stein Mehren*. In the course of their collaboration the idea of a new opera arose.

Henrik Ibsen has had a central place in the theatre repertory in Meiningen ever since his compatriot Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson introduced him to this theatre, and *The Pretenders* was staged here in 1875. Censorship restrictions at first stopped *Ghosts (Gespenster)* being performed in Germany; however, thanks to the dedicated interest of Duke Georg II of Meiningen, combined with a degree of independence when it came to cultural

matters, the play received its first performance in Germany here at the Meiningen Theatre in 1886. This paved the way for the further success of Ibsen's works in imperial Germany. <https://www.torsteinaagaardnilsen.no/index.php/blog/item/pa-historisk-grunn-i-meiningen>

As soon as the idea of an opera was agreed, Aagaard-Nilsen decided to engage Malin Kjelsrud as librettist. She chose to strip Ibsen's narrative down to its bare bones, and, around this skeleton, to build her own story. It is a story firmly based in our time, her aim being to write something that Ibsen would have found relevant to today's world, while at the same time, by and large, using Ibsen's own words.

The opera consists of 7 scenes. Perhaps the work can best be described as a psychological study, subdued and unsettling – without any scenes characterised by powerful romantic feelings or strongly dramatic action.

The setting throughout the opera is a sitting-room, where a time frame alternating between the past and the present provides the foundation for the plot and narrative. This means that several people mentioned in the drama in present time have already been seen in the scenes from the past. Those who have died are, so to speak, resurrected, as is the younger persona of the main character.

The main character in the drama is Helene Alving. In Ibsen's play she is the widow of Erik Alveng and the mother of Oswald, an artist. Kjelsrud, for her part, weaves the whole opera around Helene and the choices she makes in her life.

The question is: what really happened, in the days when those now dead were alive?

In her version of *Gespenster*, Malin Kjelsrud has, as she herself says, revised gender roles. She has put new emphasis on readings of the play for which evidence can be found in Ibsen's text, but which have not hitherto been explicitly brought into the open. Mrs Alving is characterised as being both cynical and manipulating. It is she, Oswald's mother, who abuses him. She withdraws from a full commitment to her marriage, with all the consequences that involves, and starts treating her son as a substitute. She tries to convince herself that she is a good person. But her past catches up with her, and in the tension between keeping up her facade and avoiding a life of loneliness the drama evolves inexorably.

Short synopsis

When Erik Alving dies, old and unwelcome memories are revived, not just for his widow Helene, but for everyone, since it is soon evident that the accepted picture of the past is not rooted in any absolute truth. Pastor Gabriel Manders, for example, resolutely denies having had an intimate relationship with Helene, whereas she remembers in lively detail the night they have had together, and the broken promises. It was for financial, social and practical reasons that she never actually left Erik. She ensures that their family life maintains its "perfect" facade; but hidden behind it there are secrets, cruelty and mutual loathing, and all this constitutes life's perfect lie.

Oswald suffers from the traumas that are a consequence of the conflicts that permeated his childhood at home. Now, after many years' absence, he has returned in order to attend his father's funeral. In the days before the funeral he is one moment involved in the strongly ambivalent nature of his relationship with his mother, and the next in his flirtation – which is possibly not so harmless as it may seem – with Regine. When everything in his world is on the brink of collapsing, he tells his mother that he is fatally ill. He has some pills, which he sees as the only way he can exercise his free will and escape his predicament – that is, escape being imprisoned in a permanent state of helplessness. Then, feeling a fit is imminent, he begs his mother to “Give me the sun!” Helene gives him his pills, but not all of them. She, for her part, cannot face a future of living alone with all these memories, all these ghosts.

Synopsis - longer version (by Malin Kjelsrud) :

Erik Alving is dead. His wife, Helene Alving is in a state of shock. Both the past and the present plays out simultaneously throughout the play. Erik, though dead, is visualised through Helene's memories. Helene also sees a young version of herself, their son Oswald as a child, and the late Johanne. Memories which Helene would prefer not to remember, requires her to take a hard look at her own behaviour and mindset throughout her life.

The older Helene remembers her life. Young and newlywed, she left her husband to be with her true love, pastor Gabriel Manders. It is early morning and they are waking up in his bed. Helene - happily looking forward to start a new life with Gabriel. He, however - highly distressed and demands that they both must forget what has happened. For pragmatic reasons, Helene goes back to Erik. Strongly affected by a heartache for Gabriel, Helene continues their marriage. After all, Erik is rich and popular and has a desirable position in society.

As a board member in Erik's various companies, Helene has discovered that he has done something illegal; a Secret that gives her the upper hand. They use this Secret as a mutual threat: tell someone? Then she'll lose everything. Bitter and disappointed, she spends her life keeping the facade in order. The son Oswald becomes the focus of her life.

In the beginning of their marriage, Erik loves his wife and hopes that he eventually will win her love. Her grief for Gabriel gives her a sharp tongue and a cold behaviour, which makes Erik seek love and excitement outside the marriage. He doubts, possibly rightly, that Oswald is his child. In time, their marriage transforms into a mutual hateful relationship in which they get satisfaction by hurting each other. They use their son as a weapon against each other. This turns them into cruel humans and harmful parents.

Years ago, Johanne worked as a housekeeper at the young couple Alving's house, until Erik gets her pregnant. He pays off Jakob Engstrand and Johanne to marry and let everyone believe that Engstrand is the father. Engstrand treated Johanne and the daughter Regine badly. He sold Johanne as a prostitute to finance his own drug problem. When Johanne died, Helene and Erik took over the care of Regine. As an adult, she helps Helene around the house for a place to live. Now Engstrand asks Regine to come and live and work at a hotel (AKA brothel) he intends to buy. Regine refuses.

Erik and Helene's grown son, Oswald, comes from his home in Paris to attend his father's funeral. He left the childhood home at the tender age of 16 to escape his parents. Oswald and Regine resumes the fling they started the last time Oswald was visiting. She uses her female charm to get Oswald to promise to take her to Paris once his father is buried. She wants to live what she imagines is his life: a festive, artistic, bohemian, delightful chaos.

Gabriel, the pastor, has come to bury his old friend. Helene and Gabriel talks about their agonising secret from the past. He still insists that nothing happened between them. She claims that the reason Gabriel rejected her was that he didn't love her, but Erik, which he shamefully admits. Because Gabriel glorifies Erik, Helene tells him how awful the marriage with Erik was. She

reveals that Erik is Regine's real father, not Engstrand. Afterwards Gabriel bumps into Engstrand, who's been standing outside eavesdropping. Engstrand has information about the Secrets that the other characters wants to keep hidden. Maybe Engstrand knows that Gabriel may be Oswald's biological father? Gabriel leaves. Johanne as a ghost appears and accuses her former husband, Engstrand, of killing her, but he cannot hear her. Her case will never be solved, because nobody can hear her.

Helene sees that she's been far too close and intimate with her son, both mentally and physically. Her own abuse has damaged Oswald. She also realises that Erik was the one she really loved. Their relationship could have been good, if only she had allowed it. It's all too much for her.

Oswald reveals to his mother that he is gravely sick and that he has decided on Regine as a life partner. But being so close to his mother makes him anxious and upset. Helene tries to explain and talk herself out of the blame, which makes Oswald furious. Hurt, Helene then asks Regine to come and drink champagne with them, and reveals that they have the same father. Regine then leaves.

Disappointed, scared and angry, Oswald tells his mother more about his illness, that the next attack probably will leave him in the state of an infant. He has made sure he has a way to escape: an overdose of morphine pills. He tries to persuade his mother to help him commit suicide if another attack comes. Helene cannot cope with living the rest of her life alone, everyone dead or gone. They make a suicide pact. When the next attack comes, she first helps him take half of the pills, then she takes the rest of the pills herself and follows him into death.

MUSICAL STYLE

From the start Aagaard-Nilsen wanted to search for a musical language he feels comfortable with. He describes what he found as "tonal music that is not really tonal" while suggesting at the same time that it is "atonal music that is not really atonal". Harmonically traditional tonal functions are disregarded and elements of the twelve-tone technique are used, but with no aim to create atonal music.

The glass harmonica has been as a powerful source of inspiration. As in the original score of *Lucia di Lammermoor*, where the eerie tones of this instrument not only movingly accompany Lucia in the mad scene but also underpin the theme of disease, Aagaard-Nilsen has added character to *Gespenster* through frequent use of the sounds produced by rubbing fingers on the rims of crystal glasses as they spin. They are distinct and

beautiful, but also fragile, just like the interpersonal relationships in the psychological drama that is evolving. Another resource used by Aagaard-Nilsen is the use of musical quotations, which are sometimes employed to define personalities or to create the right illusion. This is a ploy by the composer that allows him, for example, to include such music as Tekla Bedarsewska's well-known salon piece *A Maiden's Prayer*, a quotation from Schubert's *Trauermusik* and another from the *Sarabande* from Bach's Cello Suite No. 3 in C major.

In Scene 5 the orchestra's choir is heard for the first time. The singers are commenting on the bourgeois facade of society, and perform a type of chaconne which acts as a link to the next scene. The choir's participation does not end there – it acts as a sympathetic voice offering support, and also as a dark accompanist that reinforces moods of melancholy and desolation. Based on *Ghost* it ends with the words "Give me the sun." The drama's dark mood is expressed through the choir, in parallel with glimmers of sunlight from the orchestra.

CAST

Information tbc

SCORING

The score exists in two different versions:

- For full orchestra (original version for the premiere)

Orchestra:

Flute 1

Flute 2 (also Piccolo)

Oboe 1

Oboe 2

Clarinet in Bb

Bass Clarinet in Bb

Bassoon 1-2

Horn 1-3 and 2 in F

Trumpet 1-2 in C

Trombone 1-2

Tuba

Percussion:

1.

Vibraphone, Xylophone, Glockenspiel, 5 Temple blocks, Suspended cymbal, A2 cymbal, Triangle, Timpani

2.

Glasses (crystal, 5 different pitches), Cup (ceramics), Triangle, 2 Wood blocks (high/low), Snare drum, Suspended cymbal (ride), A2 cymbal, Large Tom-tom, Bass drum (Gran cassa), Kick drum, Tam-tam

Accordion

Harp

Piano (also Upright piano if available)/Celesta

Electronic (trigger)

Strings

(min. 6-6-4-4-2)

The score is transposed

- Chamber version.

Chamber Orchestra:

Flute (also Piccolo)

Oboe

Clarinet in Bb

Bassoon

Horn in F

Trumpet in C

Trombone

Tuba

Percussion:

1.

Vibraphone, Xylophone, Marimba, Glockenspiel, 5 Temple blocks, Suspended cymbal, A2 cymbal, Triangle, Timpani

2.

Glasses (crystal, 5 different pitches), Cup (ceramics), Triangle, 2 Wood blocks (high/low), Snare drum, Suspended cymbal (ride), A2 cymbal, Large Tom-tom, Bass drum (Gran cassa), Kick drum, Tam-tam

Accordion

Harp

Piano (also Upright piano if available)/Celesta

Electronic (trigger)

Strings

(1-1-1-1-1)

The score is transposed

SCORE

Full version/ Chamber version/ Piano Score:

https://musikkforlagene.no/?s=gespenster&post_type=product

LIBRETTO

Norsk:

https://issuu.com/musikkforlagene/docs/gespenster_norsk

Tysk:

https://issuu.com/musikkforlagene/docs/gespenster_deutsch_final

Engelsk:

https://issuu.com/musikkforlagene/docs/gespenster_eng

VIDEOS:

Interviews with Torstein Aagaard-Nilsen and Malin Kjelsrud

[GESPENSTER OPERA – Malin K](#)

TORSTEIN AAGAARD-NILSEN ON SPOTIFY

[Spotify – Torstein Aagaard-Nilsen](#)

USEFUL LINKS WITH MUSIC BY TORSTEIN AAGAARD-NILSEN

Reverie:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/gzrgdvh3lidxo5v/Reverie.mp3?dl=0>

5 sanger til dikt av Stein Mehren

https://www.dropbox.com/s/q8jru1vkxrkv28s/5%20lieder_urfr..m4a?dl=0

Boreas sings:

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/tjngptdin75c2d5/Boreas%20Syng.mp3?dl=0>

BIOGRAPHIES:

Complete information tbc

Torstein Aagaard-Nilsen

<https://www.torsteinaagaardnilsen.no/>

Malin Kjeldsrud

<https://www.malink.no/>

Philippe Bach

Philippe Bach has been Generalmusikdirektor at Meininger Staatstheater since 2010, Chief Conductor of the Berner Kammerorchester since 2012, and Chief Conductor of the Kammerphilharmonie Graubünden in Chur, Switzerland from 2016. He has conducted many European Orchestras, including the Tonhalle Orchester, Orquesta Sinfónica de Madrid, Hallé Orchestra, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Royal Scottish National, Helsinki Philharmonic, Basel Sinfonietta and Basel Chamber Orchestra. Prior to his position in Meiningen, he held the positions of First *Kapellmeister* and Deputy Music Director at Theater Lübeck (2008-2011). A winner of the 2006 „*Jesús López-Cobos Conducting Competition*“, Bach was subsequently assistant to López-Cobos at the Teatro Real in Madrid from 2006 to 2008. At Meiningen, he has conducted numerous opera productions. Over the years he has been responsible for a repertoire including more than 60 works and collaborating with directors such as Gerd Heinz (TRISTAN). Bach has also introduced a significant number of new composers and premieres to the orchestra's concert seasons. His passion for bringing to the public lesser-known works has led him to build an impressive list of 'Interesting and unusual works', which he enjoys presenting in thematic programmes built around a well-known major work or composer, both in Meiningen and via his guest conducting engagements.

Ansgar Haag

Ansgar Haag was initially Director in Residence at Staatstheater Darmstadt (1984–1989), next

he became Director in Chief at Salzburg State Theatre (1989–1994). From 1994 to 2006 he was Artistic Director of the Theater Ulm. Since the 2005/06 season he has been Artistic Director of the Meininger Staatstheater. Haag has staged more than 140 productions, recently including the world premiere of revised SCHLOSS DÜRANDE, MAZEPPA, TOSCA, DIE MEISTERSINGER VON NÜRNBERG and LUCIA DI LAMMERMOOR. Haag has also worked as guest director at other theatres and opera houses, such as Schauspielhaus Zürich, the Irish National Opera, Badisches Staatstheater Karlsruhe, Hessisches Staatstheater Wiesbaden, Staatsoper Leningrad, Tyrolean State Theatre Innsbruck, Korea National Opera, Stadttheater Bern, Abay Opera House and *National Theatre Brno*. His works as stage director have received many awards, among them the ‘Bavarian State Prize’ for his production of JENŮFA (1998) and the ‘Germany – Land-of-Ideas award’ for FAUST I/II (2007). In 2012 the Minister for Culture of Kazakhstan awarded Haag ‘Geehrter Kunstschaffender’ for his direction of TANNHÄUSER (the Kazakh premiere) and of ABAI (the German premiere). Haag has been maintaining a close collaboration with set designer Dieter Richter and costume designer Kerstin Jacobssen.

PHOTOS

Tbc after the premiere

CONTACT FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

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