

## JON FOSSE'S WRITINGS READ THROUGH NORWEGIAN AND ROMANIAN LENSES. A SURVEY

**Sanda TOMESCU BACIU<sup>1</sup>, Roxana-Ema DREVE<sup>2</sup>**

On the occasion of the recent Nobel Prize for Literature 2023, awarded to the Norwegian playwright, novelist, essay writer and poet Jon Fosse, we invited scholars and translators from Norway and Romania to answer a series of questions related to Jons Fosse's outstanding contribution to world literature. Many of the translators are at the same time active at academic level. The researchers and the translators were asked to address at least three of several questions.

We invited the following contributors to participate in the survey: Professor Heming H. Gujord (Bergen University), Professor Unni Langås (Agder University), Professor Lisbeth P. Wærp and Professor Henning H. Wærp (The Artic University of Norway), Associate Professor and translator Zsofia Domsa (Norwegian University of Science and Technology, NTNU, Trondheim), Associate Professor and translator Carmen Vioreanu (Bucharest University), Senior Lecturer and translator Daria Ioan (Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj), Assistant Professor and translator Ovio Olaru (Lucian Blaga University, Sibiu) and Dr. Anamaria Babiaş-Ciobanu, translator.

We are thankful to the respondents for participating in the survey.

---

<sup>1</sup> **Sanda TOMESCU BACIU** Professor at the Department of Scandinavian Languages and Literature, and founder of the Norwegian Language and Literature BA-program in Romania at Babeş-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, in 1991. Email: sanda.tomescu@ubbcluj.ro.

<sup>2</sup> **Roxana-Ema DREVE** Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Scandinavian Languages and Literature, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca. Email roxana.dreve@ubbcluj.ro.



**1. How did you receive the news of the 2023 Nobel Prize in Literature Award? Was it a surprise or a long-awaited recognition of the Norwegian writer Jon Fosse?**

**Zsofia DOMSA:** I was at a conference in Paris and received an email from a student I teach, among others, about Fosse at NTNU in Trondheim. It was a short message: Congratulations! (Gratulerer med dagen!) I was very happy, because Jon has been among the Nobel nominees for so long that I hardly dared to hope that he could win the prize this year. So, it came as both a wonderful surprise and a recognition he had long deserved. It didn't take many minutes after the first email from this kind Norwegian student before I received calls from both Norway and Hungary. I was asked to comment on the award, to talk about Fosse's writing, his language, his style and the works I would recommend. In the first few days after the big news broke, I wrote several chronicles and articles in both Hungarian and Norwegian. It was a great honour to be able to take part in the great joy that comes with the Nobel Prize, and to celebrate and pay tribute to the author whom I was lucky enough to get to know as early as 1997, shortly after I read *Nokon kjem til å komme* [Someone is Going to Come], and was excited in every possible way. Many years have passed since then, and that enthusiasm has lasted and taken shape in translations and academic research, so it is a great honour and pleasure that this year the prize went to an author who has no political agenda, but captures the essence of what it means to be a human being in our late modern age.

**Heming H. GUJORD:** I was well aware of the fact that Jon Fosse was among the most prominent candidates for the Nobel Prize. As a former student and now professor at the University of Bergen, for me the writings of Fosse have always been present. My colleagues in the Department of Comparative Literature praised Fosse from the very beginning of his career as a writer. Arild Linneberg wrote the postscript to Fosse's poetologic essay "Frå [From] telling via showing til writing" (1989), wherein he nicknamed Fosse "skrivern" – "the writer". Within the literary field in and around Bergen, Fosse has in a way been canonized from the very beginning of his career. Fosse was original and different, and his minimalistic prose was even different in the eighties and the nineties as minimalism was trending among the upcoming Norwegian authors. Even Hanne Ørstavik and Tore Renberg coded their debut works *Hakk* [Cut] (1994) and *Matriarkat* [Matriarchy] (1996) in the mode of prose minimalism. Later Renberg and Ørstavik have proceeded in ways differing from their debut works, in the direction of epic realism. Fosse has for certain also developed as a writer, foremost by entering the stage as a dramatist, but his literary voice is very much recognizable across

the borders of literary genres and modes. I consider this vocal consistency a token of artistic quality, inherent in Fosse's work all the way from the beginning. This being said, a Nobel Prize Award in literature always, in some way, has to be a surprise. There are so many great writers who will never receive the Nobel Prize. The publishing house Det Norske Samlaget, which has hosted Fosse's authorship since his debut in 1983, has been prepared for an occasion like this for years. I was myself sitting in my office at the University of Bergen following the news, listening to the secretary of the Swedish Academy. However, prepared I was for this kind of extraordinary news, it still came as a surprise. After the announcement I headed for the corridor and met the gaze of one of our PhD candidates, Fredrik Parelus. – *Det blei Fosse*, we said simultaneously. – *It became Fosse*. Fosse himself has handled the award in a highly admirable way, suiting the modest style of his literary approach. And of course, the University of Bergen, the Faculty of Humanities, and the Department of Linguistic, Literary and Aesthetic Studies are very proud of being acquainted with a Nobel laureate, not least because Fosse himself for certain will acknowledge that he has been a student at Atle Kittang's old department. This Nobel Prize is well earned, and it indeed belongs to Jon Fosse himself. Still, I would like to honour the late Atle Kittang for establishing a "Bergen School" of comparative literature, being so familiar with the highest claims of literature and aesthetics, that a forthcoming Nobel laureate found it worth staying here for several of his most formative years. Like Fosse, Kittang also had Nynorsk as his first language. It is rather sad that Kittang, who died in 2013, did not get the chance to experience this year's Nobel Prize Award to one of his former students. Fosse deserves the prize as an author, and Kittang had deserved to experience the prize in the aftermath of his scholarly work. In *Gnostiske essay* [Gnostic Essays, 1999] Fosse paid tribute to Kittang, for besides the philosopher Hans Skjervheim, he was one of the most inspiring figures during the time of his studies.

**Daria IOAN:** When I heard the news of Jon Fosse being awarded with the Nobel Prize in Literature, my first thought was that it is right, it is the way it should be. Jon Fosse had to win this prize! He had been among the favorites the past 10 years and I am so happy that he finally got it! It was a surprise because it was this year, 2023, and I didn't really see the connection. In my opinion, he was at the peak of his talent in 2013 already, or even before. All in all, it is fair that he got the Nobel Prize, as his plays form an unique universe and teach us about a new kind of sociality, new ways of communication beyond language, as we understand it so far. For me, his ways of seeing sounds and states of mind and translating them in the visual field are proof of an amazing method, not to mention his work with the structures of language and of the written composition. It surely has much to do with his love for music. What is also surprising is that he rewrote

Sophocles' tragedies or plays by Marivaux, Goethe, Federico Garcia Lorca. In order to bring these old texts to new life, Fosse thinks that the most important thing is the capacity to listen well. Since I first read his plays, I felt I knew that there was great value in his work, something different than any other thing I had read before. It is the right thing they finally awarded him with the Nobel Prize in Literature.

**Unni LANGÅS:** I was visiting the Jewish Museum in Berlin when I watched the announcement of the Nobel Prize to Jon Fosse. I had made an appointment with a Norwegian journalist (forskning.no) to give an interview in case he would be the winner, so to some degree it was not quite unexpected. Nevertheless, I was a bit surprised because you tend to think the committee will avoid authors who are in focus beforehand.

**Ovio OLARU:** The Romanian editor who suggested I should translate Jon Fosse's *Septology* had confessed his belief that Jon Fosse was due to receive the prize in 2022. He was, of course, one year off, as we all know. But his intuition was correct. I was just wrapping up a course when my phone started ringing: friends were forwarding me the official announcement of the Nobel Committee. I had forgotten about the prize, so it was a surprise for me personally. It was also a surprise inasmuch as the Nobel prize usually goes to the least expected candidate – something which is not always met with the most unbridled enthusiasm (remember Bob Dylan). But we mustn't forget that the Committee consists of literary critics who, much like any other professionals in the field of Humanities and notwithstanding their expertise, are biased through their upbringing, the cultural landscape that shaped their *Weltanschauung* and literary taste, and the so-called "economy of prestige" that makes it so that authors who are already acknowledged will receive more recognition as time goes on. Nonetheless, it was not so "long-awaited" after all, given that NRK had published an article about Fosse not being awarded the prize on account of his young age and his status as playwright – given the committee's tendency to reward poets and novelists – as early as 2016.

**Carmen VIOREANU:** Usually on the first Thursday in October I sit and wait for the live broadcast from the Swedish Academy headquarters. The ritual of announcing the awards is as exciting as the name of the new winner of the prestigious literature prize. This time too, I learned the name of the winner directly from the permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy. Needless to say, I was thrilled. This is the first time one of the authors I have translated has been awarded the Nobel Prize. I knew his name had been circulated for a decade as a candidate for the Nobel Prize for Literature, but somehow I didn't expect it.

Fosse is a complex international literary personality, as a playwright, poet and novelist; he was already being translated and performed on stages all over the world long before the 5<sup>th</sup> of October 2023.

**Lisbeth P. WÆRP:** I was having lunch with colleagues at UiT – The Arctic University of Norway – when I noticed that it was less than 5 minutes to the official announcing. I turned on the news on my iPhone, and together we watched it, all of us professors of literature, and excited by the possibility of Fosse getting the prize. And he got it. It was both a wonderful surprise and a long-awaited recognition.

**Henning HOWLID WÆRP:** I was a visiting scholar at UC Berkeley, California, at that time, and woke up to a Messenger message on my phone from a Finnish colleague with congratulations. I was however not very surprised; Jon Fosse has lived in the honorary residence Grotten in Oslo since 2011 and is highly valued. I wrote a nomination letter for him to the Nobel Prize committee around fifteen years ago. He has been a hot candidate for many years.

**2. It is the first time in history that the Nobel Prize in Literature goes to an author who writes in the New Norwegian Language (Nynorsk). Do you think that this award is equally important for the New Norwegian Language?**

**Anamaria BABIAȘ-CIOBANU:** The Nobel Prize for a Nynorsk writer is likely to draw international attention to the Nynorsk literary tradition. This increased visibility could encourage the translation of Nynorsk works into other languages, fostering a greater appreciation for the linguistic and cultural diversity within Norway. The Nobel Prize is a prestigious international award that brings recognition not only to the individual author but also to the cultural and linguistic context from which they emerge. A Nynorsk author receiving such an accolade could be seen as a celebration of the Nynorsk language and its contributions to literature. This may serve as encouragement for other Nynorsk authors to continue their literary pursuits and inspire a new generation of writers. In a global context, where linguistic diversity is increasingly recognized and valued, a Nobel Prize for a Nynorsk writer could contribute to a broader awareness of the importance of preserving and promoting linguistic diversity, even within a single country like Norway. It's important to note that the Nobel Prize in Literature is awarded based on the individual's literary merits rather than the language in which they write. However, the impact of such recognition can extend beyond the individual to influence perceptions of the language and culture associated with their work.

**Zsofia DOMSA:** I think it's a tribute to Fosse's writing, of which the Nynorsk language is an important part. In this way, this is a significant milestone in the history of Nynorsk. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that Fosse's choice of Nynorsk is not linked to a political conviction; it is a question of an individual anchoring in the Nynorsk tradition that means a great deal to his aesthetics and to him as a person. But the award went to the literary quality of his drama and prose, which is universal, and not to Nynorsk, which strictly speaking cannot be translated into other languages. Nynorsk may be implied, it may be explained, but ultimately there is a linguistic and tonal curiosity about Fosse's works which gives voice to the unsayable.

**Heming H. GUJORD:** If an author of the New Norwegian tradition had received the Nobel Prize decades ago, it really would have made a difference. In 1926 the leading Norwegian daily *Aftenposten* announced that the Nobel Prize was awarded to the novelist Olav Duun. This turned out to be wrong, and this example of fake news is one of the major scandals of cultural journalism in Norway to date. Even though it proved out wrong, it made a difference that Duun was among the candidates for the Nobel Prize in the 1920s. It proved on the highest international level that the New Norwegian language, based on multiple rural dialects, was really suitable for artistic purposes. Thus, the founding fathers of Nynorsk, and the mothers as well, have done great work to introduce the classics such as Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, and Goethe into Nynorsk. Today one must say that they have succeeded by far proving Nynorsk as a language suitable for artistic purposes on a wide range. For Jon Fosse however, Nynorsk is simply his first language. The morphology and the grammar system of Nynorsk by and large correspond with the dialect in his home village of Strandebarm. He has learnt Nynorsk in school, and he has completed his assignments in the University in Nynorsk and so on. Nynorsk, of course, is a minority language in Norway, but despite it being a minority language, the tradition of Nynorsk literature is very strong. For the Nynorsk public however, the Nobel Prize award to Fosse does mean a lot. The New Norwegian language is put under pressure. The average number of pupils using Nynorsk as a school language has been in a decline for many years. Fosse, who has stated that "Nynorsk deserved the prize" in a way, has dedicated the prize to the New Norwegian language, and this somehow gives confidence and pride to the Nynorsk public. It is far too early to see whether "målrørsla", the New Norwegian movement, can capitalize on the Nobel Prize among average Norwegians. Nynorsk in a way was coined as a counter cultural language, used more against the elites than by the elites themselves. Today Nynorsk really has conquered the institutions. It has proved its worth and usefulness in literature, in Academia, in the legislative system as well as in politics. At the same time, Nynorsk is struggling in everyday life. It is impossible

to foresee to what extent the Nobel Prize will make a difference to these challenges in a globalized world where Anglo-American impulses are a threat to both official Norwegian languages, Nynorsk and Bokmål. I think almost all Norwegians these days celebrate the award of the Nobel Prize to Jon Fosse. Hopefully, this recognition will make it more difficult, and even risky, to propose threats against Nynorsk and the rights of the Nynorsk public in the years to come. Such threats have been a matter of standard procedure in election campaigns, especially from right-wing politicians and their corresponding youth party organizations. But what is the political capital of literature and culture these days? It will be interesting to see how the Nobel Prize can eventually affect the decline of Nynorsk among the average Ola and Kari Nordmann.

**Daria IOAN:** The Nobel prize is definitely of high importance for Nynorsk, as Fosse's masterpieces were carved in the soundscapes of this language. Even if it was created on the basis of local dialects, it got to be the new language used to unify Norwegian people in all their diversity. It is interesting that in the interview that Jon Fosse gave me in Bergen in 2010, he was talking about the two Norwegian official languages, Nynorsk and Bokmål, in terms of colors. He told me that when *Someone is Going to Come* was translated into Bokmål and staged at the National Theatre in Oslo, he was asked what was the difference, in his opinion between the two languages. He said that for him, in Nynorsk, there was more brown and more purple. In Bokmål, there was yellow and white; that all has its specific sound and atmosphere, which can be described as colors. It seemed to me a masterful perception of languages and sounds as colors. Jon Fosse was able to transpose words into chromatics, such an incredible achievement! So, I began to understand, as I was studying his dramatic work, that the colors which appear in the situations he creates between his characters are not really colors. Jon Fosse's theater is to be perceived less visually than acoustically. It was fascinating. Colors are not colors and seasons are not seasons in this universe which is built on the depths of the human mind and feelings. Even the plays' titles which refer to colors or seasons are not to be read accordingly. For Fosse, *Violet* is a state of mind, like *Winter*. The human individual and collective refrains have their mysterious rhythm and way of repeating themselves between different kinds of syncope or pauses. In my book about Fosse's theater, I even dedicated an entire chapter to his system of pauses, seen not only as breaks in the body of speech, but also as a big wall of silence where the playwright draws his lines. In his words, this wall of silence is there and knows, somehow, everything.

**Unni LANGÅS:** Fosse himself and several members of the New Norwegian Language community have pointed out the importance of the Nobel Prize to this minority language in Norway. Nobody doubts that high quality fiction can be,

and has been, written in this language. The New Norwegian literary canon has a long list of high standard authorships, but the Nobel Prize is of course an important acknowledgement.

**Ovio OLARU:** The expected and predictable answer would be Yes, presumably on political grounds and as a form of acknowledging the presence and importance of Nynorsk in the regions where it is spoken. But I would argue that Nynorsk and Bokmål are so close and the Norwegian society so homogenous as to render this distinction nearly irrelevant – from a political standpoint. As for the practical consequences on the language, I doubt this will spur any additional interest in Norwegian that does not owe more to a preexisting fascination or attraction to the North and to Norway. For instance, when Mo Yan was awarded the prize in 2012, this did not elicit an increased demand in lessons in Chinese, nor did anyone start to learn Polish on account of Czesław Miłosz alone.

**Carmen VIOREANU:** The Nynorsk language is a very strong national symbol of Norway. Fosse has been writing in Nynorsk since his debut in 1983, as it is the closest literary language to his native dialect. In his very first interview minutes after Mats Malm revealed Fosse as the winner of the 2023 Nobel Prize for Literature, Fosse pointed out that Nynorsk had been awarded the prize. In my opinion, through Fosse, the Nynorsk language is finally getting recognition, not only locally but also internationally. It is the language that defines Fosse, the instrument through which he has articulated his work and shaped it into what it is today. In an age of global homogenization, which unites people but at the same time tears them apart from their roots, to write literature in a “small” European language means carefully watering the roots of the tree that represents the universal heritage. The Nobel Prize for Literature awarded to Fosse is also an invitation to reflect, to introspect, to pause in our frantic pursuit for everything, in a world ravaged by war and conflicts. It is also an invitation to return to our roots, to protect our universal cultural heritage, to accept and embrace diversity.

**Henning HOWLID WÆRP:** It is difficult to say. Fosse has in fact had readers for a long time. His “nynorsk” is easy to read, not much colored by dialect, as for example in the works of Olav H. Hauge’s or Kristofer Uppdal. As a literary language “nynorsk” in Norway has a high status. Many of the country’s best poets and novelists have chosen this written language. The three former Norwegian winners of the Nobel Prize however wrote in “bokmål”/”riksmål”, so it seems timely with a “nynorsk” winner.

**Lisbeth P. WÆRP:** It probably means a lot to Norwegians who write in New Norwegian and to Norwegians who struggle in defending the status of the language.

**3. In your opinion, what are the characteristic traits of Jon Fosse's writing, with regard to its content and stylistic approach?**

**Anamaria BABIAȘ-CIOBANU:** Fosse is known for his minimalist and poetic style. His writing is often characterized by its simplicity, with a focus on conveying powerful emotions and themes through carefully chosen words, imagery, dramatic settings, or rituals. Fosse's works often dive into existential questions and the complexities of human existence. His characters or *figures*, as I call them, struggle with issues of identity, mortality, and the meaning of life. Many of Fosse's works feature characters/ figures, who experience a sense of isolation and solitude, surrounded at the same time by people. This theme is often explored both in a physical and psychological sense, creating an atmosphere of introspection and loneliness. Fosse is known for his use of repetition and rhythmic language in his writing. This stylistic choice can create a reflective and almost hypnotic quality to his works. Fosse often finds the extraordinary in the ordinary. His narratives might center around everyday events and characters, but he fills them with deeper philosophical and psychological insights. Fosse frequently plays with the concepts of memory and time in his works. His narratives might not follow a linear structure, and there is a fluidity to how past and present are intertwined. The way Fosse builds the space and time affects the very existence of the characters/ figures, the interaction between them and the overall atmosphere. As a playwright, Fosse's background in theatre is evident in his writing. His works often have a dramatic quality, with a focus on dialogue and the dynamics between characters/ figures. The author seems to free his works from words, making space for experience, which becomes possible at the loss of words, and where communication has found a new way of accomplishment (through silence, a touch, or a glance).

**Zsofia DOMSA:** Fosse's works are similar in that they are characterized by an apparent simplicity. He has stated in several essays that he wants to write as simply as possible, without metaphors, with few characters. He usually manages to write a coherent story that encompasses something more, something completely different than just the perhaps everyday situation that one thinks the work is about. Fosse is not actually concerned that the text should be about something or someone. You could almost say that the "material" is uninteresting; it is the writing that is most important. In his novels, it is the contrast between the external

action and the inner, mental landscape that the reader is amazed and fascinated by. His drama is also characterized by the fact that nothing much happens, rather it is the unfolding of a state that we can witness. He usually focuses on an emotion, a state, such as unease or anxiety, or jealousy, longing, and makes it very big. In his works, form and content merge into a unity, into his own personal writing. Fosse may well be called a minimalist in the sense that he only writes what is strictly necessary. Paradoxically, his linguistic form of expression is characterized by repetition, constant new attempts to convey something important, something that is difficult to put into words, but so important that you can't help but try to say it. Like a kind of stuttering, but also the way we often become entangled in our own utterances, our own thoughts. And we are constantly looking for confirmation from the other person. This is how Fosse's dialogues arise, as repetitions of each other's words, both confirming and attempting to decipher what the other is trying to say. This creates an insistent form of expression that is stylized and ordinary at the same time.

**Heming H. GUJORD:** As an MA student and teaching assistant in the early 1990s, I used passages from Fosse's novel *Bly og vatn* (1992), [Lead and Water], to illustrate stream of consciousness as a mode of imaginative prose. This was also quite illuminating as to Fosse's own style as a writer. In the monograph on the authorship of Kjartan Fløgstad, *Fløgstad verk* (Samlaget 2018), I contrasted the literary modus operandi of Fosse and Fløgstad; the two most prominent Nynorsk writers today. By theme and content, Fosse vs. Fløgstad are Heidegger vs. Hobsbawm. Fosse is a confessional catholic, whereas Fløgstad is an intellectual Marxist. Fosse is seeking inwards and upwards, whereas Fløgstad is seeking outwards and downwards, to the grounds and the basis of materiality. The difference between the two great writers is evident in the imprint of their use of the Nynorsk language: Fosse is coding his works in a pure and classic Nynorsk, whereas Fløgstad, throughout nearly all his career, has celebrated what he once called "styggkultur"; the "ugly culture". It might be of some interest that Fosse, as a young and aspiring author, performed a patricide on Fløgstad. That was in the year of his debut, in 1983. In a review of Fløgstad's geopolitical novel *U3* (1983), Fosse stated that Fløgstad's novel was pure analysis through and through, missing the sense of singing, framed by the schemes of Marxism, and thereby promoting the reification of humanity. A patricide of course is a token of respect. In the words of the future Nobel laureate as a young man, Fløgstad could "dream about being awarded the Nobel Prize, and even have certain reasons for doing so". Oh, the irony! The difference between these two great writers, Jon Fosse and Kjartan Fløgstad, first and foremost demonstrates the wide scope and the triumph of New Norwegian literature in the first half of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

**Daria IOAN:** Jon Fosse's writing is simple and yet very deep, philosophical sometimes. He uses words, sounds or blocks of language to recreate language itself, to rebuild the ways of communication between common people of our contemporary age. He can be very poetic, in plays like *Someone is Going to Come*, where the main refrain about the fear of a third presence is expressed by suggestive images of the house and the sea, or like *I Am the Wind*, where everything seems to mean something else, two friends floating in a grey soundscape slowly disappearing. The poetry is created by variations and repetitions of words or sounds, with the help of some techniques which Fosse masters so well. He has even invented a system of communicating by syllables, in *Sa ka la*, the play about the old woman who cannot speak anymore but for uttering syllables.

**Unni LANGÅS:** When you open a book by Jon Fosse, it is immediately clear that you are reading a book by Jon Fosse. His writing is unique, and nobody has even tried to imitate this exceptional literature. Be it prose or poetry, drama or children's books, his texts are shaped in ways that are essentially artificial. The reader cannot avoid noticing that he or she is reading literature, not because of meta-reflections or anti-realistic techniques, but because of a curious experience of being exposed to a well-known world in an unfamiliar appearance. The words and sentences are simple, but an extensive use of repetitions and different temporal layers construct inner and outer landscapes with debts and complexities.

**Ovio OLARU:** In his own words, while quoting a short-sighted critic who destroyed him in a review of one of his earlier works, I would say that Fosse's works possess a form of "redundant redundance," in the sense of consolidating his poetic universe through a form of repetition that would render most works by any other less talented author prone to become simple background noise. And the traits of this redundance: first of all, repetition; second, a form of almost unbearable insistence on the banal and the commonplace, creating a cadence of reading that is, indeed, almost impossible to maintain in translation, not least on account of the expressive minimalism inherent to nynorsk – shorter words, less rigid grammatical forms –, the apparent phonetic monotony – kj [ç] occurring nearly every line in "Tenkjer eg" ["I think"] –, and the lack of historical landmarks and even of a historically determined vocabulary. Therefore, in a figurative and a literal way alike, Fosse's prose is ahistorical, refusing any classification and any social implications. Which gives for a very enjoyable, albeit "aesthetic" read.

**Carmen VIOREANU:** Each of Fosse's plays is like a musical score of words. Behind there is a very complex story, articulated by Fosse in the beautiful Nynorsk language so simply (which is so challenging and often so frustrating for the

translator). Each little scene is part of a whole. Everything is being repeated and echoed in the world of Fosse's characters. Silence is as important as the spoken word, perhaps more so. In a way, Jon Fosse is semantic decoder of human thoughts. Space seems eternal, as are the inner struggles his characters fight. Fosse's characters are conditioned by this space, without this space they would not exist in this form with these thoughts and insights. The word seems trapped in both a mental and a physical space. Like space, time is also fluid: past, present, and future are intertwined. Everything repeats itself; the characters have been through this before, are going through this right now and will go through this again. All these elements create that emblematic Fosse-polyphony. I see Fosse's plays as a combination of raw chamber play, dream play and travel drama. Overall, there is an intrinsic link between his poetry, prose and plays.

**Henning HOWLID WÆRP:** A simple plot of existential character, basic emotions, a rhythmic repetition of utterances that gives a meditative effect. A feeling of going deeper and deeper into the questions raised.

**Lisbeth P. WÆRP:** Contents: Deeply existential subjects – life and death, love, jealousy, loss, grief, loneliness, restlessness, anxiety, melancholy, art, religion. Stylistic approach: Poeticity and musicality. Simplicity, concentration, stylization: Simple language, situations rather than action, few, often nameless and typified characters. Insisting and suggestive repetitions of words, situations, and motives (cf. theme with variations principle in music), monologized dialogue, double exposure of situations.

#### **4. Do you think the Norwegian landscape has shaped in any way the writing of Jon Fosse?**

**Anamaria BABIAȘ-CIOBANU:** Jon Fosse has acknowledged that the Norwegian landscape and cultural context have influenced his writing. The natural environment of Norway contributes to the atmosphere and themes in his writings. If I were to mention such examples, the vast and sometimes remote nature of the Norwegian landscape can contribute to themes such as isolation and solitude in Fosse's writing. Fosse's works often reflect a strong sense of place, but his characters/figures do not always see it or understand it. The natural surroundings can become an integral part of the story, influencing the mood and setting, just like in his last play *Hav* [Sea]. The distinct seasons in Norway, with long winters and short summers, could potentially influence the temporal aspect of Fosse's works. Seasonal changes are reflected in the mood and atmosphere of his narratives.

Norwegian literature, in general, often reflects a deep connection to nature. Fosse's writing may tap into this tradition, exploring the relationship between characters and the natural world. However, an author can be shaped by a variety of factors, and his relationship with his surroundings is often complex. While these influences can be identified, it's important to remember that Jon Fosse's writing is multifaceted, and various elements contribute to its richness. His exploration of universal themes, such as existential questions and human relationships, transcends the specific geographical and cultural context. Fosse's ability to weave the particularities of the Norwegian landscape into broader, more universal themes is a testament to the depth and versatility of his writing.

**Zsofia DOMSA:** Yes, the nature and climate of western Norway have a lot to say about the mood of Fosse's works. The sound of the rain, the sound of the waves, is a constant, incessant rhythm in Fosse's writing. The repetitions that are a recurring feature of his writing can also be interpreted as an aesthetic transformation of these natural sounds. In his essay *Dei store fiskeaugo* [The Large Fish Eyes], for example, he links the rhythm of his writing to the movement of the waves. However, it is not a romantic landscape that we must imagine, it is a shadow landscape, an oppressive landscape that surrounds the main characters, who often see their fear, fear of death or longing for death reflected in their surroundings. This is not to say that all of Fosse's works are set in the countryside, by the sea, but even the stories set in urban environments are characterized by a gloomy atmosphere that is associated with rainy Western Norway, primarily Bergen. It is important, however, that Fosse does not depict landscapes in the same way as other authors. His landscapes are sketched with sparse elements, they are backdrops, but seem to live and breathe at the same pace as the characters we meet in Fosse's novels and dramas.

**Daria IOAN:** Certainly, Jon Fosse is very fond of the Norwegian landscape. If we look at all his work, we often see the water, in the form of the sea or the depths of a fjord. This element, present in the everyday life of the inhabitants of Fosse's area, is very important in this theatre. Even for the book I wrote about it, I felt it natural and maybe necessary to put on the front cover a picture I had taken of a boat on a lake while I was travelling by train from Oslo to Bergen to meet Fosse for my interview. After our discussion about his plays, I remember he told me many things about his boat and how much work it implies to take care of one, what it means to go out to sea. Another element that can be felt as strongly present in Fosse's universe is the rain and the sensation of being wet. The rain accompanies transitions or transformations in his plays. Whether it appears in a city or a wild landscape, rain is a mysterious catalyst in this theatre. It makes

the transition to great changes. As we know, Norwegian weather is mostly rainy, so, yes, the elements of the specific landscape reflect in Jon Fosse's writing.

**Unni LANGÅS:** Fosse grew up on the western coast of Norway, and we can probably tie his frequent descriptions of the sea to this fact. His landscape is first and foremost coastal, and the waves are complete with significance both as motifs and as rhythms. However, the international success of Fosse is probably not explained by fascinating descriptions of the Norwegian landscape, but by universal topics such as life and death, the presence of a troubling past, anxiety, hope, and faith.

**Ovio OLARU:** I would not say so. Fosse was influenced rather than shaped by the sparsely populated Vestlandet, which happens to overlap with his shy and withdrawn demeanor, but an introverted Catholic such as himself could have written *Septologien* [Septology] in the middle of a sprawling and disturbingly noisy New York just as well. It just so happens that the two aesthetic models, the lonely, hypnotic narrative voice and the harsh, monotonous environment converge.

**Carmen VIOREANU:** Jon Fosse is anchored in the landscape of his homeland, like many of the great writers of the world literature. I remember visiting Jon at his place in Bergen in August 2009. The terrace was very close to the water. He shared with me how important this landscape was to have the balance to create. The West-Norwegian landscape is an inherent part of Fosse's polyphonic universe. In many of Fosse's plays the characters seem to exist in limbo, not just mentally, but also geographically. They are trapped in the fjord, in this physical space of passage to the vast sea. It is a space to which the Fosse's characters feel drawn both horizontally and vertically.

**Henning HOWLID WÆRP:** Yes. The setting in Fosse's works is often a rural landscape on the west coast of Norway, alongside a fjord. The country road, the single house, the boathouse, the small fishing boat, the sea. Few people, few buildings. Modernism is often linked to urbanism, big cities. Jon Fosse, as Tarjei Vesaas, represents a rarer rural modernism.

**Lisbeth P. WÆRP:** Although it is highly stylized, Fosse obviously has his favorite topography – the West Norwegian mountains and deep fjords, and uses it for visualizing existential states and modes; take for instance the recurring image of a man in a tiny, fragile wooden boat on a deep fjord, or a woman looking out on the stormy sea from the window of a lonely house on a desolate hillside.

## 5. Which of Jon Fosse's works would you recommend to a reader who wants to get acquainted with the writer's oeuvre?

**Zsofia DOMSA:** For beginners, I would recommend *Morgon og kveld* [Morning and Evening] and *Melancholia I and II* [Melancholy I and II]. I would also recommend reading the dramas *Nokon kjem til å komme* [Someone is Going to Come], *Namnet* [The Name], *Draum om hausten* [Dream of Autumn] and *Dødsvariasjonar* [Death Variations]. For those who are more experienced Fosse readers, I would recommend continuing with *Naustet* [Boathouse], which is an early novel, but it can still be a good introduction to the great work *Septologien* [Septology]. For those who prefer to read a short but enigmatic, beautiful and brutal text, I would recommend the trilogy *Andvake* [Wakefulness], *Olavs draumar* [Olav's Dreams], *Kvældsvævd* [Weariness]. My personal favourite among the prose works is *Stengd gitar* [Closed guitar]. The drama *Ein sommars dag* [A Summer's Day] also has many strange aspects, and many formal and thematic elements that characterize Fosse's writing. But I believe that Fosse's adaptations and reinterpretations of classics such as *Døden i Theben* [Death in Thebes] and *Edda* also provide a great reading experience, although these are best experienced in a stage production. I would also recommend Fosse's literature for children. *Hundemanuskripta I-II-III* [The Dog Manuscripts], *Uendeleg seint* [Eternally late] and *Kant* can be read to small and slightly older children, and even though there is a gloomy mood over *Spelejenta* [The Violin Girl], I would also recommend it for children. Among the essays, *Når ein engel går gjennom scenen* [When an Angel Goes Through the Stage] is an important introduction to understanding Fosse's *ars poetica*. *Frå telling via showing to writing* summarizes much of what characterizes Fosse's novel aesthetics. Since I am from Hungary, I would also like to highlight a short essay about the cats in Hungary, in the essay *Kattane i Ungarn*. As a matter of fact, *Når ein engel går gjennom scenen* [When an Angel Goes Through the Stage] is also based on a theatre expression Fosse heard from his Hungarian friends, in the early 1990s.

**Daria IOAN:** *Someone is Going to Come* is, for sure, one of the most significant plays Fosse has written. But I would also recommend *I Am the Wind*, which is equally poetic and more elusive about the physical space, it challenges the senses more, creating a haptic reality where we, as readers, get lost between dialogues, refrains and infinity.

**Unni LANGÅS:** His recent series of seven novels, *Septologien* [Septology], is a masterpiece, but maybe not the right place to start. Shorter novels, like *Naustet* [Boathouse], *Det er Ales* [Aliss at the Fire], or *Morgon og kveld* [Morning and Evening], are perhaps more accessible.

**Ovio OLARU:** *Morgon og kveld* [Morning and Evening].

**Carmen VIOREANU:** In my opinion, Fosse's work is democratic, accessible to everyone. All you have to do is take a moment, put down any electronic device and enter the Fosse Land. It's a therapeutic moment just for you. For the uninitiated I recommend, in this order, some of his plays (*Nokon kjem til å komme*, *Jenta i sofaen*, *Ein sommarsdag*, *Eg er vinden* and *Svevn*) [Someone is Going to Come, The Girl on the Sofa, A Summer's Day, I Am the Wind and Sleep] and any poetry volume (maybe even the first one, *Engel med vatn i augene*, *Angel with Water in Its Eyes*). Then the novel *Melancholia* [Melancholy].

**Henning HOWLID WÆRP:** The novel *Naustet* (1989, "The Boat House") is a good start, it is a text about friendship, jealousy, love and death. It is also an exciting story, spanning over three days, one summer, on the west coast of Norway.

**Lisbeth P. WÆRP:** Perhaps one of the shorter novels and one of the earlier dramas, for instance *Nokon kjem til å komme* [Someone is Going to Come, drama, 1992] and *Andvake* [Wakefulness, novel, 2007].

## **6. As a translator, how have you approached Jon Fosse's writings? Which are your favorite works by Fosse?**

**Anamaria BABIAȘ-CIOBANU:** Translating Jon Fosse's writings presents an unique set of challenges and requires a careful consideration of his distinctive writing style and thematic elements. Here are some considerations and approaches I take into consideration as a translator: Fosse is known for his minimalist and light style. One needs to pay close attention to the economy of language and the use of repetition. It can be a struggle to convey this simplicity and precision in the target language. Fosse's works often have a rhythmic quality, influenced by his background in theatre and music. I try to preserve the rhythm and cadence of the original language, as this contributes to the overall atmosphere of his writing. Fosse's writing often involves ambiguity and moments of silence. As a translator, one may need to navigate these subtleties and find equivalents in the target language. Striking a balance between fidelity to the original and ensuring clarity for readers is fundamental. Moreover, familiarizing oneself with the existential themes that are prevalent in Fosse's works, as well as concepts of identity, mortality, and the human condition are central to his writing. One's challenge is to ensure that these themes are accurately conveyed and resonate in the translated text. Fosse's dialogue is often intimate and introspective. Hence,

it is important to pay attention to the nuances of interpersonal communication in the original text and strive to maintain the same level of intimacy and depth in the translated dialogue. One approach that I find crucial, is to stay informed about existing translations of Fosse's works, if available. This can help one understand how other translators have approached similar challenges and provide insights into different linguistic choices. I believe translation is both an art and a skill, and finding the right balance between fidelity to the original and readability in the target language is key. It's also beneficial to be aware of the cultural and literary context of both the source and target languages to produce a translation that captures the essence of Jon Fosse's unique literary voice.

**Daria IOAN:** I read Fosse in various languages, not only Nynorsk. There were interesting shapes of the sounds and nuances of expressions that the other translators have noticed and highlighted in French or English. Personally, I am very fond of the French translations and of their understanding of Fosse. I have also seen very good productions of Fosse's plays in Paris. I am fascinated with the short words in Nynorsk and the precision of the variations that Fosse composed in every play. In Romanian, words are much longer and the effect, the prolonged silence that is so important for this kind of theatre, was difficult to render. Nynorsk has also a specific sound, as Jon Fosse says himself, a specific atmosphere which is unique. It was an interesting and creative kind of work to shift to the Romanian. My favorite works are *A Summer's Day*, *I Am the Wind*, *Sleep my Baby Sleep*. But I love them all.

**Ovio OLARU:** My favorites are *Trilogien* [Trilogy] and the previously mentioned *Morgon og kveld* [Morning and Evening].

**Carmen VIOREANU:** I first learned about Jon Fosse in 2001, when Andreea Vălean, a Romanian director, mentioned him to me; she had heard about him from colleagues in Germany. Andreea asked me to read some of his plays, because she was interested in staging one of them in Romania. I already had a good collaboration with Berit Gullberg and her agency Colombine in Stockholm, who also represented Fosse. Thus, I immediately received plays by Fosse from Colombine. There was a rush of excitement when I read the plays submitted by Berit. I was extremely happy that Fosse was writing in Nynorsk, a language I felt very attracted to and had already learned through dedicated individual study. Still, I've always had the impression that I learned Nynorsk from Fosse. He has been an absolute mentor for me, because not only did I learn the language from him, but his writing has also influenced me as a dramatic writer. The first plays I translated were *Nokon kjem til å komme* [Someone is Going to Come] and *Jenta i sofaen* [The Girl on the Sofa]. I translated in a very good rhythm, driven by passion for

the newness that was opening up in front of me. I was also driven by the enthusiasm of some Romanian theatre people, especially the director Radu Afrim and Adrian Ștefan, at that time a fresh acting student. Between 2002 and 2008 I translated 13 plays by Fosse. For *Nokon kjem til å komme* and *Jenta i sofaen* I also organized reading performances at Act Theatre in March 2003 (directed by Radu Afrim). Another reading performance of the play *Svevn*, [Sleep] (directed by me) was presented at the Teatrul Mic in Bucharest in June 2008, as part of my project *Voices of the North/Norwegian Contemporary Theater* (supported, among others, by the Norwegian Embassy in Bucharest). In the meantime, six of these plays translated by me have had premieres at theatres in Bucharest and other cities. Thanks to NORLA's support, I also managed to publish six of the translated plays in the volume „Cineva are să vină. Cinci piese de teatru” at Unitext Publishing House in 2003 and „Frumos” at Vremea Publishing House in 2008. With Fosse's permission, in 2008 I wrote a script based on the plays *Ein sommarsdag* [A Summer's Day] and *Eg er vinden* [I am the Wind], which I named *Asle*. The play *Asle*, in which Valeria Seciu and Adrian Ștefan were to play the lead roles, was never staged. Our team ran into financial difficulties, we couldn't find theatres and sponsors who were interested in our project. Then, as part of the project *Scandinavian Contemporary Poetry. Translation and Mediatization in Digital Public Spaces* that I organized in the academic year 2014/2015 with the students of the University of Bucharest, members of the Society of Scandinavian Studies, we also translated a small selection of poetry by Fosse. In recent years I have also worked as a mentor for young translators from Scandinavian languages into Romanian. One of the translations I mentored was *Jente i gul regnjakke: eit bilete*, [Girl in Yellow Raincoat, translated by David Gabriel in 2015]. When asked which is my favorite Fosse's work, I answer without hesitation: *Ein sommarsdag* [A Summer's Day].

**Anamaria BABIAȘ-CIOBANU**, PhD (2018), is author of *Jon Fosse and the New Theatre* (Școala Ardeleană, 2020) and translator of Jon Fosse's *Umbre*. She has published articles in revista *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai Philologia*: "Language and Identity in Norway" (vol. 58, no. 2, 2013, pp. 167-176.), "A Short Example of Jon Fosse's Dramaturgy. The Play 'Sov du vesle barnet mitt'" (vol. 59, no.1, 2014, pp. 87-99), "From Ibsen to Beckett: Aspects of the Human Condition" (vol. 60, no. 1, 2015, pp. 133-147).

**Zsofia DOMSA** is Associate Professor in Nordic literature at NTNU. She wrote her master's thesis on Jon Fosse's *Og aldri skal vi skiljast* at ELTE University in Budapest in 2001. Her PhD with the title *Vakkert, stygt og sårt* (2009) dealt with Fosse's path to the theatre and his early drama. She has written about Fosse's drama and prose in a number of publications and has translated several of his

plays into Hungarian. She currently lectures on Fosse's writing and has also researched Fosse's children's literature.

**Heming H. GUJORD** is Professor of Nordic literatures at the Department for Linguistic, Literary and Aesthetic Studies, the University of Bergen. He has published extensively on the relations between literature, politics, and ideology, especially regarding the works of Olav Duun and Kjartan Fløgstad. From 2011-2016 Gujord was coeditor of *Norsk litterær årbok*.

**Daria IOAN** specializes in visual arts. She completed a PhD in theater and another one in Cinematography-Photography-Media at the Faculty of Theater and Film, Babeş-Bolyai University, and is currently teaching Photography in the same university. She has a special interest in Indian culture. She writes on visual arts and anthropology, she is the author of *Jon Fosse's Theatre* (2013), of more than 40 articles on visual arts and theatre and of photography exhibitions, such as *Vanishing Acts* (2023), *India. People, Waters, Boats* (2023), and *Karma Gokarna* (2018). She has translated Jon Fosse's plays *The Man with the Guitar*, *Rambuku* and *I Am the Wind* into Romanian. In 2018, her translation of *Rambuku* got the Uniter Prize for the best performance, directed by Mihai Măniuțiu.

**Ovio OLARU** is Assistant Professor of German Language and Literature with the Department of Anglo-American and German Studies at Lucian Blaga University of Sibiu. His fields of research include German, Romanian, and Scandinavian studies, as well as Digital Humanities. He is also a translator of Scandinavian literature. He co-edited *Beyond the Iron Curtain. Revisiting the Literary System of Communist Romania* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2021) and *The German Model in Romanian Culture* (Berlin: Peter Lang, upcoming).

**Unni LANGÅS** is Professor of Scandinavian literature at the University of Agder, Kristiansand, Norway. She has published several articles on Jon Fosse's fiction and dramatic works, and is now head of the research project *Making Memories. Contemporary Aesthetic Articulations of Norway in the Second World War* (2022-2026).

**Carmen VIOREANU** is Associate Professor in Swedish Philology and Scandinavian Studies at the University of Bucharest (Romania). Translator of theatre plays and novels from Swedish, Norwegian, Danish and Icelandic into Romanian.

**Henning HOWLID WÆRP** is Professor of Nordic literature at UiT – The Arctic University of Norway, campus Tromsø. He is for the academic year 2023/2024 a

visiting scholar at UC Berkeley, USA, working within the field of animal studies. His latest published book is: *“Hele livet en vandrer i naturen.” Økokritiske problemstillinger i Knut Hamsuns forfatterskap* (Orkana 2019).

**Lisbeth P. WÆRP** is Professor of Scandinavian Literature at UiT – The Arctic University of Norway, Faculty of Humanities, Social Sciences and Education, Department of Culture and Literature, Tromsø, Norway. She is on the Editorial Board of *Ibsen Studies* and has published numerous articles about, among others, Henrik Ibsen and Knut Hamsun.