

Ibsen Our Contemporary

In this article Richard Hornby argues that Ibsen's plays are badly performed today, or not performed at all, because of directors' refusal to take them with appropriate seriousness. The tendency is to stage the plays' reputation as simplistic social problem plays rather than as the complex, challenging, bizarre dramas that Ibsen actually wrote. In particular, directors avoid the grotesque elements that are the true 'quintessence of Ibsenism', and that are often remarkably similar in style to that of avant-garde playwrights today. Richard Hornby is Emeritus Professor of Theatre at the University of California, Riverside. For the past twenty-eight years he has been theatre critic for *The Hudson Review*, and is author of six books and over two hundred published articles on various aspects of theatre. This essay was delivered as the keynote address at the fourteenth annual Ibsen Festival of the Commonweal Theatre Company, Lanesboro, Minnesota, in April 2011.

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HERE are the outlines of some not-so-well-known plays by a well-known nineteenth-century playwright:

Play 1 A small-town preacher makes increasing demands on his family and his parishioners, which cause his estrangement from his dying mother and later the death of his wife and son. Later still he leads his flock up an icy mountain for no clear reason; separated from them, he encounters a hawk, which turns into an avalanche that kills him. Above the roar of the avalanche is heard a voice crying, 'God is love!'

Play 2 A feckless dreamer entertains his family with a pet duck, which he keeps in the attic, which he pretends is a forest. A more sober individual moves in. Appalled by all the nonsense, he suggests to the adolescent daughter (whose parentage is actually none too clear) that she kill the duck. Just as much a dreamer as her father (if he really is her father), she interprets this suggestion rather too symbolically, and shoots herself instead.

Play 3 A young couple have a son who is crippled because of an accident in infancy, when he fell off a table because his parents were preoccupied having sexual intercourse.

Now plagued with guilt, the father decides to devote himself to his son's upbringing, but once again gets distracted, so that an itinerant ratcatcher – an old woman who carries a live dog in her handbag – manages to lure the boy off to drown in the fjord. Ultimately the couple decide to devote themselves to the disadvantaged children of the town (we can only hope they do not get sidetracked yet again).

The nineteenth-century playwright here is of course Henrik Ibsen, and the plays are *Brand*, *The Wild Duck*, and *Little Ejlolf*. I chose them partly because there is not a single social problem in them, unless you see *Little Ejlolf* as a stern warning against having sex without protection – for your children. But equally important, these plays show Ibsen's sense of the bizarre, the unexpected, the unexplainable, which is one of his defining traits. Such grotesqueries are not typical of nineteenth-century drama, nor of other realistic literature of that time, but are the true quintessence of Ibsenism for anybody who has read or seen more than the small number of his plays that most people pay attention to. For many decades I have seen over a hundred plays a year, yet have only ever seen one production of *Brand*, one of *The Wild Duck* (in French!),

and one of *Little Ejolf* (which I directed myself); but I have seen dozens of *Doll Houses* and *Hedda Gablers*, and maybe half a dozen each of *Ghosts* and *An Enemy of the People*. The reason one only ever sees a handful of Ibsen's twenty-six plays is not because those four or five are his best, but because they seem to fit the mould created early on, of Ibsen the social reformer attacking mostly outdated social problems, the safe Ibsen who never challenges anyone except political reactionaries, most of them long dead.

The social problem or 'thesis' play emerged in mid-nineteenth-century France, when hack playwrights such as Augier and Dumas *fills* realized that there was money to be made by writing didactic works about current social problems such as prostitution, the power of money, and the influence of the Church on politics. The bourgeoisie could go to the theatre to be entertained, yet convince themselves that they were not just having a good time but receiving a valuable lesson.

The genre has never really gone away; turn your TV through a few channels and you will find sanctimonious dramas dealing with gays in the military, athletes on steroids, women in the corporate boardroom, and so on. There is nothing necessarily wrong with writing plays about social problems, but two provisos apply: if a play is just a means to a practical end, once the social problem has been solved or otherwise forgotten the play will lose its reason for being and sink into oblivion (though we should note that social problems have a way of coming back from the dead). Second, and more important, since the playwright *chooses* the social problem and invents the details, it is all too easy to 'prove' any thesis he or she likes.

We think of social problem drama as being left wing or at least progressive, but consider, for example, D. W. Griffith's landmark 1915 movie *The Birth of a Nation*, which warns of the social problems that arise from allowing African Americans to vote and hold political office. Or consider one of my all-time favourite bad movies, Leo McCarey's *My Son John*, a Hollywood release in 1952. In it, Helen Hayes's character outs her son, not as gay (although it is implied that he is), but as

a *Communist*. He's been acting strangely of late, criticizing her religious beliefs and his father's patriotism. Luckily for America, the FBI (like the Ku Klux Klan in *Birth of a Nation*) steps in to restore traditional American values.

The point is that the social problem play as a genre is neutral, both politically and artistically. Ibsen wrote a few works that can be seen as social problem plays, one of which, *A Doll House*, made his reputation in Europe and America as a feminist social reformer. But just as the fact that *Hamlet* being a revenge play is not what makes it great, the fact that *A Doll House* is a social problem play neither elevates nor reduces it.

In fact, when you look at Ibsen's handful of famous plays closely, you find that he handles the problems far more subtly than the Parisian hacks ever did. The word 'feminism' is never even mentioned in *A Doll House*; nor does the hot-button feminist issue of its time, votes for women, ever come up. Oswald's disease in *Ghosts* is never called 'syphilis', which its symptoms do not always match. *An Enemy of the People* is not really about water pollution, but about the tyranny of the majority, and ultimately, I shall argue, about fanaticism.

Ibsen can even *parody* the social problem play. *The Master Builder*, written in 1892, seems to begin as one. The play is about an ageing building contractor named Halvard Solness whose successful career has led to contempt for his clients, ruthlessness towards his employees, loss of his children, and the mental breakdown of his wife. The play opens in Solness's 'plainly furnished workroom', a realistic, mundane setting that prepares us for a very practical, down-to-earth play. We soon learn that Solness, in addition to having past difficulties in his life and work, is currently having a sexual affair with his bookkeeper Kaja Fosli, and is also suppressing the career of her fiancé, an aspiring young architect named Ragnar Brovik. The young man's father Knut Brovik, once an architect himself but now reduced to serving as Solness's feeble old assistant, begs Solness to give Ragnar a commission, but Solness is oblivious to the problems of both men, and adamantly opposed to helping

anybody – ‘making room’, he sneers – in the building trade. He is the nineteenth-century self-made man gone monomaniacal.

Thus the stage is set for any number of social problems: the heartlessness of the capitalist system, the tribulations of the elderly, the limitations of individualism, the power of money, and even sexual harassment. Instead of following up any of these, however, the play veers off in a different direction. Solness, in his office, talking with his friend Dr Herdal, confesses his fear of ageing: ‘The change is coming,’ he insists. ‘Someday youth will come here, knocking at the door’ – when lo and behold there actually is a sudden knock at the door and youth does enter, in the person of Hilda Wangel, a girl whom Solness had met ten years earlier, when she was twelve. It is once again one of those embarrassingly wacky moments that are so typical of the real Ibsen.

Hilda is a strange character indeed, seeming alternately like a very ordinary young woman and some kind of demon. She claims that Solness molested her at the time of their previous encounter; he remembers the incident, but cannot recall whether he actually held and kissed the child – ‘many times’ – or only fantasized about it. She also insists that he agreed to come back and carry her off ‘like a troll’ to a magic kingdom, and demands that he do so forthwith. The problems that were besetting Solness at the beginning of the play fade away, replaced by an uncanny duel between the master builder and the mysterious girl that ends with Solness plunging to his death from a tower that he has just had constructed.

Solness’s wife, his mistress Kaja, and his assistant Knut Brovik, along with the old man’s son Ragnar, are still around at the end of the play but are all but forgotten, shoved from the spotlight by a demonic girl and her bedazzled admirer. The social problems that the earlier characters seemed to foreshadow remain undeveloped and certainly unresolved, because the social problem play has turned into a symbolist fairy tale. This kind of disruption is again not typical of late nineteenth-century drama, not even those plays of Strindberg, de l’Isle-Adam, Maeterlinck,

or Yeats, which are symbolist from the start, and stay there beginning, middle, and end.

If Ibsen were alive today and had just written *The Master Builder*, fashionable literary and performance critics would be enraptured. We would hear all the buzzwords: ‘intertextuality’, ‘parody of past styles’, ‘meta-drama’, ‘magic realism’ – even ‘deconstruction’. But since Ibsen actually wrote the play in 1892, such critics have probably never even heard of it. They would certainly have heard of Ibsen – as a writer to be avoided, a dead white European male who wrote boringly predictable plays about Victorian social problems. Syphilis, wasn’t it? Or maybe votes for women?

In the theatre, especially in America, the situation would be even worse. Since, as I noted earlier, the social problems have a way of coming back, trendy directors sometimes put on the plays today, but ‘adapted’, which means removing all the supposed awkwardness, outdatedness, incongruousness, unpredictability – in other words, the challenges that make the plays great. If one of our *wunderkind* directors got his hands on *The Master Builder*, he would probably remove the character of Hilda entirely, to turn the play back into the heavy, preachy piece that all Ibsen’s plays are supposed to be.

The urge to adapt Ibsen, then, arises from a strange kind of circular reasoning. A play that Ibsen wrote is not the real play. The genuine article is *behind* what Ibsen wrote, an eternal, unchanging, unchallenging ideal that Ibsen, writing a long time ago with deficient playwriting skills and a limited imagination, was unable to actualize. Thus Ibsen can only become Ibsen via the intervention of the modern adapter. It is best that the adapter not know any Norwegian, nor much about Ibsen’s work as a whole, nor much about the late nineteenth-century theatre, because up there in Plato’s heaven where the true play resides there is no room for such squalid particulars. In short, the proper technique is not to adapt the play, but to adapt the play’s reputation.

Thus, in adapting *Ghosts*, you start with the assumption that the play is all about syphilis, but since that illness is now curable

you change it to AIDS. You set *Hedda Gabler* in the 1930s with music by Cole Porter and a man playing Hedda. In *A Doll House* you make the Helmers black or Hispanic or Asian, or even all three at once, with the lead roles triple-cast. Or you have Torvald literally beat poor Nora to teach the little squirrel a lesson, thus demonstrating the brutal side of male chauvinism that Ibsen lacked the guts to depict. Or worst of all you cast the men in *A Doll House* with little people and find tall actresses to play opposite them. This was the notorious Mabou Mines production, directed by Lee Breuer. Here is a description of a performance from the jacket notes to *Mabou Mines' Dollhouse* (Mabou Mines/Alive Mind DVD):

Mabou Mines' Dollhouse [sic], an audaciously comic adaptation of Ibsen's classic tragedy *A Doll's House*, opened at St. Ann's Warehouse in 2003 to rave reviews. Director Lee Breuer and leading lady Maude Mitchell adapted the piece, and both won off-Broadway's prestigious Obie awards for their work on the production. After the off-Broadway production closed, the company embarked on a five-year tour, playing more than thirty cities around the world. The play became an international sensation, playing to enthusiastic audiences and receiving glowing notices in London, Paris, Germany, and Ibsen's native Norway.

Dollhouse infuses Ibsen's tragedy with a comic edge. Torvald and the other male characters are portrayed by actors under four and a half feet in height. Nora and the rest of the female characters are played by actresses up to six feet tall, creating a dizzying visual commentary on sexual politics. Adding to the funhouse effect, the set itself is a virtual doll house. The performers play their scenes on and around miniature tables and chairs. In this world of mismatched proportions, the men settle snugly into the child-sized Victorian furniture, but the women have to contort themselves into unnatural positions every time they try to fit into the furnishings of a constricting world that was fashioned with no attention to their needs.

'In *Dollhouse* [sic]', the press notes state, 'nothing dramatizes Ibsen's patriarchal point more clearly than the image of these little men dominating and commanding women one and a half times their size.' It is not clear whether the word 'patriarchal' here refers to Ibsen himself, to the play, or to society, but one thing is for sure: it does not refer to anything Ibsen actually wrote.

Breuer's production was an arrogant anti-male fantasy. The play became a heavy feminist treatise, the one Ibsen supposedly wanted to write but somehow didn't. The characters are no longer individuals we care about, but are merely types. An actor cannot even sit in a chair without the action making a political statement. The men were cast entirely because of their bodies rather than because of their acting ability, which is the opposite of what 'non-traditional casting' is supposed to do, and their bodies are held up to ridicule. And what did those enthusiastic audiences actually get from this production with its pathetic, posturing actors and a message so obvious only a moron could miss it? Did they feel a new appreciation for Ibsen? Or did they go home with the smug feeling that they had experienced a brilliant director's commentary on a tiresome old play?

As a contrast to this, consider the production of *An Enemy of the People* staged a few years earlier by the National Theatre in London under the direction of Trevor Nunn and starring Ian McKellen. Like *A Doll House*, *Enemy* has suffered at the hands of an adapter, in this case the playwright Arthur Miller. Before the Nunn/McKellen version I had seen half-a-dozen productions of the play (including one I performed in, and another an odd movie starring Steve McQueen), but always in the Miller adaptation.

Miller, writing in 1950 when Ibsen's reputation could not have been lower, felt obliged to defend the Norwegian playwright in a preface to the printed text. Unfortunately, he bought the notion of Ibsen the social reformer with unqualified gusto, even stating in his preface (Penguin, 1977, p. 7) that 'Every Ibsen play begins with the unwritten words: "Now listen here!"' Every Ibsen play? Miller could only mean every Ibsen play he had read, which cannot have included very many.

What are the messages Ibsen wants us to listen to in *The Wild Duck*, for example, or *The Master Builder*? Don't play with ducks in attics? Don't climb towers without a safety harness? Once he got into the 'listen here' mode, Miller inevitably assumed that Ibsen's message is more important than his art, and hence that the same message could be told

better by altering or leaving out parts of the play that Miller found disturbing. It is the same familiar story of adapting the reputation of an Ibsen play rather than looking at what Ibsen actually wrote.

What is that reputation? *An Enemy of the People* is popularly said to be a simple treatise on the issues of water pollution, government corruption, and free speech: Stockmann, the protagonist, is medical officer for a spa in a small Norwegian town. When he discovers that the baths are polluted, vested interests in the town, which depends on the spa for its prosperity, not only refuse to clean up the pollution, but muzzle the good doctor when he tries to speak out. He becomes a heroic martyr to scientific truth.

This plot outline is not exactly false, but it omits many crucial details that blend its blacks and whites into more interesting greys. For one thing, Dr Stockmann's chief antagonist is not only mayor of the town but his own brother. Stockmann served for years in a northern backwater while his brother prospered at home; when the returned doctor suggested building the baths, the mayor took over and became Chairman of the Board, relegating his brother to the lesser position of medical officer, while ignoring his advice on where to place the intake pipes. Thus Dr Stockmann's exposure of the pollution is not merely a plea for truth and health, but a blow in a sibling rivalry going back years.

This background rivalry is the reason that the doctor is *happy* when he discovers that the baths are polluted, actually expecting that the town will laud him as a hero. When the reaction turns out to be the opposite, he picks up on an idea that unscrupulous journalists had put into his head, that the pollution is a symbol of government corruption generally, calling for the extermination 'like vermin' of all who oppose the truth. Although he has right on his side, the doctor can be as ruthless as his brother, with an edge of fanaticism that is moderated only by his lack of real power. When the town votes to declare him an 'enemy of the people', he compares himself more than once to Christ, vowing to find twelve disciples among the urchins of the neighbourhood.

Only a naive audience member would welcome this quest without reservation. Although *Enemy* certainly qualifies as a social problem play, it is also a fascinating psychological study of a complex protagonist. The Miller adaptation simply removes the complexities. The Christian imagery is toned down to a single historical question: 'Was the majority right when they stood by while Jesus was crucified?' Stockmann's speech about 'vermin', and earlier ones that express racial theories that sound embarrassingly fascist, are excised. Stockmann's well-known curtain line – 'The strongest man is the one who stands alone' – spoken while he is ironically surrounded by family and a friend, gets changed to the confusing 'The strong must learn to be lonely', which Miller counterpoints with a howling lynch mob outside the door. If you are going to add the mob, which is not in Ibsen, should not the line be something like 'The strong must learn to be persecuted'? (Or maybe, 'The strong must learn to be dead'.)

By contrast, the Royal National Theatre production avoided the crude Miller adaptation of *Enemy*, using instead a straightforward translation by Christopher Hampton that preserved the ambiguities of the Dr Stockmann character that Ibsen wrote. Ian McKellen, playing the lead, made the doctor one of his greatest roles. McKellen has all the charm and charisma of a major theatre star, but he is not afraid to show the negative side of a character. In fact, he is at his best with ambiguous heroes such as Coriolanus, Uncle Vanya, or Salieri in Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus*. He is particularly good at showing defeat, with a hangdog slouch that radiates emotion from his entire body. (The ability to act with the entire body, rather than just the face and voice, is one of the characteristics of a great actor; critics went on for ever about Garbo's face, for example, but look at the way she leans against a door, slumps at a table, or walks across a room.)

McKellen showed the unfavourable side of Dr Stockmann in a number of ways, some of which came from the imaginative staging by director Trevor Nunn. The scenes between the two brother antagonists were thus

played with deep rancour, which at one point (not called for in the text) turned into an actual wrestling match. McKellen had a way of baiting people, particularly during the scene in which the entire town censures him for trying to speak out; it was clear that his objective was not truth, but vindication. He was also delightfully vain when he forbade the newspaper people to hold a banquet or parade in his honour, a hilarious moment in a play that is wrongly thought to be humourless. Through the entire performance McKellen showed the boyish charm, the exuberance, the genuine smile, that made it impossible for us not to identify with him. The mayor and his brother may have a lot in common, but where the former is mean and underhanded, the latter, as played by McKellen, is open, generous (to a fault, leading to financial problems), and naive.

I saw *Enemy* when it opened in London in the fall of 1997, then again, nearly a year later, when it played in Los Angeles at the Ahmanson Theatre. One of the delights in seeing the show twice was in noting how McKellen had grown in his performance. In scoring a role for a stage play, actors tend to think not so much in terms of lines or speeches, but in units, which are defined by the events that occur in them. In rehearsal you speak of the persuasion unit, the humiliation unit, the reconciliation unit, etc. You are always trying to improve each unit, even after a show opens, since in a role of any size you are rarely happy with every moment of performance. It is like an artist retouching a painting, or a writer revising a manuscript; the main work may have been done successfully, but the totality is never perfect.

In ten months of performing in *Enemy*, McKellen enriched many units. In the town meeting, for example, he added some swigs from a hip flask, making Dr Stockmann slightly drunk as his reactions grew wilder. At another moment, when making Darwinist observations about the evolution of society, he added a hilarious imitation of an ape, while at the end, when comparing him-

self to Christ, he now assumed a cruciform position. Those who doubt that acting is an art should see how carefully and beautifully a fine actor builds a great role.

Several lessons can be drawn from contrasting the Mabou Mines *Dollhouse* and the National Theatre *Enemy of the People*. First, forget about Ibsen the social reformer. There is some truth to that view, but it tends to blot out other important considerations, especially aesthetic ones. Ibsen was primarily an artist, a poet of the theatre, not a pamphleteer, and his disruptive style is closer to that of postmodern playwrights like Beckett, Ionesco, and Stoppard than to nineteenth-century 'thesis' playwrights such as Augier, Dumas *fils*, Brieux, or early Shaw. Second, as has long been obvious, Ibsen is a great playwright for actors. Heavy 'concept' productions like the Mabou Mines little-men-big-women version of *A Doll House* are not only anti-playwright, they are anti-actor. Breuer's actors had nothing to create; all they needed to do was show up and follow orders. Instead of a careful, detailed, stimulating collaboration between actor and director, as with Nunn and McKellen, creativity flowed only one way, from a tyrannical director to slavishly obedient actors.

The final lesson to be learned is how important it is to include in production the elements of an Ibsen play that go against the grain, that are unexpected, that do not support a thesis. I mentioned some of these elements in *An Enemy of the People*, but there are some in *A Doll House* as well: the fact that Nora is not an abused spouse, that in fact she adores her husband, and had taken out the loan not to advance herself in some way but in order to save Torvald's life. She ultimately finds his love shallow and repulsive, but she is walking out on love, not cruelty, and, we might note, she is walking out on her children as well as on her husband. As Pirandello insisted, Ibsen is the greatest playwright since Shakespeare, and we need to give him the respect he deserves if we are to experience the challenge and grandeur of his plays.