

# Renovating the House

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One can only wonder what old Henrik would say about the post-modern age and its rather annoying insistence on revivalism and inscrutability. What might he say about Polly Teale's neo-expressionistic approach to his most celebrated play, *A Doll's House*, currently being performed at the Oxford Playhouse? What the hell have you done to it? seems a likely knee jerk reaction. But I imagine after a few hearty puffs on his pipe, he might grumble: *It doesn't know what it wants to be. Is it real or expressive?*

Up until the last twenty years, most productions of this play were at heart faithful to the dramatic realism it helped advance. When Ibsen wrote it in 1879 he was deliberately moving against the over-romanticized notions of verse and royalty so imbibed in the mainstream after centuries of Shakespearean theatre. One might even say he was moving away from much of his earlier work, which for over twenty-six years had been about writing dramatic and nondramatic verse. Indeed, a few of his most successful theatrical poems, *Brand* (1866) and *Peer Gynt* (1867), embody the same impulse—if not the vision—of conventional Romantic drama. It wasn't until *A Doll's House* first began making its sweep through Germany and Scandinavia in the early 1880s that critics started thinking of its bold new prose as realist—so realist it was considered radical in some countries, where Ibsen was asked to change the last scene to a more “happy” ending.

*A Doll's House* portrayed an ordinary couple in an ordinary environment so imaginable and on par with the times that the reality of its illusion shattered the unreality of its metaphor. People didn't want to believe that the world they built or accepted was so insular and unredeeming. It was just too real. It's not surprising then that for more than a century set designers and directors have tried to remain faithful to the original script; in some cases right down to matching wallpaper and somber tones of Norwegian cloth.

But since the 1980s, many theatre companies throughout Europe and America have made a noticeable effort at envisioning and producing the play from an expressionistic perspective. Polly Teale, the director of the play and joint director of the relatively new London-based theatre company called Shared Experience, has come to Oxford to show us how. And why shouldn't she? Times have changed. Equal opportunity has trumpeted its way to the ceiling, even punching small holes in the glass. But why continue to produce the play if the certainty of its declaration and the underpinning of its cause have in most countries been conceded and very nearly reversed? One answer might be because *A Doll's House* is less about women's rights

than it is about self-determination. And isn't this the bedrock of almost every feminist movement anyway?

What is most obviously expressionistic—if we take this term, in this case, to apply to the distortion of Ibsen's objective reality—is the cast selection. Torvald and Krogstad are black and the rest of the cast, including the children, are white. Whether this gestures to race or mixed marriages or both, probably isn't as important as trying to understand why this seemed so ineffectual. The problem for me, was not that I couldn't imagine Nora and Torvald married (indeed, given the kinds of issues Ibsen confronted, I would think—had he lived during the latter half of the 20th century—that he would've been one of the first to write about such relationships), it was just that Anne-Marie Duff (Nora) and Paterson Joseph (Torvald) were from the start so hopelessly out of tune with each other. Their lines were spoken flawlessly, but there was no sense that they believed them.

You may be thinking that one of the major points of the play is precisely this effect—that Nora and Torvald don't belong with each other—but that has nothing to do with their clumsiness on the stage. There was one moment after Paterson reached over (awkwardly and at the wrong time) to prop up Anne-Marie's chin when a considerable amount of people sitting in the first few rows began laughing, prompting Paterson himself to grin conspicuously. Sure, things like this happen, but there's no question that the utter strangeness and incongruity of their rapport had the effect of loosening and undermining the tone and shape of their divorce. The door that Nora slams as she walks out of the doll's house for the last time does not shudder or boom; it creaks. This wasn't as noticeable with Francesca Ryan (Christine) and Jude Akuwudike (Krogstad), both of whom rendered compelling enough performances to bridge any misgivings about geniality.

Aside from Krogstad's ghost-like presence on stage (the intention being to reflect the eeriness of Nora's thoughts), many of the other expressionistic elements of the play felt as if they enhanced some of the enchantment Ibsen may have envisioned in the first two acts. The opening image of Nora rising from her doll's house (a microcosm of the figurative one she doesn't yet realize she's living in) reflects not only the depravity of her condition but also a premonition of her egress. She barely fits in this house, yet, as if a fairy had cast a spell on her, she has fallen asleep in it. The bells chime, the snowflakes fall, and slowly Nora comes awake and stands up stretching out of a doll's house that's only half her height. Then it's back to reality. These are the kinds of shifts in mode and expression that Teale seems most conscious of making. A reference to the past is mentioned and the soft sequence of chimes begin again, signaling forth old footsteps of the past. Nora's father, years dead, silently makes his way slowly across the stage, pausing to comfort her (or ask forgiveness, as Nora's subsequent enlightenment seems to suggest), before slowly disappearing.

Pip Donaghy, who also plays Dr. Rank, does an excellent job at making these entrances and exits feel so comfortable. But Krogstad, as I hinted earlier, does not. After threatening to reveal Nora's secret (a forged signature) unless she influences Torvald to preserve his (Krogstad's) position at the bank, he sits in the corner downstage and squirms, convulsing as Nora fails to persuade her husband that this is a worthwhile endeavor. But hadn't we already felt the pressure that Krogstad threw on Nora's shoulders? There was no need to overdo it so sordidly. (At the culmination of his perceived demise Krogstad emerges from Nora's doll's house and vomits.) Sounds like a scene from Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata*. But we can't blame Krogstad. His involvement in the suspense and leveling of Nora's secret was exceptional. It's just that unlike the wistful mood and tempo of Nora's father's fairway, the figurative Krogstad was too real.

*It doesn't know what it wants to be*, echoes Ibsen impatiently scratching his beard. Indeed, for all of the stylized theatrics of Peale's direction, the play wavers too frequently between idealism and banality. There are some nice touches but no real flourishes. We never are wholly convinced that the adaptation has come into its own. One of the problems, of course, with directing Ibsen is in deciding how much to risk. If you're going to do a love scene, better to take it over the top and into the end zone than to fuddle with it and lose the ball. Even Ibsen once said *A Doll's House* was not so very different from his other plays in the way it dealt chiefly with the "individual and one's self-realization" in spirit and in truth. Could that be a green light for post-modern drama? Maybe. But there's also a flip-side to this play that speaks to the historical gravity from which it was spawned. There were moments in the last scene that made these less engaging ones feel marginal. One of the most chilling lines is when Nora, with suitcase in hand and one foot out the door, slowly turns back to Torvald and replies stone-faced: "I don't believe in miracles anymore." Riveting. You could've seen this play a hundred times and still felt the immensity of those words. Go and see it. Even if you don't believe any more in its relevance, it's still somehow a miracle.