

# JON FOSSE, THE NOBEL PRIZE, AND THE ART OF WHAT CAN'T BE NAMED

*In his novels and plays, the Norwegian author has continually probed the  
limits of the perceptible world.*

**By Merve Emre**

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In Oslo, in September, I attended the preview of Jon Fosse's play “I Svarte Skogen Inne” (“Inside the Black Forest”). The theatre was small and dark, without a stage, and the scenery was minimal: a large illuminated rock in the middle, some scattered trees, and the audience members, many of whom were seated in folding chairs ringed around the rock. A trumpeter entered first, blowing long, melancholy notes, followed by a young man. The man explained that he had gone for a drive and, when his car had stalled, he had wandered into the woods. It grew darker and colder, and the audience heard the voices of an older man and an older woman speak about the young man, expressing their distress at the direction his life had taken. Then, without warning, a young woman appeared.

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### **Jon Fosse's Search for Peace**

*The author speaks with Merve Emre on where his body of work comes from.*

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She was called a younger woman in the script, but it would have been better to describe her as a presence—or, to borrow the title of Fosse's new novel, “Kvitleik,” a shining. She was a modern angel, a peroxide blonde with stern cheekbones, in a glittering white slip dress and a white fur stole. Her hair was cropped. Her feet were bare and beautiful and caught the light from the rock with each step. She spoke to the man, urging him to return home. As he roamed the theatre, trembling, followed by her voice and the trumpet, he stopped right next to the chairs of the audience members to argue, to plead, although it was not always clear for what. “My own shame is bigger than myself,” he screamed. I watched the faces of the audience; most of them remained impassive, stony. They looked down at their hands or feet and away from his stricken face. In their withdrawal, they seemed no different from the trees that surrounded them.

The play was performed in Norwegian, and, although I had read the English translation of the script, by May-Brit Akerholt, beforehand, I did not

understand the words as they were being spoken. It was strange to realize how little this mattered. The light, the trumpet, the sweat and the shame of the young man, the profound indifference of the world to him—all of it exceeded language. His characters seemed to know this as well as I did. “But there’s something there,” the older man said to the older woman. “Yes, larger than life, or at least something else other than life. But can you say something like that?” “No, not really,” she responded. “For everything just becomes words.”

When the Swedish Academy awarded the 2023 Nobel Prize in Literature to Fosse yesterday, they described his colossal, genre-spanning body of work as giving “voice to the unsayable.” What I think the Academy meant is that, across his forty-odd plays, his novels, his essays, and his children’s books, what is unsayable—the absolute depths of abandonment, shame, love, and grace—is felt without needing to be named, surpassing the mere arrangement of words on a page.

It is easiest to see in the light and music of Fosse’s plays, more of which I hope will make their way to English-language audiences in the coming years. But we see it, too, in the lines that open Fosse’s seven-book masterpiece, “Septology,” translated into English by Damion Searls. “And I see myself standing and looking at the picture with the two lines that cross in the middle, one purple line, one brown line, it’s a painting wider than it is high and I see that I’ve painted the lines slowly,” Asle, the narrator of the series, thinks. He knows that the essence of a painting is its ability to create a convincing illusion of depth, and that one looks at it to find some elaborate meaning behind appearances. The illusion is created by the dripping lines of the painting, its representation of the cross of St. Andrew. But it is also created by the space that surrounds these lines—the flatness and the forbidding blankness of the canvas—that is everything that the painting is not. Together, what is absent and what is present create the painting’s sense of wholeness, the totality of its form.

If a man stands in front of a painting what can he understand about the essence of what he sees? That there exists “an emptiness? a nothingness? a distance? yes, maybe yes, yes maybe it’s a distance,” Asle thinks. The image of the cross

reminds him of how far he is from divinity. The only way for him to believe that divinity might exist somewhere within the painting is by committing to the reality of what he cannot see, hear, or touch; of what remains invisible, ineffable, and unfathomable; of what he knows to exist only by virtue of its absence from the worldly limits of our perception. This absent presence is perceived by Asle as the “soft invisible light” that emanates from the painting. This light is an extension or an emissary of God, the light that emanates from the dark in the writings of the medieval German theologian Meister Eckhart, which Asle reads and recites throughout “Septology.”

The soft invisible light assures Asle that the painting bears the possibility of transcendence. The painting is vaster and more varied than its surface suggests, and suffused with a meaning that cannot be explained or captured by any of our tools. We cannot point to or photograph the soft invisible light. We cannot pin it down or imprison it, the way that children catch fireflies in glass jars. We cannot study it by measuring its frequency in either broken particles or unbroken waves. We cannot know it. We can only sense it, and, sensing it, believe in it.

Paradoxically, the reality to which Asle must commit is a form of unreality, at least according to our empiricist standards of knowledge. But, if we believe in the integrity of our belief, then the distance between illusion and reality shrinks to nothing. What we gain in the process is an astonishing freedom from the rational world. Some might describe the faith that one has in unreality as the belief in God. Others might call it the art of fiction. I do not think Jon Fosse would mind what you or I call this faith, so long as we allow for the possibility that it exists. ♦



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