A Doll’s House Resource Guide – BMCC Speech, Communications and Theatre Arts Department

Table of Contents
Page 2 Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) Norwegian Playwright
Page 3 Ibsen around the World
Page 4 Director’s Notes on the 1950s Play Adaption
Page 5 Advertising from the 1950s
Page 6 Ibsen and His Actresses
Page 7 Questions for the Audience, Sources, and Further Reading

A Doll’s House
Resource Guide
Spring 2014

Speech, Communications and Theatre Arts Department

Theatre Program

Borough of Manhattan Community College

Dates
Wed., April 23rd at 2PM & 7PM
Thurs., April 24th at 7 PM
Fri., April 25th at 2PM & 7PM
Sat., April 26th at 7PM

Location
BMCC, Main Campus
199 Chambers Street
Theatre II
Admission is Free
Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) Norwegian Playwright

Why Ibsen?

Henrik Ibsen, with the exception of Shakespeare, is the most frequently produced playwright in the world. He is also universally known as "The Father of Modern Drama" and "The Father of Realistic Drama."

For over a century and a half, Ibsen's plays have been renowned for displaying a fierce revolt by the individual against an oppressive middle-class society. Specifically, *A Doll's House* has been a trailblazer for women's liberation and feminist causes around the world.

Ibsen Timeline

1828 Born in Skien, a small town in Norway.
1843 At 15 he moves to another small town, Grimstad, and works as an apprentice in a pharmacy.
1851 He moves to Bergen and takes on the position of Artistic Director and Dramatist at the Bergen Theatre.
1857-62 Works for the Norwegian National Theatre in Oslo, and assists in staging 145 plays and writing seven.
1864 Self-exiled, he moves to Italy and travels to Germany.
1865-67 He writes and publishes *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, two major dramatic poems that bring him relative fame and financial ease, if not fortune.
1875 While in Europe, he turns sharply from his past poetic dramas and writes realistic plays.
1879-81 He writes *A Doll's House* and *Ghosts*, which gives him the reputation of a "Radical Thinker." These plays stir up critical controversy and even cause riots outside the theatres.
1890 He writes another controversial play, *Hedda Gabler*. Its heroine is denounced as "abnormal" and "hysteric."
1891 He returns to Norway and spends the last 15 years of his life in Oslo.
1906 He dies at 78, receiving a state funeral from the Norwegian Government.
Ibsen around the World

Promotional advertisement for Sino-Norwegian production of *A Doll’s House*, starring Jin Xing as Nora.

Ibsen in Asia

Perhaps no other nation has felt Ibsen’s influence more than China. At the beginning of the 20th century, productions of *A Doll’s House* were so significant that they contributed to social actions like the May 4th Movement in 1919, a cultural campaign to reform Chinese society. As a result of this campaign, thousands of Chinese women followed Nora’s footsteps to seek independence and demand the right to be treated as human beings. Due to his emphasis on individuality and social responsibility, Ibsen has become the most produced European playwright in China.

Ibsen in Africa

According to the International Ibsen Conference entitled *Ibsen through African Eyes* (2010) he has been produced 32 times in 12 nations. *A Doll’s House* holds the title as the most frequently produced play.

Ibsen in Europe

He was not easily accepted in Europe in the first decade of the 20th century until the Irish fellow playwright and critic George Bernard Shaw and English drama critic William Archer recognized Ibsen’s literary value and insights to the human condition.

Ibsen relentlessly grappled with social problems, middle-class hypocrisy, and the shortcomings of marriage, all taboo subjects in the Victorian era. Pioneers of Realistic Theatre such as Andre Antoine in France, Freie Buhne in Germany and Konstantin Stanislavski in Russia embraced "Ibsenism" as the "new drama."
Director’s Notes on the 1950s Play Adaption

**Director’s Notes**

Though women have made great strides toward equality since the 1880s, *A Doll’s House* continues to make important points about marriage, society, equality and personal responsibility. Setting the play in 1950s Mid-America allows a more contemporary view of the play’s conflicts. That decade of American history had characteristics that Ibsen identifies in *A Doll’s House*: pressure to conform, fear of social stigma and losing reputation, and marriage roles that defined husband as breadwinner and wife as homemaker.

Originally set in 1880's Norway, the play’s conflict revolves around Nora, a young woman confined and defined by male-dominated society. Thinking she is capable of managing serious matters, Nora is proud of her secret: years before she took a courageous step to save her husband. But when her secret is exposed, she realizes she’s been a fool, not a heroine. To meet the expectations of the men in her life, she has behaved like a doll rather than the reasonable human being she wants to be. She vows to change, to educate herself, and to find out who she really is. It’s a costly, shocking move, one that continues to create controversy more than 130 years later. Nora’s decision at the end of the play has been a watershed for women all over the world.

To make the play fit 1950s America, there were several changes made. The most important changes to note are the male character’s names:

- Torvald Helmer …….. Tom Helmer
- Dr. Rank ……………… Dr. David Frank
- Neils Krogstad ……….. Neal Kromer

**Role of Women in the 1950s**

During WWII, American women were expected to work outside the home to support the war effort. But when the troops returned after 1945, these same women and their younger sisters were urged to stay home and become happy homemakers, and to think of marriage as a fulfilling career.

Most young women were married by the age of 19, and many went to college to get their “MRS. degree.” What did they learn? Take these excerpts from a *Housekeeping Monthly* article published in 1955:

- Your goal: Try to make sure your home is a place of peace, order and tranquility...
- Don’t complain if he’s late home for dinner or even if he stays out all night.
- Don’t ask him questions about his actions or question his judgment or integrity. Remember, he is the master of the house and as such will always exercise his will with fairness and truthfulness. You have no right to question him.
- A good wife always knows her place.
Notice the examples of 1950’s advertisements on this page and it’s evident that the woman was there to serve the man and make him comfortable. Not only that, she was supposed to be happy doing it.
Ibsen and His Actresses

The contribution of Ibsen's heroines to actresses around the globe can't be overstated. His female characters possess all the qualities and dimensions necessary to fashion a great individual performance.

Consider some of the actresses who have played Ibsen’s women over the past century: Elizabeth Robbins and Dame Edith Evans (England), Eleanore Duse (Italy), Eva de Gallienne (USA), and more recently, Liv Ullman, Claire Bloom, Jane Fonda, Mary-Louise Parker and Cate Blanchett, just to mention a few.
Questions for the Audience

It's common in our day to look at Nora as the hero and Torvald as the villain, but such a dichotomy is too easy. It prevents us from thinking further about the deeper questions the play raises.

Torvald is bad, Nora is good. But how good is Nora, really?
Is what Torvald expects from Nora wrong?
Where does the pressure and conflict in their relationship come from?

What does it do to Torvald to think of Nora as his possession, to think of himself as her teacher and her protector?
What kind of burden does it put on him to take responsibility for everything?
What kind of communication and support is he deprived of if he views Nora in this way?

What does it do to Nora to have been raised as a doll?
Why does she lie so often?
Does she think of herself as lying?
What do her lies do to their relationship?
If she were honest, what might happen?
Could anything positive come from her being honest?

Sources


Further Reading


Significant Plays by Ibsen

Brand (1866), Peer Gynt (1867), A Doll's House (1879), Ghosts (1881), Enemy of the People (1882), Wild Duck (1884), Hedda Gabler (1890)