

## **Unwrapping *A Doll's House*.**

*TORVALD: All will be revealed when the Christmas tree is lit.*

Critics and audiences received the first performances of *A Doll's House* in 1879 with shock and dismay. It was not that nineteenth-century marriages did not dissolve over lies and secrets about debt, what today we might call "financial infidelity." Moreover, men in that society could be overbearing and controlling and wives did leave their families and set out on their own. Nonetheless, Ibsen's critique of inequality in marriage and his sanction of self-determination over social duty struck at the very cornerstone of middle-class society and morality. The idea of telling such a story on the stage and not redeeming the conclusion through either a change of heart on the part of the heroine or an appropriate punishment (e.g., sanitarium, suicide) for her actions was too much for Ibsen's contemporaries.

In this production, we take Ibsen's realism and bring out the darker, more Gothic spirit of *A Doll's House*: the dark and gloomy family "castle" where family secrets dwell in the very architecture; the mysterious, unscrupulous stranger whose threat unfolds slowly with ever advancing consequences; a heroine whose already frenzied imagination bubbles over under the threat of past transgressions revealed.

The intermedial collaboration among our designers melds the stage and screen worlds, enhancing the uncanny already present in *A Doll's House*. Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 1892 short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," has been a particular touchstone to dramatizing Nora's intense and complicated interior world. An original score and the cast's detailed language of physical gesture foster this uniquely theatrical mise-en-scene for Ibsen's play. Ibsen himself embraced such theatricality, a mode of performance where the distance between reality and stage representation was enhanced instead of erased. In fact, it is this very feeling of recognition, of the strange yet familiar, which continues to make Ibsen's script so compelling, so threatening, and so relevant over 130 years after its first production.

*For whatever one's opinions of A Doll's House as a play may be, there can be no question of its startling unconventionality.*

--Licensed Victuallers' Mirror 11 Jun. 1889.

--Jules Odendahl-James, Production Dramaturg

## **Nora Helmer (1879 – Present)**

In an 1897 review, George Bernard Shaw described Nora's exit at the end of *A Doll's House*, as the "slam of [a] door ... more momentous than the canon of Waterloo [...] the end of a chapter of human history." In its first fifty years, this 'slam heard 'round the world' was, quite literally, performed around the world, with productions all over Western Europe as well as Poland, Iceland, Russia, the Ukraine, Japan, China, even the first English performance in Milwaukee, WI (1882).

Early notices of the play vehemently denounced Ibsen's controversial protagonist as a feminist monstrosity. Ibsen was accused of undermining the sanctity of marriage by dramatizing the unequal power between women and men and, to make matters worse, offering a non-idealized conclusion to domestic conflict. Critics were astounded by Nora's decision to leave her husband and family, as it defied Victorian conventions of both motherhood and womanhood. They feared Ibsen's dramaturgy set a dangerous precedent for female spectators. Based on the initial reviews, one would think we would never see this play again. However, *A Doll's House* and Nora have managed to withstand the test of time, becoming one of the most iconic plays and characters in the history of modern theatre.

Nora is a malleable icon. Playwrights, many of them female, have adapted the text to different places and cultures uncovering new resonances for new audiences. Nora's story has been transformed many times ranging from Ibsen's own rewrite for a German production where Torvald persuades Nora not to leave her children, painstakingly period recreations of an immaculate nineteenth-century home, a stage and film adaptation by Ingmar Bergman that distills the play to just Nora and her husband, dance and puppet show versions where the doll's house metaphor is made literal and the door slam moment is multiplied as many Nora's leave their confines. In the last ten years there has been an all female production, a *Mad Men* inspired transposition of Nora to the 1960s, a German revision where Nora shoots Torvald at the play's end, and an adaptation where Nora and Torvald are Lincoln Park yuppies who lose money in a bio-tech investment venture. Nora's acting challenge has been met by an array of performers including Eleanora Dusa, Jiang Qing (later and perhaps better known as Madame Mao), Joan Crawford, Jane Fonda, Janet McTeer and Jin Xing, the first transsexual woman approved by the Chinese government to perform a lead role in a theatrical production.

Ibsen's heroine was frowned upon for some of the reasons we admire her today – she was revolutionary, courageous and was willing to speak the truth that no one was ready to hear. The debates over the implications of her actions can almost make one forget that Nora is an invention and not a real person. And perhaps that confusion is Ibsen's greatest achievement. We have succeeded in doing what Torvald could not: to consider this woman, wife, and mother as "first and foremost a human being."

--Kim Solow, Assistant Dramaturg and Jules Odendahl-James, Dramaturg