

'A Doll's House': an individual's search for identity

By Alex Plaza

With a single slam of the door, the heroine of Henrik Ibsen's "A Doll's House" severed the bonds of a false marriage, and theater history was made. Against societal convention, Ibsen had the courage to define marriage as a condition in which a man and a woman operate on equal terms. It was a revolutionary concept in 1879, and it may be that no other female before "A Doll's House" explored the issue of female dependence with as much depth or breadth of vision.

On the surface, Ibsen's work is a deceptively simple tale of a woman driven by passion to engage in acts of deceit and subterfuge. On a deeper level, it is a powerful expression of the chasm between idealism and reality, of the gaps between people who need to be honest with each other. It is ultimately a portrait of desolation.

Unlike his Scandinavian counterpart, August Strindberg, who was consumed by a diabolical search for truth, Ibsen demonstrates in "A Doll's House," as in his other plays, that he is more concerned with asking uncomfortable questions, with probing issues that cut to the bone, than with providing any answers.

For Nora, Ibsen's strong-willed heroine, the issue of primary concern is a choice between the ideal and the real. Like Hedda Gabler, her tragic awakening to her position is propelled by her discovery of her husband's inability to conform himself to her romantic conception of his character.

At the play's beginning, Torvald, Nora's husband, views his wife neither as his peer nor as an individual entitled to share his anxieties and troubles. She must be satisfied to perform the role of the dutiful, complacent housewife — no impossible demands, no sullen moods, no backtalk. He tells her: "My songbird must have a clean beak to chirp with no false notes." For Nora's part, she is completely content with the lavish attention she receives from her husband. It blinds her to the harsh injustices of the outside world.

And, like Nora, the reader is helpless against the beauty of Ibsen's lyric. It has precisely the romantic passion of our dreams and, just as we are ready to surrender, Ibsen gives us the dream's price. In her willingness to maintain her doll's house existence, Nora is inevitably ensnared in an intricately woven web of prevarication and double-cross.

To acquire the money needed to nurse her husband through a long illness, Nora forges her father's name on a promissory note. Her deception is revealed when, Krogstad, a former employee of her husband's bank, threatens to blackmail Torvald into restoring him to his former job.

Torvald's discovery of her error turns Nora's reality into a splintered prism, its crippled crystals refracting the events of her past life in a dizzy stream of images and thoughts.

Her displacement, though, is temporary. After her husband places his own selfish whims ahead of her feelings, Nora realizes she's been living an illusion. She's no longer willing to exist merely to perform tricks for her husband. Instead, she discards her subservient marital state and embarks, alone, on a quest to become, as she says, "a reasonable human being."

Film director Ingmar Bergman described Ibsen's genius in "A Doll's House" as "an unswerving commitment to exposing the corruption of complicity." Like Bergman, Ibsen is not a social critic standing on the outside, observing his characters with slight disdain. He is inside and it is from this particularly painful vantage point that his

force of insight emerges. It brings not only criticism but understanding, not righteous anger but a desperate, if ultimately futile, struggle against despair. Ibsen is first and foremost a realist.

His sense of realism is acutely apparent in "A Doll's House" when Nora comes to terms with the awful reality of her predicament. She does not voice her distress — she is cold, mute, immovable. It is a stage silence that almost shatters the words of the play. It is also a moment that could exist only in the theater and, by that moment, one understands why Henrik Ibsen was what he wanted most to be — a playwright.

Women's rights 100 years after

By Caroline Powell

"A Doll's House—100 Years After: Women's Rights and Wrongs" will be the subject of an informal open symposium the UT drama department will hold from 2-4:30 p.m. Friday and 10 a.m.-noon Saturday in the B. Iden Payne Theatre.

Dr. Howard Stein, chairman of the department, will lead the symposium which will coincide with the department's centennial production of Ibsen's play, about a woman who leaves her husband and children to try to become "a reasonable human being" rather than the mere doll of the title. Performances are Wednesday through Thursday and Oct. 15-20 in the Payne Theatre.

The discussion will concentrate on the relationship (within a dramatic art work) between "essentially prosaic social conditions and the larger poetic vision" — in this case a vision of "the burden of freedom." Ibsen has often been hailed as the first great playwright for the feminist cause — and he draws a

frightening picture of women's legal position — but he is also dealing with the problem of what it means to be human. Nora, his heroine, is not the only character in the play "caught up in the fact" of circumstances.

Friday's discussion will center on the play itself while Saturday's will view women's rights within the larger context of human rights "which transcend colour, sex and age, but which involve human responsibilities."

Members of the cast who will attend the symposium include Barrie Ingham (playing Torvald), fall semester lecturer at the University and member of the Royal Shakespeare Company, and Marianne Owen (Nora), formerly of the Yale Repertory Theatre. Professor Bernard Engel (Dr. Rank) and Assistant Professor Jan Ross (Christina) of the drama faculty will also attend along with professors from different departments. Yvonne Shafer, professor of humanities at the University of Delaware and a charter member of the Ibsen Society in America, will also be present.



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... Nazimova



... Marianne Owen

Owen takes on complex role

"A Doll's House," written by Henrik Ibsen; to be presented Wednesday through Oct. 20 at B. Iden Payne Theatre; directed by Michael Kaha; curtain time is 8 p.m.

The role of Nora in "A Doll's House," Henrik Ibsen's classic play about women's rights, is not only timely but challenging to the actress who portrays this complex character.

For Marianne Owen, who plays Nora in the UT drama department's production of "A Doll's House," the character is exciting and real, caught in a dilemma which is as common today as it was 100 years

ago when the play was first presented.

Owen grew up in Cape Elizabeth, Maine, and has been involved in acting since she was in high school. She received her bachelor of arts degree from the University of Maine at Portland/Gorham in 1976 and her master's degree in fine arts from the Yale School of Drama in 1979.

Owen is no stranger to challenging roles. Counting Army in "Wings" among her favorite roles, Owen has acted in the Yale Repertory Theatre and off-Broadway as a member of the New York Public Theatre. Past roles include Celia in "As You Like

It," Gina in "The Wild Duck," The Woman in "The Bundle," and various roles in "Sganarelle." Owen has also portrayed Rosalind in "As You Like It," Olivia in "Twelfth Night," Denny in "Great Solo Town" and was understudy for the role of Kathleen in the world premiere of "Terra Nova."

Plans include a February-July 1980 stint with the American Repertory Theatre at Harvard University, where Owen will play Helena in "A Midsummer Night's Dream," Miriam in "Happy End," the role of the wife in "Ivanov" and Kathy in "Terry Rex."



Henrik Ibsen

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