



The Man Who Loves to Repeat

Fredrik Brattberg is acclaimed all over the world for his innovative drama.

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Engelsk versjon av May-Brit Akerholt

I ring the doorbell of a white brick house in Porsgrunn.

Here lives Fredrik Brattberg (44). His name is still quite unknown in Norway, but internationally, he is one of our most critically acclaimed dramatists.

His plays are translated to 20 languages, and are produced on stages all over the world. In Germany, Czechoslovakia and France he's played by the largest theatre companies, and named as a genius in

the national newspapers. *Les Echos* describes his plays as “family drama of pure magic.”

This author is a genius

L'EXPRESS

When people praise Brattberg's plays, it's often their form they focus on. Because where most playwrights tell a continuous story from beginning to end, Fredrik likes repeating the same scene again and again and again ...

The door is opened.

– Are you afraid of dogs? Fredrik asks. He's holding a barking brown dachs in his right hand.

– *No, that's okay, I say.*

– Gulla is really nice. She only barks when she meets new people, her owner explains.



THE DRAMATIST: After Jon Fosse and Arne Lygre, Fredrik Brattberg is the most performed Norwegian author internationally. His plays are staged in China, Indonesia, Australia, USA and Iceland, among other countries.

FOTO: SINDRE THORESEN LØNNES / NRK

Fredrik invites me into the living room. He's about to give me a guided tour around the house when I suddenly remember:

- Shit! I forgot my glasses in the car. Won't be a minute.

An international Theatre Star

I ring the doorbell of a white brick house in Porsgrunn.

– Come straight in, the door's open!

I open the door, walk into the house. It smells dog and coffee. Fredrik puts his head out from the kitchen with a cup of coffee in his hand.

– Coffee? he asks.

– *Yes thanks, I answer.*



THE DRAMATIST: After Jon Fosse and Arne Lygre, Fredrik Brattberg is the most played Norwegian dramatist internationally. His plays are staged in Denmark, Italy, Finland, Netherland and Ireland, among other countries.

FOTO: SINDRE THORESEN LØNNES / NRK

Lately, he has stayed quietly at home, to finish his next play. But he often travels around the world, in order to catch different productions. Before Christmas, he came home from Turkey and Romania, where he'd seen six different productions of his works.

– That's one of the greatest things about being a dramatist.

In these days, *The Returning*, one of his most well-known pieces, is being shown on Israel's National Theatre in Tel Aviv.

The play is about two parents who lose their son. They are grieving deeply, but suddenly there's a knock on the door, and their son isn't dead after all. Then he disappears again, and his parents think he's dead once more, but then he returns again. And so it keeps going.

After a while, the parents can't keep on grieving, and they become more and more indifferent to their son's death.



THE LOST / RETURNED SON: According to director Raz Weiner, the audience often stays in the auditorium to talk about what they've seen. "It's almost been impossible to get them out!" he's said in an interview in *Scenekunst* (Journal of Performing Arts).

– In Israel, the play was seen as a kind of criticism against how the Jews grieve. Young Jews today must still grieve over the Holocaust. They inherit their parent's grief. But in my play, this grief disappears. In other countries it's interpreted differently.

The repetitive form is characteristic of all of Fredrik's plays. In Norway, Katta Shadow Theatre has recently toured with *Jesu Resurrection and Death*. The plays is about Jesus' death, he's resurrected, dies, is resurrected, dies ... (well, you get the idea).



JESUS: The start of Fredrik's death is quite similar to the Bible's story about Jesus' death and resurrection. He's caught again, sentenced to death again, and so it goes.

FOTO: MARTIN ELDØY / KATTAS FIGURTEATER

Fredrik's untraditional method is hardly incidental. Because he has quite a different background than most of his colleagues.

– The plan was never to become a playwright, Fredrik says.

He starts to look for a few sheets of music from the bookshelves when I suddenly remember;

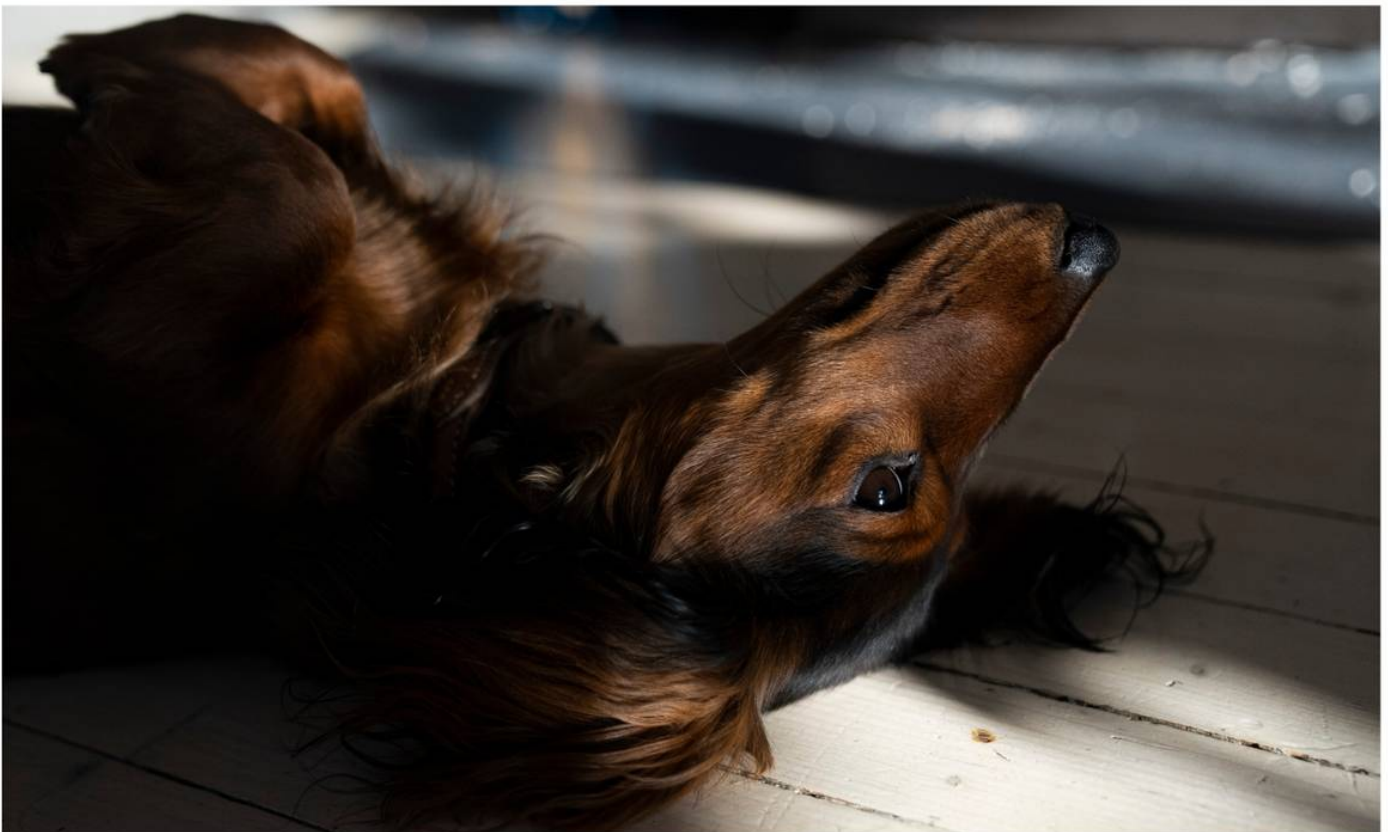
– *Shit! I really want to hear more about this. But I forgot the sound recorder in the car. Won't be a minute!*

The Composer

I ring the doorbell of a white brick house in Porsgrunn.

No one opens. I carefully try the doorhandle, it's unlocked. I walk in. In the hall, I hear classic music from the living room. Behind the piano sits Fredrik, eyes closed, playing Mozart's piano sonata no.6. On the floor is Gulla, yowling to the music.

– When I bought a dog, I didn't know she was going to sing every time I play the piano. It's full-on howling, Fredrik says, somewhat resigned.



He started to become interested in classic music at the end of primary school. Then he was given his first CD player, that came with a CD of Johann Strauss thrown in.

– It was so refreshing! I was totally spell-bound by the music. It was at that time I got the childish dream about becoming a composer, and write my own music.

At junior school, Fredrik started to take piano lessons, then came the music strand at senior school, before he travelled the larger world to try his luck as a composer. After a while, he ended up in the small Canadian mountain city Banff, where he was hired to write an opera with the Canadian dramatist Lance Woolaver.

During the work with the opera, a new and revolutionary thought started to germinate in Fredrik's head. As a composer, he was used to repeat the same musical motif again and again.

Could he “compose” a play in the same way?



– Let's take a lyrical piece by Grieg. First you get melody A, then melody B, then the exact same melody A comes again. In a novel,

you'll never experience that chapter 1 and 3 are completely the same, but in a musical or dramatic piece, it makes sense.

– *Why does it make sense?*

– Do you have paper and pen? Then I can explain it better.

– *I have a notebook in the car. Just a moment. Won't be a minute.*

The Dramatist

I walk in the door of a white brick house in Porsgrunn.

Gulla meets me in the hall. She takes me into the library, where Fredrik sits in his armchair, the way he often does when he wants to hatch new ideas, with the Mac in his lap, and classic music over the sound system.



IN THE WRITING ROOM: On the top shelf is the Ibsen Prize that Fredrik won for *The Repetitions* in 2012. He also won the Czech drama prize Ferdinand Vaněk Award in 2017, and was nominated for the French drama award Le Prix Godot in 2016, and The Hedda Prize in 2020.

FOTO: SINDRE THORESEN LØNNES / NRK

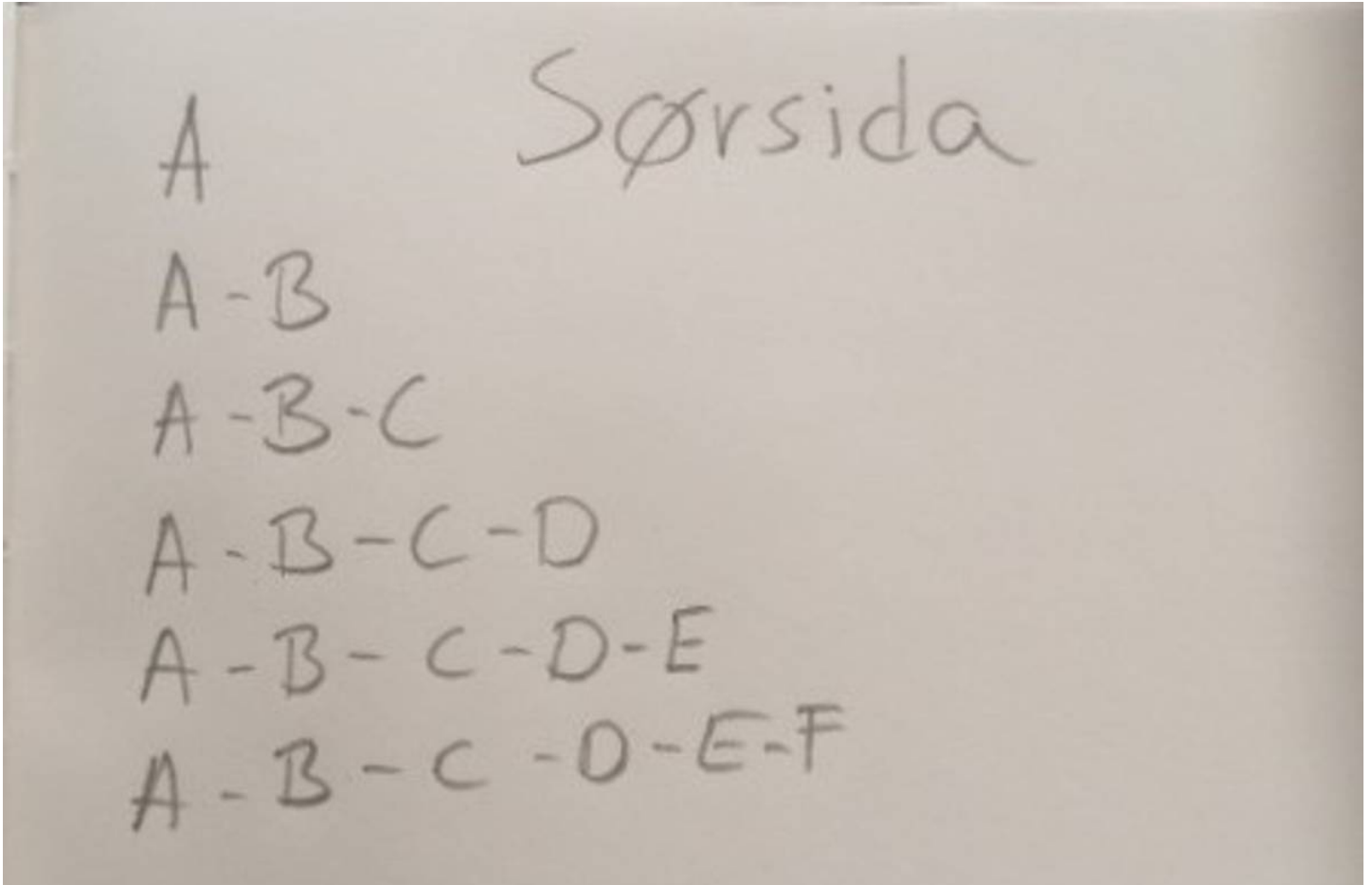
I give him pen and paper, and he begins to draw and explain.

– A piece of music is first interpreted by the musician who reads the notes. When something is repeated, it becomes created in an interpretation-space, because even if the notes are the same, the musician will never play them the same way. The same is true of an actor in a play.

When music or drama are played, it's interpreted by an audience. In a novel, it's usual to say that the meaning is hidden between the lines, but according to Fredrik, the meaning of his texts is between the repetitions.

– We see how the characters perform in the first round, then we see how they perform in the second round. If we had only seen the

second, we hadn't understood anything, but because we compare it with the first, it gives meaning.



COMPOSITION: For each new line, the play starts from the beginning again. In the play "The South Side", the first scene (A) is repeated five times in all.

In *The South Side*, we meet a child, two parents and two grandparents who are holidaying in a summer house by the sea. One day, the father wants to take the daughter to the south side of the island to swim, something that creates a sense of unease with the others in the family. The uneasiness grows and becomes more obvious each time the day is repeated.

– In the text, the first and second scene are identical, but on stage, they're never the same, because both the actors and the audience know that this is the second time, and then they have a different experience.

During the second round, we unconsciously start to look for small changes. Was there something with the tone of voice that was

different? More heartfelt? More hesitant? And the hug between the two characters? Wasn't it a bit longer in the first round?



THE SOUTH SIDE: Fredrik believes that theatre ought to strive to be as abstract as possible, and become closer to music, by giving the audience experiences that they cannot quite put to word.

FOTO: MAGNUS SKREDE / DEN NATIONALE SCENE

When *The South Side* was staged on The National Scene in Bergen in 2019, the national paper *Dagbladet* thought the piece moved in “a border land between a dream play and an intimate family drama”. Fredrik’s plays are often described as ‘absurd’ and ‘surrealistic’. But according to him, this is a misunderstanding.

For what is actually ‘realistic’?

Is life a streamlined history, with a distinct development from beginning to end – or are we muddling around in a long series of repetitions?



– Sorry, I really have to start making dinner, Fredrik says. The kids will be home soon. Perhaps you could take a trip to the shop, to buy some flatbread?

– *Yes, of course. I'll jump in the car at once, won't be a minute!*

An intimate family drama

I stand outside a white brick house in Porsgrunn.

The sun has gone down, and my stomach is growling. I can see Fredrik stirring a large casserole through the window.



I ring the bell and walk in through the door. In the hall I meet Gulla, she doesn't bark, as well as Fredrik's two children: Sigve (8) og Ylva (11).

– I hope you like stew, Fredrik says on his way from the kitchen, carrying the casserole between his hands.

We sit around the table, and start to eat while we talk about how our day has been. Sigve tells us that he wants a fog machine for his

birthday. His father answers evasively. Very many of Fredrik's plays are about everyday situations like this.

– I have to care about what I'm writing. And in the final instance, it's the life I live here, in this street with my children, that matters, Fredrik says.



According to Fredrik, the day is the ultimate repetition. In his most recent play, *Break of Day*, we get to see what happens if the day is broken up. We meet a family who do the everyday things again and

again; they get up, brush their teeth, eat breakfast, go to work and school, shop food, make dinner, do homework, watch TV, go to bed.

But then the day starts to slide in different directions. After a while, the father is watching TV, while the daughter is sleeping, and the mother is brushing her teeth before she's going to work. The play provokes an uncomfortable feeling, because without the common repetitions, the family disintegrates.

– They become disoriented as to what time of day it is. The family moves from being a mutual wheel, to being three different circles. In music, we'll say that they are polyphonic, Fredrik explains.

Break of Day has already been translated to English, German, French, Turkish, Rumanian and Czech. The world premiere will be at Anthatisches Teater in Dessau, Germany, in 2024.

As far as I'm concerned, it's time to go home. I say my goodbyes with Fredrik and his family and sit down in my car. On my way down the driveway, I suddenly remember:

— *Shit! I left my mobile in the living room.*



I ring the doorbell of a white brickhouse in Porsgrunn ...

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