Ibsen’s naturalism

Structure
Deriving from concepts outlined in the Poetics of Aristotle (384-322BC), a play which has a small number of characters and an unchanging scene, which takes place over a short period of time, and which is unified by a single plot, is said to follow the classical unities. In A Doll’s House Ibsen has used only five main characters and a single location (all events take place in the Helmers’ apartment). The events in the play span about sixty hours (true classical unity would demand twenty-four). Such concentration, heightened by the reduction of the customary five acts to three, creates a realistic framework, places emphasis on psychology rather than action and intensifies the force of the drama.

Unlike classical Greek drama, A Doll’s House has two strands to the plot, the main one involving Nora, Helmer and Krogstad and the sub-plot concerning Mrs. Linde and Krogstad. While the two plots are linked through a series of parallels, the sub-plot distracts attention from the main plot but is not in itself satisfactory. Neither Mrs. Linde nor Krogstad are sufficiently well-rounded characters to be entirely convincing. This signifies a possible weakness in Ibsen’s mastery of his craft which may be excused given that A Doll’s House was only his second real attempt at a modern ‘social’ drama.

Within the structure of the play, Ibsen has made extensive use of the device of parallel situation to illuminate the central predicament of Nora. In the case of Mrs. Linde, for example, Ibsen establishes a sharp contrast with Nora on her first appearance, a contrast which Nora herself strives to lessen in her confiding to the other woman of hardships she has had to overcome. As well as fulfilling the useful role of confidante to Nora, Mrs. Linde’s greater experience and steadier personality throw Nora’s frenzied girlishness into greater relief. As the play unravels, it is Mrs. Linde who is fleeing from the cold emptiness of the world outside, Nora is preparing to exile herself.

Krogstad in his crime, Dr. Rank in his hereditary disease and Anne-Marie in her giving up of her illegitimate child, all likewise serve to amplify Nora’s motivation and attitudes. Many further parallels are drawn between other pairs of characters, for example Krogstad and Helmer. In a play which stresses the danger of avoiding the truth, skilful use of this technique enables the playwright to delineate character by implication and suggestion rather than by direct statement.

As the play progresses an increasing number of facets of ‘the truth’ are disclosed by hints and deliberate revelations. In this way, in a manner akin to the Greek dramatist Euripides (484-406BC), Ibsen uses what is often referred to as the ‘retrospective’ method of situation and character delineation. He prefers to begin his tragedy just before the catastrophe and to use the dialogue to unravel the preceding events in retrospect instead of presenting the actual events on the stage. The influence of the past on the present and the future is carefully explored. The action is concentrated into a very small space of time and the sins of the past are contrasted vividly with the calm and comfort of the present, which are swiftly destroyed as retribution approaches. It also makes for a more convincingly realistic depiction of character. For example, Nora’s playful extravagance which is carefully established in the opening scene as her dominant trait is gradually demonstrated to be a mask she employs as and when she sees fit. As her secret is slowly revealed, the audience discover the true complexity of her nature. In the manner of real life Ibsen’s characters show different aspects of their thought and attitudes in varying situations.

Although the characterisation of Mrs. Linde and Krogstad demonstrates some of the difficulties inherent in this technique—the lateness and rapidity of the revelations about their past crucially affect their credibility—A Doll’s House shows a remarkable sophistication with regard to technique so early in Ibsen’s career.

Well versed in the plot devices of the Scriban ‘well-made play’, where coincidence and revelations of a character’s past are used to heighten the audience’s anticipation and to resolve the complications of an elaborately complex story line, Ibsen quite deliberately uses these same techniques but to very different effect. The audience is led by a series of hints and ironies to suppose that Nora’s dilemma will be happily resolved. We initially anticipate, with Nora, that Helmer will perform the ‘miracle’ she expects. As this becomes less likely, Mrs. Linde appears to be the character who will provide a happy ending through her influence on Krogstad. Instead she chooses to advise him to allow Helmer to discover the truth. Even in the final act, Krogstad’s return of the
IOU and Helmer's desire to revert to the status quo signal the end
of Nora's predicament. This constant reversal of the audience's
expectations forces us to appreciate the true seriousness of
the theme of the play. Ibsen has no easy, comforting solutions to offer;
the conventional hopes and attitudes which inform the 'well-made
play' are shown by implication to be inadequate. Part of the
playwright's intention is to demonstrate the essential shallowness
of the popular plays which used platitudes to hide from the tragic
seriousness of the human condition.

Ibsen uses the stock types and situations familiar to his audience.
Hence there are strong hints that the relationships between Nora,
Helmer and Rank amount to the usual eternal triangle, leading the
audience to suppose that Nora has earned her money, as Mrs. Linde
suspects and as Nora encourages her to believe, through a sexual
liaison with Rank. Just as Krogstad is the 'stage villain' so Mrs.
Linde is 'the woman with a past' but his villainy is mitigated by his
genuine despair at being deserted by her and his desire for social
acceptability, just as her 'past' turns out to be full of dutiful,
conventionally praiseworthy acts instead of the 'dark deeds' we
might have expected. The only obvious device inherited from the
'well-made play' which Ibsen does not turn on its head is the
leaving of the unopened letter in the letter box to heighten
suspense. As Allardyce Nicoll observes, Ibsen 'has learned how to
modify the Scribe formula so as to retain the thrillingly effective
and at the same time to hide the presence of the machinery'
(World Drama, Harrap, p.536).

Language

Reviewing the world premiere of *A Doll's House* at the Royal
Theatre, Copenhagen on 21 December 1879, the Danish playwright
and critic, Erik Boegh wrote:

... Not a single declamatory phrase, no high dramatics, no drop
of blood, not even a tear; never for a moment was the dagger of
tragedy raised ... Every needless line is cut, every exchange
carries the action a step forward, there is not a superfluous
effect in the whole play ...

Boegh was obviously impressed by Ibsen's ability to write such an
effective play in contrast to the bombastic melodrama to which
nineteenth-century theatregoers had become accustomed. There
are in fact occasions, most noticeably in Krogstad's words to Nora
about the physical effects of suicide by drowning, when Ibsen has
deliberate recourse to the very language Boegh praises him for
avoiding. As the play proceeds Nora learns the essential
impracticality of the romantic posturing embodied in such
language. Although frightened she is not deterred by Krogstad's
warning — 'Under the ice? Down in the cold, black water? And
then, in the spring, to float up again, ugly, unrecognizable,
hairless?' (p.73) — but finds her noble intention is regarded as a
melodramatic embarrassment by Helmer (p.94). The
inappropriateness of such an action is prefigured by the language
used by Krogstad, which seems so out of place amidst dialogue
designed to sound like that of everyday speech. The seven
monologues given to Nora may seem an exception to the overall
effect of ordinariness but in fact they are simply broken repetitive
utterances which inform us of Nora's increasingly intense inner
 torment. They are not soliloquies in the normal sense of that word.
Ibsen creates for each character a habit of speech appropriate to
his or her own class and personality which is accurately reflected in
Michael Meyer's translation. Each one speaks naturally but with a
distinctly different voice. Characteristics of Nora's speech are
genteel exclamatory expressions such as 'Pooh' or diminutive
expressions such as 'Just a tiny bit'. She tends to accumulate short
phrases within a series of questions and exclamations: 'Oh, how
splendid! We'll have to celebrate! But take off your coat. You're
not cold, are you? There!' (p.29). She alternates wheedling with
assertiveness — 'If you really want to give me something, you could
— you could —' (p.26) and 'Them? Who cares about them? They're
strangers' (p.25) — in a way that reflects her lively and excitable
nature. When she decides to leave Helmer, her dawning self-
awareness is signalled by her use of simply formed declarative
sentences: 'I have another duty which is equally sacred' (p.100)
and 'Millions of women have done it' (p.102).

Helmer's paternalism and sense of his own importance are
reinforced by his distinctive speech. His use of endearments such as
'skylark' and 'squirrel' define his attitude towards his wife. His
playful friendliness is often insulting — 'Has my little squanderbird
been overspending again?' (p.24) — and his frequently lecturing
tone helps to establish his own view of himself in the minds of the
audience.

Krogstad's manner of speech shows his legal training in
sequences of questions, most noticeably in his enquiries about Mrs.
Linde (p.44-S). The ironically humble fashion in which he speaks of himself, ‘Will you be so good as to see that but also seems to blame others for his low status in society. He can be threatening and openly disrespectful, using his skill with words to try to frighten Nora (p.73).

Mrs. Linde and Dr. Rank have almost directly opposite modes of speech. Where he is usually guarded, preferring, as a man of sophistication and breeding, to speak indirectly, using ready-made figures of speech ‘With death on my hands?’, ‘I’ve been going through the books of this bankrupt’, ‘Laughter’s all the damned thing’s fit for’ (p.65), Mrs. Linde speaks directly to the point but often sounds bitter and cold. Her words reveal a collected, resolved mind certain of its own opinions. She uses ready-made phrases, like Dr. Rank, but without any hint of indirectness. She means what she says whereas he uses words to conceal his real meaning. It is appropriate that it is Mrs. Linde who insists that ‘There must be an end of all these shiftings and evasions’ (p.84).

Staging

The naturalism identified by Boegh highlights dramatic and theatrical differences between A Doll’s House and Ibsen’s earlier plays. Rebellng against both the heightened romanticism of melodrama and the mechanical complexity of popular light comedies, Ibsen used all his knowledge of the theatrical devices available to a playwright to create a world that was instantly recognisable to his predominantly middle-class audience. As the curtain rises on the set for A Doll’s House we are looking through the ‘fourth wall’ into a typical, comfortable, bourgeois drawing-room. Ibsen’s careful description delineates exactly how doors and furniture should be positioned. Although at first sight it may seem merely a re-creation of any such room, closer analysis of the play reveals just how integral to the full design and impact of the play is used to lead the audience into a close identification with the characters who inhabit this room which seems so familiar. However Nora, whose cosy environment has been created to suit her husband’s tastes, seems, because of her constantly emphasised restlessness, trapped within it. She rarely seats but paces the floor as if in the confines of a cage. It is noticeable that whenever she feels threatened she retreats to the stove, whose warmth seems to represent the security she so urgently craves. For example, both Nora at the entry of Mrs. Linde (p.29) and Helmer (p.52) when he returns from business, have established the stove as the conventional source of heat but in Nora’s actions after Krogstad’s exit in Act One this is extended to include emotional as well as physical warmth: she ‘nods indifferently as she closes the hall door behind him. Then she walks across the room and sees to the stove’ (p.38). Similarly after Dr. Rank has declared his love for her, she ‘goes over to the stove’ saying: ‘Oh, dear, Dr. Rank, this was really horrid of you’ (p.68). Thus Ibsen uses an apparently naturalistic method to establish clearly the emotional life of his characters.

Similarly stage properties are used to show most pointedly the agony of a character’s dilemma. When Nora enters at the beginning of the play, she is bringing home a Christmas tree, the symbol of a festival concentrating upon renewal of life and family happiness. The tree is seen only fleetingly but for long enough to establish both the time of year and Nora’s involvement in ensuring her family’s well-being. In an attempt to rid herself of the fears called up by Krogstad’s threatening visit, she calls for the maid to place the tree in the middle of the room, the focal position in theatrical terms, here it stands representing family security and happiness as Nora tries in vain to concentrate upon its decoration and blot out her anxieties. Hence before a word is spoken in Act Two, Nora’s failure to allay her fears is already implicitly established by the fate of the Christmas tree which now stands ‘in the corner by the piano ... stripped and dishevelled, its candles burned to their sockets’ (p.53).

To look closely at the treatment of a superficially minor property such as the macaroons is to reveal more of this aspect of Ibsen’s art. When Nora at the beginning of Act One secretly eats a couple of these small sweet biscuits before concealing the bag from her husband, Ibsen establishes in a moment and most economically that Nora has a childish capacity to deceive and delight in secret rebelliousness and that her husband has a parent’s authority over her. The sweets can further be seen (p.40) as symbolising all the good things which seem to be safe from Krogstad’s threats, when Nora realises what she thinks will be the extent of Helmer’s influence in his new post. Later, when Nora is trying to prevent Helmer from opening his letters (which involves persuading him to do as she wishes) the macaroons are what Nora chooses to make her point with when she orders the maid to ‘Put out some macaroons! Lots of macaroons — for once!’ (p.78). Being prepared
to brave her husband's schoolmasterly anger, her action speaks of the bravado of the child who knows her naughtiness must be discovered.

Despite the realistic appearance of the set as described by Ibsen, the playwright employs an essentially unrealistic use of lighting to counterpoint and reinforce the reactions of his characters. When Nora calls for the lamp (p.68), the ensuing light chases away more than the physical gloom. She asks Dr. Rank: 'Aren't you ashamed of yourself, now that the lamp's been lit?' (p.69). She is consciously equating his declaration of love with the deeds of darkness even though she has been prepared to exploit that gloom for her own purposes.

A quite different technique is demonstrated, however, in Ibsen's use of what the critic, John Northam, terms 'illustrative action' (Ibsen's Dramatic Method, Faber). Rank comes to leave his final visiting card:

\[\text{NORA (strikes a match). Let me give you a light.} \\\n\text{RANK. Thank you. (She holds out the match for him. He lights his cigar.) And now — goodbye. (p.90)}\]

Thus the close sympathy between Nora and Dr. Rank can culminate in a cryptic conversation, the words of which can quite credibly be misunderstood by Helmer. The accompanying action, however, contains the reality of the final farewell, a reality hidden behind the illusion of everyday speech. At the same time Rank's tendency, evident in the black crosses on his visiting cards as well as in the example just cited, to regard himself and his actions symbolically betrays an over-developed and crass sense of self-importance.

An early critic declared that 'the tarantella is the play', a somewhat sweeping statement but one which draws attention to the most obviously symbolic action in the play. In an effort to prevent Helmer taking Krogstad's letter from the letter box, Nora stages a rehearsal of the wild dance Helmer taught her. Although the audience is privy to her emotional state, Helmer and Dr. Rank are unaware. Nora allows herself to be misunderstood by Helmer. The accompanying action, however, has 'a large black shawl' (p.84). Such differences in appearance are of crucial significance in the play. The colourful shawl would seem to embody a desire to cling to the many delights of life in the midst of the 'Dance of Life and Death' which is the Tarantella. By contrast the black shawl conceals the colourful Italian fancy-dress costume. Intuitively an audience responds to such visual symbolism; there is no need for the characters to express it in words. Nora's romantic reaction to Helmer's opening of the letter is contained as much in her wrapping of herself in his black cloak and her black shawl as she apparently rushes to commit suicide as it is in any of her decision to leave him, she has removed the fancy dress and put aside her world of child-like play to discover her own true identity. The costume, which has been painstakingly mended by Mrs. Linde at Nora's request as if in a last attempt to hide behind the mask of make-believe, is finally rejected.

Even such basic stage properties as doors are used by Ibsen to reinforce the themes of the play. There are nearly forty references to doors opening and closing in the stage directions and dialogue. The play begins with a door opening and ends with a door slamming shut. The door imagery throughout relates to themes of caged and free animals; to open and to closed possibilities; to the potentiality for change and its impossibility; to a sense of choices freely made and choices irrevocably determined by heredity and by social and environmental pressures.

**Characters**

**Nora**

When Nora first appears in the Helmers' comfortably and tastefully furnished living-room, she seems the perfect bourgeois wife. Returning laden with parcels from a shopping excursion, she is humming contentedly and tips the porter over-generously. Wrapped in furs to protect her from the cold, she resembles the 'squirrel' her husband calls her, returning to its drey laden with its hoard of supplies. Her girlish extravagance is established in her desire to wear a 'large black shawl' (p.77). For the actual performance at the party she has 'a large black shawl' (p.84). Such differences in appearance are deliberately using her moodiness to get her own way. Helmer makes amends by giving her extra money for the Christmas expenses. Their relationship rests upon his paternalism and her
childlike qualities and is very much that of parent and child; when he 'takes her playfully by the ear' (p.24), it is the action of an adult dealing with a naughty infant. Her concealment of the fact that she has been eating macaroons (when he has expressly forbidden her to eat sweet things) is typical behaviour of a child, but it is obvious that this episode is part of a ritual that the two of them play, and which seems essential to their marriage.

Nora enjoys her role as spoilt child, relishing, too, her husband's use of pet names. She delights in the power her attractiveness and sexuality give her. When Helmer seems reluctant to fall in with her wishes, she tries to wheedle the decision she wants out of him. Despite such behaviour, Nora does intuitively apprehend the nature of her marriage. She may seem superficially 'silly' but she knows that to tell Helmer the truth would be to 'completely wreck our relationship. This life we have built together would no longer exist' (p.36). She prefers, however, deliberately to refrain from thinking or talking about the reality of her situation. Thus, although she hopes for and apparently expects a 'miracle', her responses are rendered ambiguously complex because of the awareness which she chooses to repress. It is vital to realise that the play is concerned to show how Nora is compelled to face the implications of her intuitive which she has steadfastly tried to avoid acknowledging.

This refusal is further extended in Nora's conversation with Dr. Rank in Act Two (p.64 onwards). Her seemingly callous reception of the news of her friend's imminent death (because it makes it more difficult for her to pay off Krogstad's threats) is followed by her equally clumsy flirtation with him and it becomes obvious that Nora's interaction with others has always rested upon her refusal even to think about, let alone understand how her actions might affect other people. What upsets her is not that Rank loves her but that he tells her, for this makes it impossible for her to pretend ignorance of the impact of her conduct. She would rather cling selfishly to behaviour she has delighted in from childhood as her only means of escaping from the suffocating paternalism of, first, her father and, now, her husband. Her liveliness demands an outlet in lighthearted conversation and fun; unfortunately within her circumscribed lifestyle, this can apparently be achieved only by indulging in such immature behaviour.

The cosiness and peacefulness of the Helmers' home life depends upon keeping any unpleasantness at a distance. Nora finds it incomprehensible that society would prosecute her for an action performed 'for love'. Her impulsiveness is at odds with that society's narrow rules of conduct. Her superstitious, irrational nature is demonstrated when she desperately tries to ward off Krogstad's threats by busying herself with decorating the Christmas tree. She invokes all the ways in which she will entertain her husband, rather in the manner of a magic spell to ward off evil. Nora parades her practicality when she talks to Mrs. Linde in Act One, proud that she was able to find the money for Helmer's convalescence. She is, however, essentially impractical. There was no other thought in her mind than to 'save' her husband; therefore she did not think in advance about how the debt would be repaid or even about the possible results of committing the forgery. Similarly she cannot think coherently about how to deal with Krogstad's threats but lurches agonisingly from one hoped-for solution to the next without any properly formulated plan of action.

The interlude with the children shows Nora in the role of mother, but a mother whose love reveals itself in the form of play. She undresses the children because 'it's such fun' (p.43) and enters enthusiastically into the game of hide-and-seek. Her conversation with Anne-Marie, her old nanny, reveals her concern for the welfare of her children, but it should be remembered that a mother in a middle-class, nineteenth-century family was not concerned with the day-to-day care of the children. What they ate and wore, how they learnt, how they interacted with other people would be the nanny's concern. In such a situation, Nora's decision to leave home and entrust her children's lives to Anne-Marie would be far less disruptive and potentially damaging to her children than would now be the case. This is not to say that it was any the less shocking to contemporary audiences, as can be seen from the pressures placed upon Ibsen to write a 'happy ending', but Nora's final description of her children as having been 'dolls' is borne out by her earlier conduct.

Throughout the play Nora adopts a series of poses. With Helmer she is the child-wife who uses her sexuality to get her own way and is pleased to be protected and pampered. With Mrs. Linde she portrays herself as an energetic and supportive wife, capable of independent thought and action. With Rank, she is the flirtatious, amusing, youthful companion. Although her restlessness signals her basic insecurity and anxiety, she delights in her ability to manipulate. It is as if she were attempting to impose her own pattern upon a life that she knows subconsciously to be shaped by the forces at work in society which have pre-determined her roles.
of wife and mother. As Nora is propelled further and further into despair, she takes refuge in melodramatic posturing. Her agony is genuine (as shown by her fragmented soliloquies) but her actions betray a romantic desire to act ‘heroically’. Thus her intention to commit suicide, cruelly but accurately dismissed by Helmer, is the climax of a life of self-deceit. When Nora re-appears clad in her everyday clothes, her apparently simple reply ‘Yes, Torvald. I’ve changed’ (p.96) is charged with both significance and pathos for now she must try to behave genuinely. The songbird has been forced to acknowledge what she has always known about life within this particular cage.

The first and final serious talk between Nora and Helmer represents a reversal in their previous roles. Now Nora takes the lead, forcing Helmer to look at their marriage from a totally new perspective. Explaining her new understanding that ‘our home has never been anything but a playroom’ (p.98) where ‘In eight whole years . . . we have never exchanged a serious word on a serious subject’ (p.97), she knows that she must now educate herself, that she can no longer live her life as somebody else’s property. The only way to do this, she feels, is to leave Helmer and the children and ‘stand on my own feet’ (p.99). Her discussion of her position reveals an intuitive intelligence which has led her to connive at her own oppression since this had seemed the easiest way to a comfortable life. Faced with the most uncomfortable reality of the social, religious and moral codes which her husband represents, her energy and love of life, which so far have been channelled into frivolous enjoyment, come into their own. She can no longer love Helmer for he is not the man she had believed him to be. Despite his attempts to persuade her to stay, or at least remain in contact with him, Nora no longer believes in miracles. Handing back her wedding ring, the symbol of their marriage, she leaves, her claim for independence complete. As the sound of the slammed street door reverberates, Nora escapes to face the challenge of reality, a challenge which she is at least prepared to face, although she may be ill-equipped to win the fight.

Torvald Helmer

Torvald Helmer sees himself as the epitome of the respectable nineteenth-century husband. He treats his wife as a winsome little creature, capable of playful deception but dependent upon his largesse and knowledge of the outside world. Although he chastises her for being extravagant, he delights in being able to give her presents of money. One of the most obvious ways in which he maintains his dominance over Nora lies in his financial control of the household; ironically it is his refusal to compromise his honour by borrowing money that gives Nora the chance to prove her own ingenuity and love as well as ultimately destroying their security.

Helmer’s apparent pomposity and lack of perception are the stereotyped response of the domestic male to his role. His patronising or teasing tone whenever he addresses Nora does not let up even in the face of her distress — that is, until she demands that they talk seriously. His security depends upon feeling superior. The games he and Nora play all seem designed to maintain his role as dominant male. She has learnt her own stereotyped role as subordinate sustainer of a man’s self-opinion, and Helmer is the happy recipient of her expertise. As Nora says, ‘he’s so proud of being a man’ (p.36), and yet it is this very pride which ensures that the miracle she expects can never happen.

In his treatment of Krogstad, Helmer reveals his essential pettiness so explicitly that even Nora cannot avoid it. Helmer’s principal preoccupation is always with himself, so the idea that Krogstad might cause Helmer embarrassment by using his Christian name (p.62) is, in Helmer’s view, more than enough reason to sack him. At the same time it needs to be noted that both Krogstad and Helmer have been found guilty of social indiscretions in the past so that it is not a simple case of social snobbery but rather the result of Helmer’s desire not to be confronted by a mirror-image of himself. Similarly, although Helmer is driven by his desire for social approval and status and is more concerned with appearances than truth, there is also a sense that Helmer has perceived the absurdity which underlies social attitudes and mores (p.52). The one time in the past when he acted ‘dishonourably’ was in concealing the truth about Nora’s father when he was appointed by the government to investigate a scandal. He is prepared, having scolded Nora, to revert to the status quo once the IOU is destroyed. If Nora had accepted, Helmer would have been happy since his social standing and respectability would not have been affected.

Quite apart from, and yet of a piece with, his behaviour towards his wife, Helmer is disgracefully patronising towards Mrs. Linde. He high-handedly acts the beneficent patron in agreeing to secure her employment (p.42) and later dismisses her pompously and unfairly as a ‘dreadful bore’ (p.87). Even more unpleasant is his selfishness in the face of Nora’s news of the imminent death of Dr. Rank,
Helmer’s friend. Rank’s ‘suffering and loneliness’ are dismissed as merely ‘a kind of dark background to the happy sunlight of our marriage’ (p.91), which enables Helmer to switch back to his main preoccupation which at this point is to make love to his wife. When Nora objects, using Rank’s death as a defence, Helmer pronounces pretentiously: ‘You’re right. This news has upset us both. An ugliness has come between us, thoughts of death and dissolution’ (p.92). Even the knowledge that his friend is about to die cannot force him to alter his self-contained, self-obsessed perception of the world.

Ibsen’s friend, the critic and dramatist, Bjoernstjerne Bjornson, had written, in 1865, The Newly Wedded Couple, a play which concentrates upon the way in which the male, rather than the female, partner is treated as a mannequin. It is similarly a mistake to see A Doll’s House solely as the tragedy of the female. Helmer holds rigid views, obsessed with the need to abide by the social, religious and moral code of the time but he is not presented unsympathetically. Nora has used his paternalism to her own advantage. Their marriage has depended upon her concealing, or refusing to acknowledge, that she does know the truth of her husband’s character. Where Helmer is shown to be weak and in need of support, Nora’s strong will and vitality enable her, finally, to cancel their marriage contract. Whereas he has suffered from love/sick, financial insecurity and a certain amount of dishonour, she has been protected by her lack of involvement with the world. When Nora leaves Helmer, she abandons him to face the ensuing scandal. There is never any doubt that he believes that he loves Nora; his tragedy lies in failing to offer her anything other than a sentimental, protective form of love. He is as much a victim of his society’s attitudes as Nora.

Nils Krogstad
Krogstad is, in a superficial sense, the villain of the piece. Interrupting Nora’s innocent game of hide-and-seek, he appears like the spectre at the feast — the malign influence who will destroy the family’s peace and happiness. At first he asks Nora to use her influence with her husband (p.46) but, when she disclaims any such power, he is provoked into threatening to reveal all to Helmer. Knowing the ways of the world, a world against which he feels all the bitterness of a man who has been rejected, he carefully and delightedly reveals Nora’s true situation to her. The drawn out process of question and answer (p.47-8) by which he demonstrates his detailed knowledge of her forgery underlines his unpleasant enjoyment of the fact that she is in his power. By experience he has learnt the attitude of society towards such a crime: ‘But I can assure you that it is no bigger nor worse a crime than the one I once committed and thereby ruined my whole social position’ (p.49): A lawyer, he knows that ‘the law does not concern itself with motives’ and that Nora will have to reach some agreement with him.

After being rejected by Mrs. Linde, Krogstad had made an unhappy marriage. Now a widower with three children to bring up, he is determined to hold on to the respectability he has worked so hard to re-establish. Like Helmer he desires social position and prestige above all things. Krogstad understands Helmer’s essential weakness and lack of courage. He is determined to exploit his position as Nora’s creditor to his own financial and social benefit. He increases the stakes on his second visit to Nora (pp.70-3), when he demands that Helmer make him assistant manager. Convinced that Nora, like himself, would not have the courage to commit suicide, Krogstad tries to frighten her further by hinting forcefully at the effects of drowning (p.73), a description which lingers in Nora’s imagination.

Despite Krogstad’s catalogue of complaints against society, he remains the apparent embodiment of villainy until his dialogue with Mrs. Linde (pp.80-4). His bitterness at being jilted is gradually eroded as she explains her position and begs him to join his life with hers. His sense of the loss he felt when she rejected him is both poignant and forceful: ‘When I lost you, it was just as though all solid ground had been swept from under my feet. Look at me. Now I’m a shipwrecked man, clinging to a spar’ (p.81). The emotional despair humanises the stage villain, giving a different dimension to his actions and cynicism. At first he dismisses Mrs. Linde’s plea as ‘hysterical and romantic’ (p.82), accusing her of wanting to find an excuse for self-sacrifice. Once he is convinced that she is genuine, his joy is instantaneous. As a result he no longer wishes to hurt Nora but accepts unquestioningly Mrs. Linde’s suggestion that it would be better for Helmer to know the truth. The ‘villain’ departs the happiest man in the world, leaving his letter untouched.

Doctor Rank
Rank is a close family friend; it is understood that he will join the family’s Christmas celebrations (p.27). His tone of cynical bitterness
finds expression in the first conversation with Nora when, having described the successful Krogstad as a moral cripple, he extends his remarks to include society in general—those who are corrupt are given 'some nice, comfortable position' while 'the healthy ones just have to lump it' (p.40). Thus, in Rank's view, human society is being turned into 'a hospital'.

In love with Nora, he chooses to confide in her that he will soon die. He is suffering from tuberculosis of the spine, inherited from his father who had venereal disease as a result of a debauched life. Rank knows he is about to enter upon the phase of 'final disintegration' (p.65). Realising Helmer is 'sensitive' and 'hates anything ugly', he does not want his friend to visit him in hospital. He will send a visiting card with a black cross on it to tell Nora when 'the final filthy process has begun'. His disgust and bitterness at his lot are intense and he is jealous that Mrs. Linde will very rapidly take his place as the family friend. When Nora flirts outrageously with him as a prelude to asking him for money, he chooses this moment to declare his love for her, a love that has been concealed behind banter and amusement. He is surprised by Nora's reaction, which suggests that she knew how he felt but did not want it openly declared (p.68). He finds her impossible to understand but continues to show affection and support, even though she carelessly wounds him by equating his company with that of the servants when she was a child.

There is also something comic about Rank. The detached scientific curiosity with which he regards his own demise—even to the extent of conducting experiments on himself—suggests a macabre fascination with the processes of illness and death. His rather portentous use of the symbolic phrase 'and thank you for the light' (p.90), his penchant for black, and the crosses on the visiting cards perhaps almost justify the indifference with which the news of his imminent death is received. He has been like a member of the living dead extracting whatever life he can from his fleeting encounters with Nora.

Mrs. Christine Linde
Widowed and released from the burden of an ailing mother and two younger brothers, Mrs. Linde, an old school friend of Nora's, finds herself free at last. Ironically that very freedom which she had so much desired when married to a man she did not love proves irksome. Her life has been more difficult than it might have been because of her sense of duty, that duty which determined that she should break with Krogstad, whom she loved, because he had no money with which to maintain her family. Through having to work, she has discovered that she 'must work if I'm to find life worth living' (p.82), but work on its own is not enough. Her freedom she now perceives as loneliness, for she feels 'so dreadfully lost and empty'. She desperately wants 'something—someone—to work for', as she pleads to Krogstad. She, unlike Nora, has had to face the world and survive on her own. She knows the value of the support of another human being; 'Castaways have a better chance of survival together than on their own.'

Throughout her conversations with Nora, Mrs. Linde seems older and wiser than her frivolous, extravagant schoolfriend. She acts the role of motherly confidante, alternately patronising and chiding Nora. Although she is prepared to intervene with Krogstad on Nora's behalf, it is Christine Linde who prevents him from asking Helmer for the return of the letter. Her conversations with Nora have led her to the conclusion that 'There must be an end of all these shiftings and evasions' (p.84). If Nora and Helmer are to achieve a 'full understanding', Helmer must know the truth of Nora's secret dealings. Thus it is Christine's influence on Krogstad which both creates the possibility of a 'happy ending' and ensures that Nora will be forced to confront the truth of her husband's nature and her own situation. When Nora slams the door, she is deliberately choosing the kind of life represented by Mrs. Linde and from which Mrs. Linde is trying to escape. Her hard life has fostered an idealism based on a concept of 'truth' which blinds her to the fact that the security of illusions may be preferable to the choice which Nora eventually feels she has to make. There is irony in the fact that Mrs. Linde's idealistic motivation leads to the break-up of Nora's marriage, when it was designed to establish it on a firmer basis.

Anne-Marie, the Nurse
Having brought up Nora, Anne-Marie is now nanny to Nora's children. Her history is common to the nineteenth century. She gave up her own illegitimate child to strangers in order to take up the offer of a job as 'wet-nurse' and nanny to Nora. She is down-to-earth and 'reasonable', accepting her position in society and critical only of the father of her child—'That good-for-nothing didn't lift a finger' (p.56). She is protective towards Nora and indispensable. The nineteenth-century middle-class family depended upon such servants. Nora plays with her children and
buys them presents; Anne-Marie looks after them and brings them up.

The children
For practical reasons the children are often cut from performance. Ibsen has facilitated this by giving all their dialogue to Nora. If this is the case, however, it is crucial that the lines Nora speaks to them and her playing of hide-and-seek should still be included by having the children apparently present off-stage. The children are Nora's 'dolls'. She delights in playing with them. They have no designated characters but perform an important function in the play by actually showing Nora in the role of mother.

Under protest, Ibsen provided an alternative ending to the play in which Nora melodramatically revokes her decision to leave, under emotional pressure from Helmer who exploits the fact of the children,

NORA .... that our life together could become a real marriage.

Good-bye. (She starts to go.)

HELMER. Go then! (he seizes her arm.) But first you shall see your children for the last time.

NORA. Let me go! I will not see them. I cannot!

HELMER (dragging her to the door on the left). You shall see them! (He opens the door and says softly,) Look — there they are, sleeping peacefully and without care. Tomorrow, when they wake and call for their mother, they will be ... motherless!

NORA (trembling). Motherless!

HELMER. As you once were.

NORA. Motherless! (After an inner struggle, she lets her bag fall, and says:) Ah, though it is a sin against myself, I cannot leave them! (She sinks almost to the ground by the door.)

The curtain falls.

(Trans. Peter Watts, Penguin, p.334)

Ibsen called this a 'barbaric outrage' on the play but it serves to demonstrate the importance of the idea of the children even if their presence is minimal. In fact, the 'non-existence' of the children is an aspect of their reality. In earlier drafts they were assigned individual lines but Ibsen gradually eliminated them individually until they became 'the children'. Their reality is conferred on them by Nora, who ventriloquises their responses. It is not simply a convenient device for getting round the staging problem. The 'sexist' lines of their conventional upbringing should also be noted — a doll for Emmy, a sword for Jvar. It is tempting to see Emmy's destructiveness — she'll pull them apart in a few days' (p.25) — as a form of rebellion.

Themes

A Feminist Tract?
An important contemporary of Ibsen, the Swedish dramatist, August Strindberg, thought A Doll's House an outrageous defence of feminism and an act of male treachery on Ibsen's part (see his Preface to Getting Married). The play has been repeatedly both acclaimed and vilified as advocating women's liberation, a matter which had been under public discussion in Norway, as elsewhere, during the nineteenth century. In 1869 Georg Brandes, the Danish critic had translated J.S. Mill's The Subjection of Women and in 1871 Mathilde Schjoett wrote The Women-Friends' Discussion of 'The Subjection of Women'. The sensational impact of A Doll's House when it was first produced at the Theatre Royal, Copenhagen demonstrates just how radical the drama was in its sympathetic portrayal of a woman who refuses to obey her husband, leaving him, her home and her children. Ibsen himself, however, insisted that he was 'more of a poet and less of a social philosopher' (speech to the Norwegian Association for Women's Rights in Christiania, 26 May 1898) and that he was not 'even very sure what Women's Rights really are'. His interest lay not in specific political and social changes but in a 'revolution of the spirit of man'. While writing A Doll's House Ibsen made the following notes:

There are two kinds of moral laws, two kinds of conscience, one for men and one, quite different, for women. They don't understand each other; but in practical life, woman is judged by masculine law, as though she weren't a woman but a man.

The wife in the play ends by having no idea what is right and what is wrong; natural feelings on the one hand and belief in authority on the other lead her to utter distraction.

A woman cannot be herself in modern society. It is an exclusively male society, with laws made by men and with prosecutors and judges who assess female conduct from a male standpoint.

She has committed forgery, which is her pride; for she has
done it out of love for her husband, to save his life. But this husband of hers takes his standpoint, conventionally honourable, on the side of the law, and sees the situation with male eyes.

Moral conflict. Weighed down and confused by her trust in authority, she loses faith in her own morality, and in her fitness to bring up her children. Bitterness. A mother in modern society, like certain insects, retires and dies once she has done her duty by propagating the race. Love of life, of home, of husband and children and family. Now and then, as women do, she shrugs off her thoughts. Suddenly anguish and fear return. Everything must be borne alone. The catastrophe approaches, mercilessly, inevitably. Despair, conflict and defeat.

Nora represents the middle-class, nineteenth-century daughter and wife who is 'protected' from experiencing the hardships (and benefits) of the world outside the family and is expected to suppress her own desires in deference to the wishes of first, her father, and then her husband. Women's liberation is, however, not the main concern of A Doll's House; the plight of women is part of a larger theme, the necessity for self-liberation. Both Nora and Helmer are victims of their social roles as husband and wife. In attempting to behave according to convention, they have developed a marriage which is based upon an illusion. Within their relationship they deceive each other and themselves both consciously and sub-consciously. Nora does not see the forgery as anything but a means to an end and engages in it almost casually without realising its full social consequences. Her priority is the welfare of her husband. The irony is that the forgery, the most glaring of a whole sequence of 'shiftings and evasions' (p.84), can be seen as the one genuine act of love in the whole play.

Desperately wanting to be the conventional good wife, Nora has wilfully learned to suppress those areas of her consciousness which lead her, ultimately, to reject Helmer and what he stands for. Dreaming of improbable solutions to her problem — Dr. Rank will leave her money, Helmer will take the weight of the world's accusations upon his own shoulders — she tries to maintain the fragile foundations of her life with Helmer. Suddenly, when he does not behave in the hoped-for miraculous fashion, she is confronted by what she has always suspected — her husband's subservience to petty social values which are more important to him than his feelings for his wife.

Helmer, however, is trapped in his social role. Afraid of any repetition of social humiliation just prior to his new appointment, he can only mouth his desires to be brave, honest and responsible. He repeatedly asserts that his honour is of paramount importance but this is equated merely with social respectability. Once the danger from Krogstad has receded, he wishes to reassert his role as protector — 'I shall watch over you like a hunted dove which I have snatched unharmed from the claws of the falcon' (p.96). This indeed sounds like the heroic defender whom Nora at first thought — and then hoped — she had married. But he has revealed his inadequacy in so stark a fashion that not even Nora can hide from the reality of her husband's motives and attitudes. In these circumstances, Nora comes to realise (perhaps too suddenly for much faith to be invested in the maturity of her decision) the hollow sham that has been their life together. The passion, ingenuity and courage which she has so far channelled into her attempts at acting the role of dutiful wife and mother now seek an alternative outlet. No longer prepared to accept marriage to a man who 'just thought it was fun to be in love' (p.98) and who expects her simply to mirror his tastes and attitudes, she claims the right to educate herself — 'I must think things out for myself, and try to find my own answer' (p.100) — and the right to discover 'which is right, society or I' (p.101). Shocked by the experience of what she has found out about certain laws which would condemn her as a criminal when she only sought to save her husband's life, Nora begins to question the demands of duty to her husband and children as expounded by religion and society when they run counter to her duty towards herself.

**Love and duty: self-liberation**

In the character of Mrs. Linde, Ibsen presents the results of a marriage embarked upon purely out of duty to members of one's family. For the sake of her sick, ageing mother and two younger brothers, she married a man whom she did not love but whose wealth would bring her family financial security. This might appear praiseworthy but it has ultimately brought her only misery. Seeing herself as a 'shipwrecked soul' with the opportunity of choosing whom to share her life with, Mrs. Linde makes a determined bid to re-establish herself in Krogstad's affections. At first glance this reuniting of the two lovers can seem to present a rather romantic view of love as conqueror. However, Christine has 'learned to look at things practically' (p.81). She does not rush back to Krogstad...
A doll's house provides a make-believe world where children make their dolls perform social roles. Through the agency of the title and by means of various speeches within the play, Ibsen draws a
A Doll's House

parallel between the life that is represented in the house on stage and the false life of a doll's house. This is most clearly emphasised when Nora describes herself as her husband's doll and the children as her dolls. Helmer's paternalism seems to confirm this throughout the play as he gives Nora presents expecting her to entertain him in return. Under the guise of being a good mother, she plays games with her children and gives them presents. Their real needs are catered for by Anne-Marie. When Nora slams the door at the end of the play, she is rejecting her role as a doll in order to realise her full potential as an individual in the outside world.

The world of nature
Apart from the lines relating to 'dolls' and 'play', the most obvious thread of imagery which runs through A Doll's House is that which relates to the world of nature. The window in the left hand wall of the set looks on to the outside world and the Scandinavian winter. The cosy drawingroom, warmed by the large stove placed on the opposite side of the stage, is a refuge from the weather which is equated with the bleakness of human interaction in the world of business. When Krogstad enters, he brings the cold with him. Mrs. Linde's experiences of life outside have left her feeling empty and lonely. By contrast, Nora has so far managed to protect her sheltered haven from disruption. The deceit she has practised to safeguard her home, eventually forces her out into the cold. Helmer knows just how fragile is their protected environment — one cruel stroke of fate could destroy it. The image chosen is of a tile falling from a house on to his head — the result of a natural storm could so easily bring financial ruin. By such means, Ibsen establishes a finely balanced tension between the two worlds of nature and social convention.

Both Krogstad and Mrs. Linde are described as 'castaways', symbolic victims of a world of storm and tempest, as well as of the cruel reality of a system based on finance and moral cowardice. Their emotional condition is reflected in Mrs. Linde's description of them as 'two shipwrecked souls' (p.82). Helmer's pet names for Nora would also seem to ally her with the world of nature. The creatures she is likened to, however, are essentially small, gentle and pleasure-giving. The 'lark' and 'squirrel' have difficulty surviving in a world where Nature seems, in Tennyson's words, 'red in tooth and claw'. The imagery hence reinforces the audience's ambivalent emotions when Nora finally slams the door. The 'expensive pet' (p.26) has now to cope with the natural world to which it belongs and yet from which it has been alienated. There is no easy optimism available to the observer. The 'hunted dove' has refused to be 'snatched from the claws of the falcon' (p.96). Its survival must be problematic.

The 'miracle'
Another facet of Ibsen's ability to imbue language with poetic power can be seen in his development of Nora's use of the word 'miracle'. At first she regards their approaching prosperity as 'almost like a miracle', for it will release her from her debt, but once it becomes clear that the facts of the whole episode will be made public, she describes herself as 'sitting here and waiting for the miracle to happen' (p.79). The 'miracle' has changed its substance and now consists of Helmer taking entire responsibility for her action upon him. When 'the miracle failed to happen' (p.101), Nora is forced to acknowledge what she has concealed in her subconscious — the true nature of her husband and her relationship with him. Her husband has embodied her religion. Helmer has been the God-like provider upon whom she has depended totally, accepting his wishes and attitudes as innately superior to her own. She uses the word 'miracle' several times in her final conversation with Helmer. Once her belief in him is broken, she has no concept of religious duty left. The 'miracle of miracles' (p.104) would now mean both she and Helmer undergoing such revolutionary changes in character that their union could become a genuine marriage. Thus, Ibsen's development of Nora's concept of 'the miracle' in itself charts her progress towards self-realisation. Helmer's plight is poignantly reinforced when his last hope of 'The miracle of miracles — ?' (p.104) is shattered by the slamming of the front door.

Ibsen's influence
Although many of Ibsen's plays when first performed or published created a furore amongst critics and certain sections of the public, they also enjoyed enormous popularity and support amongst progressive young writers and theatre directors all over Europe. In
England the leading critical supporters of Ibsen were Edmund Gosse, William Archer, J.T. Grein and George Bernard Shaw, who battled to undermine the arguments of conservative critics such as Clement Scott, writing for the Daily Telegraph, who had accused Ibsen of producing degrading, sensationalist filth. By the late 1890s Ibsen's detractors all over Europe were largely silent and his supporters triumphantly welcomed his growing stature as a dramatist of international repute (David Thomas, Henrik Ibsen, Macmillan, pp.158-9).

Ibsen's work has directly and indirectly influenced a vast array of successive playwrights. It was Ibsen's example that inspired G.B. Shaw to write his early didactic plays such as Widowers' Houses (1892) and Mrs. Warren's Profession (1893), which deal with social problems and moral issues. The line of influence in the British theatre, embracing such figures as Pinero, Galsworthy and Rattigan on the way, remains strong today. The Irish dramatists, J.M. Synge (1871-1909) and Sean O'Casey (1880-1964), consciously used their debt to Ibsen, the former in his depiction of Nora, the young wife, in In the Shadow of the Glen and the latter in The Plough and the Stars where the scenes between Jack Clitheroe and Nora recall those between Nora and Helmer. Synge attacked Ibsen for removing the crucial element of 'joy' from the stage but nevertheless acknowledged the advances introduced by the Norwegian in terms of subject matter and technique. This is especially clear in The Playboy of the Western World, which owes a strong debt to Peer Gynt.

Ibsen's impact on later writers has varied enormously. Open admiration is the case of Arthur Miller whose All My Sons (1947) provides a variation on the theme of Pillars of Society and whose Death of a Salesman (1949) is probably the most celebrated attempt, through the character of Willy Loman, to extend Ibsen's concept of tragedy. Both plays also make much use of Ibsen's retrospective technique. Even Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956), who thought that 'a modern spectator can't learn anything from them' (Brecht on Theatre, Methuen, p.66), considered Ibsen's plays 'important historical documents'. And Chekhov, as David Thomas points out, 'quite brilliantly adapted Ibsen's technique to serve his own very different needs and aspirations as a writer' (Thomas, p.160). The influence of The Wild Duck on the writing of The Seagull is clear.

For Ibsen's younger contemporaries in Germany A Doll's House provided a much needed focus for their desire to change the arid mechanistic approach embodied in the established theatres. Frowned upon, and frequently censored by, the German authorities, Ibsen's work encouraged such as Gerhart Hauptmann to address themselves to serious social themes avoiding conventional stereotypes and obligatory happy endings. European drama could no longer pretend to be separate from real life; the long reign of melodrama and romanticism had been challenged by Ibsen's intentions and achievements. His plays are a seminal influence in the development of modern theatre. A Doll's House acted as 'a clarion call to the younger generation of dramatic realists' (Allardyce Nicoll, World Drama, Harrop, p.536). It was a clarion call that effectively changed the face of European theatre practice and playwriting.
Productions of A Doll's House

Continental productions

The world premiere of A Doll's House was given in Denmark, at the Royal Theatre, Copenhagen, on 21 December 1879, directed by H.P. Holst after only two blocking and eight general rehearsals. Betty Hennings played Nora and the production, despite its conventional setting and inadequate preparation, ran for twenty-one performances during that season alone. It remained in the repertory for all of twenty-eight years, to be revived in all its essentials as late as 1955. Critical attention focused on the morality of the play's ending and especially Nora's decision to abandon her three children. Doubts were also expressed about the plausibility of Nora's psychological 'revolution' during the play's final scene when she undergoes an apparently instantaneous transformation from doll-wife to mature woman. According to one newspaper critic, 'Nora has only shown herself as a little Fordic "Frou-Frou" and as such she cannot be transformed in a flash to a Soren Kierkegaard in skirts' (cited in F.J. and L-L. Marker, Ibsen's Lively Art, CUP, 1989, p. 48). Despite his criticisms were generally very impressed by the production and especially the childlike quality of the twenty-nine-year-old Hennings' performance. Reflecting later on this production, and comparing her performance with others he had seen over the years, the English journalist and writer, Maurice Baring, commented that 'She made the transformation [...] of the Nora of the first act into the Nora of the last act seem the most natural thing in the world' (ibid., p. 50).

The first production in Ibsen's native Norway was given the following year at the Christiania Theatre, in what is now Oslo, with Johanne Juell as a Nora who brought a touch of wild hysteria to the role in what was otherwise a rather slapdash production by all accounts, which ran for only twenty-eight performances.

In Germany, the first production of A Doll's House was staged at the Residenz Theater, Munich, in 1880, directed by Ernst von Possart, with Marie Ramlo as Nora. Ibsen saw the production and said that he felt 'a couple of actors had not fully understood their roles [and that] he did not like the wallpaper in the living room' (Ferguson, 1996, pp. 246-7). Although this production had conformed to Ibsen's original, his German translator had warned him in advance of German audiences' potential response to the play's liberationist ending. Much against his will, Ibsen felt obliged to compose an alternative ending to suit bourgeois taste, which he described as 'an act of barbarous violence against the play', but which he preferred to write himself rather than allow anyone else to do it. In this revised version, Helmer drags Nora to the bedroom door and, pointing to their sleeping children, demands she consider what they would feel like when they realise they are 'motherless'. Whereupon, overcome with remorse, she recants as follows:

Motherless! (After an inner struggle, she lets her bag fall, and says) Ah, though it is a sin against myself, I cannot leave them! She sinks almost to the ground by the door. The curtain falls.

According to Robert Ferguson,

Since the author himself had written it, many German theatres used the new ending. Hedwig Niemann-Raabe performed the barbarism in Flensburg, Hamburg, Dresden and Hanover. She also performed it in Berlin, where there was such an outcry over the dishonesty that shortly afterwards the play had to be performed in its original version. This in turn provoked a second outcry, and a third version was performed, incorporating a putative 'missing' fourth act in which Fri Linde and Krogstad are discovered a married couple, with a restless Nora their guest. Torvald arrives. Nora looks up at him and whispers 'Have you then quite forgiven me? Helmer gives her a mysterious but affectionate look, takes out a large bag of the forbidden macaroons and pops one into her mouth with a smile. 'The miracle of miracles!' cries Nora joyfully, as the curtain descends. (Ibid., p. 245)

Irene Triesch played Nora in a production at the Lessing Theatre, Berlin, in 1889, staged by Otto Brahm, a director famed for his naturalistic approach. According to one critic, the actress gave the impression of 'a sleepwalker dancing on the edge of an abyss' (Marker and Marker, op. cit., p. 57), an interpretation which coloured Brahm's next production, at the Deutsches Theater, Berlin, in 1894, with Agnes Sorma as Nora. To many this seemed a savage, almost Strindbergian interpretation of the role in which the clash with Helmer brought out the sexual undercurrent in the relationship. The final scene was acted in such a way as to emphasise the complete humiliation of the husband in face of Nora's scornful contempt for his about-turn when he thinks he has been 'saved' from public exposure. In this connection it is interesting to note that Strindberg's third wife, Harriet Bosse, acted Nora when aged fifty, at the Royal...
Dramatic Theatre, Stockholm, in 1925.

One of the first great European actresses to tackle the role was the Italian Eleonore Duse, at the Teatro Filodrammatici, Milan, in 1891, using a heavily cut text which, among other things, omitted the children. While some critics criticised the cuts and Duse’s tendency to over-domesticate the role, others appreciated the subtlety with which she handled the more melodramatic moments, such as the tarantella, performed wearing a crown of roses and executed with just a few, tentative steps before collapsing in an apparent paroxysm of nervous exhaustion. The noted Ibsen translator, William Archer, who saw the production on tour at the Lyric Theatre, London, in 1893, was struck by an almost expressionistic effect at the beginning of the last act when Duse appeared hollow-eyed and ashen-faced as if ‘the shadow of death’ lay over her. After seeing her performance in Vienna, the poet and librettist Hugo von Hofmannstahl ‘compared the contrast between her martyred feelings and her calm self-possession to that of a passion-play actor in the role of Jesus Christ’ (Simon Williams, ‘Ibsen and the theatre of Chekhov’s 1877–1900’, in McFarland, 1994, p. 177).

The first French production was given in 1894 at the Théâtre de Vaudeville, in Paris, with Gabrielle Réjane as Nora. An actress of enormous nervous energy who had had a recent success in a boulevard play by Sardou, Réjane seemed an unlikely candidate for the role of Nora but managed to bring it off by emphasising the character’s underlying sense of fear, combined with an innate eroticism which, finally, produced a sense of authentic revolt. Meanwhile, in Russia, the first production of Nora (as the play has tended to be called in that country) was staged by the entrepreneur F.A. Korsh at his own theatre in Moscow in 1882. The first St Petersburg production was in 1883, followed closely by one at the Aleksandrinsky Theatre, also in St Petersburg, the following year with Mariya Savina as Nora. However, the most famous Russian interpreter of the role was undoubtedly Vera Komissarzhevskaia who, having starred at the Aleksandrinsky in the ill-fated premiere of Chekhov’s The Seagull in 1896, subsequently established her own theatre, in St Petersburg, where she staged A Doll’s House in 1904, at the age of forty. While her own performance was a triumph and she was literally bombarded with flowers at the final curtain, Nikolai Krasov’s Helmer seemed to critics a very weak foil to this powerful actress who, when she later toured America, was praised for ‘that rare power of showing the working of one emotion beneath another’ in a manner that was ‘simply wonderful! Wonderful!’ and where ‘superb acting brought out Nora in a new psychological light’ (cited in Victor Borovsky, A Triptych from the Russian Theatre, London, Hurst & Co., 2001, p. 199).

A further production of the play at Korsh’s Theatre, Moscow, in 1891, was followed by one at the theatre owned and run by Chekhov’s friend, the publisher and entrepreneur Aleksandr Suvorin, in St Petersburg, with Lydia Yavorska as Nora. Komissarzhevskaia then revived the play at her own theatre to which she had invited the comparatively unknown director (at that stage in his illustrious career) Vsevolod Meyerhold. A former actor at the Moscow Art Theatre, Meyerhold had left tofound his own company in 1902, subsequently spending three years working in the provinces where he achieved interesting results through applying theatrical techniques derived from his interest in Symbolist theories of theatre production. His production of A Doll’s House in 1906 retained essentially the same decor as for the 1904 version but sought to stage the action more as a bas-relief, a technique he was to employ in more radical experimental productions involving Komissarzhevskaia, by confining all the action to the forward edge of the stage. The decor was stylised so that, instead of cozy bourgeois domesticity, the audience was confronted with what looked like a ‘cramped corridor passageway with a decrepit piano in one corner [...] an equally dilapidated three-legged table [...] an arbitrarily suspended window [...] and cranberry-coloured drapes’ (Marker and Marker, op. cit., pp. 63–4). Perhaps taking a leaf out of Duse’s interpretative book, the tarantella was staged by Meyerhold as ‘no more than a series of expressive poses during which the feet simply tapped out a nervous rhythm. If you watched only the feet, it looked more like running than dancing’ (Edward Braun, ed., Meyerhold on Theatre, rev. edn., London, Methuen, 1991, p. 25).

Meyerhold went on to stage further productions of the play after the Russian Revolution, in 1920 at Petrograd (formerly St Petersburg) and then in Novorossiisk in 1920. However, probably the most radical version of the play ever mounted was the one he staged after three days’ rehearsal in Moscow in 1922, at the former Nezlobin (renamed the Actor’s Theatre) where his assistant – the future film director, Sergei Eisenstein – later recorded in his memoirs a sense of creative excitement such as he had experienced in his life neither before nor since. Audiences arrived at the venue to encounter a setting composed of stage flats which might normally have been used for a conventional naturalistic setting, but here reversed to reveal blank canvas with exposed wooden supports. They had been propped
against the stage walls in a state of complete disarray as if to suggest that the domestic revolution which the play records had found its counterpart in the political revolution taking place beyond the theatre's walls.

Two of the finest Scandinavian interpreters of Nora have been, in the 1930s, Tor Segelcke and, more recently, Liv Ullmann at the Det Norske Teatret in 1974. The former's was 'a thoroughly, fiercely modern portrayal of a distraught, self-possessed human being whose "eerily gaiety" in the first act gave unmistakable warning of the angry rebelliousness and bitter disappointment that were to follow. Her tarantella became "the outburst of a temperament rendered unbalanced and rebellious by her sense of aloneness in a sexual charade she had, deep down, always regarded as degrading" (Marker and Marker, op. cit., p. 70). Liv Ullmann's interpretation had the great advantage of her having previously worked with the great Swedish film director, Ingmar Bergman, for whom she had appeared in several, emotionally rather bleak, films. While inheriting the interpretation from Segelcke in many respects, Ullmann deliberately suppressed the element of hope at the conclusion. The implication here was that life in the outside world was more likely to lead to the madhouse than to the achievement of any kind of genuine independence.

Bergman himself had first turned his attention to the play in 1964 and then, more significantly, in 1981, with a production at the Residenztheater, Munich, with Rita Russek as Nora. Rather like the production of Hedda Gabler he had staged in London with Maggie Smith in 1970, Bergman lined the non-representational box set in dark red so that it seemed a womb-like limbo into which neither light nor air penetrated. A succession of fragmentary settings were indicated by a bare minimum of furniture and properties — and the main stage area into which they stepped when making an entrance, rather like figures of fate, or role-players in a masquerade. In this sense the production seemed reminiscent of Strindberg's A Dream Play, which Bergman had previously directed, but with Nora as the dreamer whose controlling consciousness dictated the nature of the action. Her tarantella, danced on a tabletop, seemed like a cry for help while, at the play's conclusion, as if waking from a bad dream, Nora made her exit through an apparently solid wall which swung open like a gateway to freedom. In a revival of the production at the Royal Dramatic Theatre, Stockholm, in 1989, Bergman deployed many of the same devices, although Nora's final escape on this occasion was made through the auditorium, observed from the stage by her little daughter clutching a doll.

Other German productions of note have included a revival by Rudolf Noelle at Berlin's Renaissance-Theater, in 1976, and one by Peter Zadek at the Bremer Kammerlade in Bremen, in 1967, with Edit Clever as Nora. Zadek opted for a minimalist form of staging which was designed to lay bare the play's essence and to enforce a sense of critical distance which produced an almost Brechtian-style 'alienation-effect'. What has also been characterised as the shock-style (shock-style) of this production might also have been said to have characterised Hans Neuenfels' production at the Stuttgart-Wurttemberg State Theatre in 1972, which stressed an anti-bourgeois element in its conception. The setting, by Klaus Gelhaar, seemed to reflect Helmer's dreams of grandeur in its green and white palatial lineaments, displacing the usual middle-class coziness, and dominated by a huge set of rear windows hung with funeral drapes. The actors struck puppet-like poses and the play's ending was staged as a mixture of the absurd and the ironic as Nora ascended a ladder to effect an exit through the rear windows before reappearing, almost immediately, as an orphan-like face pressed to the glass as if seeking readmission from exposure to the wintry harshness of the world outside.

British productions

The first production of A Doll's House in Britain took place in 1884, based on a translation by Henrietta Frances Lord, who had an eccentric belief in a Christian version of Pythagoras's theory of the transmigration of souls. She entitled the play Nora and appended a preface in which she described the play in ways which amounted to its being little more than a tract for the twin causes of Feminism and Christian Science. Two years later a bowdlerised and expurgated version of this translation by Henry Arthur Jones and Henry Herman entitled Breaking a Butterfly, which both sentimentalised and melodramatised Ibsen's play, opened at the new Prince's Theatre in London. Not only did the adapters alter the ending but they also invented a number of new characters with English names, including four members of the 'Goddard' family, a 'Philip Dunkley' (played...
by Herbert Beerbohm Tree) and two other characters called 'Martin Grittle' and 'Dan Bradbury'. The play's ending had Helmer take upon himself the blame for Nora's past indiscretions while Nora herself concluded as a sweeaty repentant wife and mother.

A famous amateur performance took place in 1886 in a private drawing room in London's Bloomsbury district organised by Karl Marx's daughter, Eleanor, who played Nora opposite her common-law husband, Edward Aveling, who played Helmer. William Morris's daughter, May, played Mrs Linde and no less a figure than the law husband, Edward Aveling, who played Helmer. William Morris's of Ibsenism professional production of the play was given in London at the Novelty Theatre in June 1889, directed by Charles Carrington, with his wife, Janet Achurch, as Nora. Carrington himself played Helmer. The production was planned to run for a week but lasted for three. The translation was a distinguished one by William Archer, who went on to translate most of Ibsen's plays into English. The critic Clement Scott, who tended subsequently to be hostile to Ibsen and who famously loathed Ghosts, admired Achurch's performance and although the 'restlessness of the child wife in the first act was a trifle forced [. . .] nothing could have been better than the scene with the doctor [. . .] and the whole of her share in the last long duologue was as good as it could be [. . .] The interest was so intense [. . .] that a pin might have been heard to drop [. . .] and when the curtain fell there was such cheering that Mr Carrington promised to telegraph the happy result to Henrik Ibsen' (unsigned notice by Scott in the Daily Telegraph, 8 June 1889, in Egan, 1972, pp. 102-3).

In an interview, Achurch described the strain of undertaking such a large role which she considered 'heavier than Hamlet' (ibid. p. 124). Not all criticism was positive, however; in fact the London press was predominantly hostile, the play being described as 'morbid and unwholesome' by The Times, while the critic of the Sporting and Dramatic News declared that he 'had never sat out a play more dreary or illogical as a whole, or in its details more feeble or commonplace. It is as though someone has dramatised the cooking of a Sunday dinner' (quoted in Michael Meyer cd., File on Ibsen, London, Meduen, 1985, p. 35).

Attending a revival in 1892 at London's Avenue Theatre, again with Janet Achurch, the trade-union leader John Burns noted in his diary that the theatre had been 'half-filled with socialists' – an indication as to how Ibsen was being interpreted at the time. Achurch again performed the role at two London venues – the Royalty Theatre in 1893 and, penultimately, in 1897 at the Globe Theatre. Viewing this last, Shaw was struck less by the play's political implications than by both Achurch's performance and that of Courtney Thorpe as Helmer. The latter played the part with passion. It is the first time we have seen this done, and the effect is overwhelming. We no longer study an object lesson in lord-of créationism, appealing to our sociological interest only. We see a fellow-creature blindly wrecking his happiness and losing his "love life", and are touched dramatically' (Bernard Shaw, Our Theatres in the Nineties, London, Constable, 1954, p. 132). As far as Achurch's performance was concerned, she was 'far ahead of any living English actress of her generation in this class of work' and, after discussing the subtleties of her acting in some detail, Shaw concluded that 'Nora has all her old vitality and originality, and more than her old hold on the audience, she is less girlish and more sophisticated with the passions of the stage than she was at the Novelty when she first captivated us' (ibid. pp. 132-3). Achurch's last performance of the role was given at the Kingsway Theatre, London, in 1911. The 1920s and 1930s saw London performances by Madge Titheradge at the Playhouse Theatre in 1925, two performances by Gwen Ffrangcon-Davies – at the Arts Theatre and the Criterion Theatre, both in 1930 – and two performances of the role by Lydia Lopokova – at the Arts Theatre in 1934 and at the Criterion Theatre in 1936. James Agate, reviewing the 1930 Criterion production bewailed the continued dominance in British Ibsen of 'the dingy parlours hung with penitential gloom' and while praising Lopokova's performance, criticised the ponderous reproduction of the drawing-room milieu with its hideous stuffiness. Reviewing a production in 1939 at the Duke of York's Theatre, directed by Marius Goring, and with Lucie Mannheim and Austin Trevor, Agate again had cause to criticise the decor. Although he felt that Marius Goring had produced 'excitingly', he disapproved of 'the amazing architecture of Torvald's summer palace, which appears to be on the ground floor of Park Lane's latest and most luxurious block of flats'. Agate also thought that 'Miss Lucie Mannheim's Nora should not be allowed to let off shrieks and whistles which suggest a railway engine in hysteria', although 'a great deal of her Nora is exceedingly touching, and the end of the second act is very nearly the best I have seen'. He was especially struck by the staging of Rank's final exit, 'in gala costume, with confetti on his shoulders, and on his forehead a mask to which is attached a balloon, baleful and ridiculous. It is as though Ibsen, foreseeing Strindberg and wishful to take the wind out of his sails,
had thrown in an entire Strindberg play as a mere decoration' (James Agate, Red Letter Nights, London, Jonathan Cape, 1944, pp. 60–2).

Peter Ashmore's 1953 revival at the Lyric, Hammarsmith, starred Mai Zetterling and Mogens Wieth in a setting which opened up the entire living area of the Helmer apartment to include a bedroom, where the final scene was played in such a manner as to stress the sexual aspect of their eight-year relationship as an important contributory factor in Nora's decision to leave. Patrick Garland directed a notable production of the play at London's Criterion Theatre in 1973, designed by John Bury and with Claire Bloom and Colin Blakely. Bloom's performance was described as one of 'high theatrical intelligence [...] you can see from the beginning every bright-eyed, feverish, whimsical move has been laid to prepare for the climax: [...] Miss Bloom [...] comes up with a credible vulnerability, a genuine affection for her husband and a frantic neurosis about her impending disgrace [and] emerges not as a plaything but as someone on the brink of womanhood'. In this she was matched by the 'intelligence and power' of Colin Blakely's performance as Torvald in a play where 'husband, as well as wife, is exposed which gives the play shock-waves their power' (Helen Dawson in Plays and Players, March 1973, pp. 42–3).

Probably the finest of the more recent productions of A Doll's House was the one directed by Adrian Noble, in the round, at the Barbican Centre's intimate Pit Theatre in 1982, with Cheryl Campbell as Nora. Michael Billington described the production as achieving 'an almost holy intensity', in which 'the central dynamic comes from Cheryl Campbell's extraordinary Nora', played as 'a schizoid, suicidal near-hysterical', in such a way that 'the final discovery of her real self becomes not merely moving but cleansing'. The famous tarantella scene concluded with frenzied laughter and wild cartwheels. Playing opposite her, Stephen Moore offered 'an almost definitive Torvald: no paternalist villain but someone trapped like a dog in a kennel who feels trapped'. The character's influence on the play's unfolding of events is achieved 'by the strength of his interpretation' (Michael Billington, One Night Stands, London, Nick Hern Books, 1993, pp. 185–6).

Anthony Page staged what was described as a 'revelatory revival' at the Playhouse Theatre, London, in 1996, with Janet McTeer and Owen Teale. McTeer's performance was characterised as having 'grandeur' in the way she contrived to wear her infantilism 'like a disguise'. Teale's Welsh Torvald was a 'strapping, virile ox with a self-sentimentalising streak', a man who, 'if he were to kill or rape his wife, would blubber with fetching self-pity afterwards'. The critic's experience was genuinely cathartic and he urged his readers to 'go to see this compulsory account of a very great play' (Paul Taylor, Independent, 26 October 1996).

Other recent productions have included one at the Royal Lyceum Theatre, Edinburgh, in 1987 (with Judi Bowker), at the Palace Theatre, Watford, in 1987 (with Susan Penhaligon), at the Royal Exchange, Manchester, in 1987 (with Brenda Blethyn), at the Riverside Studios, London, in 2000 (with Anne-Marie Duff), and one by the Birmingham Repertory Theatre Company in 2004 (with Tara Fitzgerald). Some of these have assumed a more stylised approach, none more so than the productions by Lou Stein in Watford and the one given by the Shared Experience group at the New Ambassadors Theatre, London, in 2000. Both can be described as 'expressionist' in nature. The Watford production had decor by Stefanos Lazaridis, who provided a series of 'black Norwegian pine screens that steal shock-waves their power' (Helen Dawson in Plays and Players, March 1973, pp. 42–3).

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Film versions

A 1922 screen version, with Alla Nazimova and Alan Hale, was apparently the fifth silent film version of the play to be made in America. It then seems to have fallen out of favour until later in the century when Rainer Werner Fassbinder made a German video version in 1973, which was wildly seen on European television. According to Marker and Marker, 'In this heavily edited cinematic de(con)struction of A Doll's House, the heroine — played by the Fassbinder star Margit Carstensen — became a materialistic society woman cynically intent on the acquisition of power and the selfish preservation of her social and marital position. [...] Carstensen depicted a timelessly bourgeois Hausfrau, fully as responsible as her husband for their unhealthy marriage and for the power struggle it has become' (op. cit., p. 77-8). Ingmar Bergman's film Scenes from a Marriage (1973), which he also adapted for the stage, is said to have been inspired by A Doll's House. Originally part of a six-part TV series, it starred Liv Ullmann and Erland Josephson, with Bibi Andersson as 'the other woman', and was shot largely in close-up in order to emphasise the tensions between the protagonists.

In 1973 two other filmed versions of the play appeared — one directed by Patrick Garland and based on his own stage production with Claire Bloom; the other directed by Joseph Losey and starring Jane Fonda. Both films had very strong casts. Claire Bloom's performance gained support from Anthony Hopkins's Torvald, Ralph Richardson's Dr Rank, Denholm Elliott's Krogstad and Anna Massey's Mrs Linde, while no less a person than Dame Edith Evans put in a cameo performance as the nanny. Both films had very strong casts. Claire Bloom's performance gained support from Anthony Hopkins's Torvald, Ralph Richardson's Dr Rank, Denholm Elliott's Krogstad and Anna Massey's Mrs Linde, while no less a person than Dame Edith Evans put in a cameo appearance as the nanny. The screenplay was by British playwright, Christopher Hampton. Losey's film, which was based on a screenplay by yet another British playwright, David Mercer, had an all-star cast which, as well as Fonda, included David Warner as Torvald, Trevor Howard as Dr Rank, Delphine Seyrig as Mrs Linde and Edward Fox as Krogstad.

More recently, the British director, David Thacker, who had staged Ghosts and Arthur Miller's version of An Enemy of the People at London's Young Vic Theatre, made a TV version of A Doll's House for the BBC in 1992, which was his first work for television and highly praised. An excellent cast, which included Juliet Stevenson, Trevor Eve, Geraldine James, David Calder and Patrick Malahide, prospered under Thacker's 'enormously generous' direction, where it was 'the warped pattern of relationships that is unpicked [in what was] a depiction of real life, not a morality play' (Nigella Lawson, The Times, 28 November 1992).

Further reading

Ibsen in English translation


The Oxford Ibsen. Volume 5 of this 8-volume series contains Pillars of Society, A Doll's House and Ghosts, translated and edited by James McFarlane. It also includes a selection of the dramatist's draft material, accounts of early performances and extensive bibliographical information.

Criticism

M.C. Bradbrook, Ibsen the Norwegian: a Revaluation, London, Chatto and Windus, 1966. This critical study by an outstanding scholar and writer on the theatre draws attention to the specifically Norwegian qualities of Ibsen's work.


