

PROSCENIUM

Hedda Gabler

By Henrik Ibsen

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Wednesday 14th February to Saturday 17th February 2007
Compass Theatre, Ickenham

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By Henrik Ibsen

In a version by Richard Eyre

Hedda Tesman, daughter of General Gabler Isabelle Cartwright
George Tesman, her husband, an academic Robert Ewen
Juliana Tesman, his aunt Evelyn Moutrie
Judge Brack, circuit judge David Pearson
Thea Elvsted, wife of a High Sheriff Clare Wooster
Eilert Loevborg, writer Michael Williams
Berthe, maid Crystal Anthony

Director Colin Hickman
Assistant director Olwen Mears
Set Design Michael Gerrard
Stage Manager Sheila Harvey
Properties Margaret Rudolph
Lighting Design Janet Harrison
Lighting operated by Paul Davis
Music composed and recorded by Vincent Eavis
Costumes Evelyn Moutrie

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Henrik Ibsen was born in 1828 in Skien, a tiny and remote town in the far south of Norway, a country whose language was spoken only by its inhabitants, who had been ruled by foreigners for nearly a thousand years. Norway had been transferred from Denmark to Sweden at the beginning of the nineteenth century and did not attain full autonomy until a year before Ibsen's death in 1906. The country had very little formal culture – though an immensely rich popular one, both poetically and musically – and almost no theatre to speak of. His father was a merchant and the family comfortably off until his business failed

when Henrik was seven, leaving them grindingly poor. This early humiliation, the loss of his childhood paradise (he would play with his puppet theatre under the active encouragement of his mother), seems, as with Charles Dickens, directly related to the unrelentingly driven nature of his life and work.

At the age of sixteen he was apprenticed to a pharmacist in Grimstad and two years later was compelled to begin supporting his illegitimate child born to a serving girl.

In 1850 he moved to Christiania (now Oslo) where he studied and earned a little from journalistic writings. In the same year he wrote his first two plays, *Catalina* and *The Burial Mound*.

Ibsen had hoped to become a physician but, after failing his university entrance examinations, he met the violinist Ole Bull, a great champion of nascent Norwegian culture, who sensed his uncommon promise and installed him as stage poet of the Norwegian Theatre in Bergen. Here, for five years, Ibsen provided the theatre with a play a year – verse dramas on historical subjects – while supervising the annual output of 44 plays. He immersed himself in every aspect of the theatre, was sent on a study tour of Denmark and Germany, and in 1857 returned to Christiania as Artistic Director of the new Norwegian Theatre. The next year he married Suzannah Thorenson and their only child, Sigmund, was born in 1859. He wrote the epic *Vikings at Heligoland* and the satire *Love's Comedy* during this period but he was under considerable pressure, the theatre was in financial difficulties and he began to find consolation in the bottle. Eventually a group of friends, realising he was at breaking point, clubbed together to supplement a small government grant which enabled him to travel to Italy.

It was here in the south that the great poet of the north found himself. His two great poetic dramas, *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, established his reputation throughout Europe and earned him a state pension. Although honoured in Norway, (he dined with the king in Stockholm and represented Norway at the opening of the Suez Canal) he moved from Rome to Munich with his family, and in all he lived abroad for nearly 27 years.

While living in Munich he devoted himself to his work. 'An author who wants to achieve anything,' he wrote, 'must isolate himself and live alone in his thoughts and for his work.' He had, he said, no time for flowers, children or music. Only the work mattered. 'Ibsen the fanatical sceptic,' wrote Strindberg, 'so repellent, so attractive.' At this time he wrote four socially realistic plays attacking social conventions as destroyers of life and happiness: *Pillars of the Community* (1877), *A Doll's House* (1897), *Ghosts* (1881) and *An Enemy of the People* (1882).

In his later plays, which include *The Wild Duck* (1884), *The Lady from the Sea* (1888) and *Hedda Gabler* (1890), while they still maintain a clear social critique, symbolism plays an increasingly large part. He returned to Norway in the early 1890s to write his last four plays, culminating in *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896) and *When We Dead Awaken* (1899).

IBSEN, IN HIS OWN WORDS

From his preliminary notes for the play:

Women aren't all created to be mothers. They all have a leaning towards sensuality, but are afraid of the scandal. They realise that life holds a purpose for them, but they cannot find that purpose.

Men and women don't belong to the same century.

Hedda is typical of women in her position and with her character. One marries Tesman but one titillates one's imagination with Eilert Loevborg. One leans back in one's chair, closes one's eyes and pictures to oneself his adventures. The enormous difference: Mrs Elvsted 'works to improve him morally', while for Hedda he is merely a subject for cowardly and tantalising dreams. She lacks the courage to partake actively in such goings on.

It is the want of a goal in life which torments her.

Life is not tragic – Life is ridiculous – and that cannot be borne.

Brack quite understands that it is what is repressed in H., her hysteria, that is really the motivating force behind her way of behaving.

Loevborg has leanings towards Bohemianism. Hedda is also attracted to it but dares not take the jump.

On the play:

The title of the play is *Hedda Gabler*. My intention in giving it this name was to indicate that Hedda as a personality is to be regarded rather as her father's daughter than as her husband's wife.

It was not my intention in this play to deal with so-called problems. What I principally wanted to do was to depict human beings, human emotions, and human destinies, upon a groundwork of certain of the

social conditions and principles of the present day.

Letters

On Women:

I must disclaim the honour of having consciously worked for women's rights. I am not even quite sure what women's rights really are. To me it has been a question of human rights...Of course it is incidentally desirable to solve the problem of women; but that has not been my whole object. My task has been the portrayal of human beings.

Speech to Norwegian Society for Women's Rights 1898

On acting:

The language must sound natural and the mode of expression must be distinctive for every character in the play; one human being does not express himself like another ...The effect of the play depends greatly on the audience feeling that they are listening to something that is actually happening in real life.

Letter 1883

People have not fully appreciated that a passionate writer needs to be acted with passion, and not otherwise.

In conversation

REACTIONS AND COMMENTARY

I have studied Ibsen's plays pretty carefully, and all the characters appear to be morally deranged. All the heroines are dissatisfied spinsters who look on marriage as a monopoly, or dissatisfied married women in a chronic state of rebellion against not only the conditions which nature has imposed on their sex, but against all the duties and obligations of mothers and wives. As for the men, they are all rascals or imbeciles.

Mr Pigott, the Lord Chamberlain's Examiner, 1891

I feel pity and terror, as though the play had been Greek.

Oscar Wilde

The tragedy of Hedda in real life is not that she commits suicide but

that she continues to live! There is not one of Ibsen's characters who is not, in the old phrase, the temple of the Holy Ghost, and who does not move you at moments by the sense of that mystery.

G. Bernard Shaw

In the whole of the new play there is not one speech which would require thirty seconds for its enunciation. I will dare to say that I think in this instance Ibsen has gone perilously far in his desire for rapid and concise expression... an unceasing display of hissing conversational fireworks, fragments of sentences without verbs, clauses that come to nothing, adverbial exclamations and cryptic interrogations. On the stage, no doubt, this rapid broken utterance will give an extraordinary sense of reality.

Edmund Gosse, first translator of Hedda Gabler

Hedda Gabler is a masterpiece of piquant subtlety, delicate observation, and tragic intensity, and I take leave to enjoy it. Its heroine may be, as our judicial critic asserts, 'a monstrous specimen of unfettered womanhood', but I can only ask 'What then – so long as she is interesting?'

A.B. Walkley on production at the Vaudeville April 1891

Most of Ibsen's plays have been about egotistical men and selfless women: but here was a play about an egotistical *woman*, and whereas a man's egotism may at least often cause him to accomplish much, a woman's merely drives her into isolation and self-adoration. Hedda has no source of richness in herself and must constantly seek it in others, so that her life becomes a pursuit of sensation and experiment; and her hatred of bearing a child is the ultimate expression of her egotism, the sickness that brings death.

Herman Bang, lecture in Christiania November 1891

Loevborg and Tesman, Dr Duve argues, are aspects of Ibsen's own self: Loevborg is an idealised portrait of himself as he had been in the wild years of his youth, Tesman a *reductio ad absurdum* of what he had chosen to become. Loevborg stands for Ibsen's emotional self, Tesman for his intellectual self. Ibsen was haunted through the latter half of his life by the feeling that he had stifled his emotional self and that only his bourgeois and slightly ludicrous intellectual self had

lived on.

Michael Meyer, The Making of a Dramatist 1967

Hedda inherits her father's abilities with sharpened edges. An energetic organiser with no vocation of her own, a charmer who would be undefeatable in committee, a commanding personality and a good shot .. she ought to have become commander-in-chief of the Norwegian armed forces. When, in place of that job which she could do better than anyone else in Scandinavia, society offers her motherhood, which can be done by half the population, Hedda is naturally disgusted. Forbidden to organise, she disorganises – and touches with destruction almost everyone she knows, including the ultimate target of her marksmanship, herself.

Brigid Brophy, 1970

Hedda is a victim. She is not tragic but desperately needs to get the minimal rewards of life ... The idea of being made pregnant – by anyone, even Loevborg – is repellent to her. Her tragedy, if it can be called one, is that of being born bored and that is what is fascinating about her in the annals of dramatic literature. The very concept was unique at the time. She is a loser, whereas Mrs Elvsted is an odds-on favourite.

John Osborne

Nora (in *A Doll's House*) is one of a wonderfully varied stream of trapped and angry women, driven to oddity or malice or violence by the imposition of an idealistic straightjacket on their bodies and minds. Nora, Hedda, Rebecca West, Hedvig. The men too are trapped in their beliefs, in structures that contain them as the walls of the stage contain them.

A.S. Byatt, the Guardian, December 2006

OUR

NEXT

PRODUCTION

HUMBLE BOY

By Charlotte Jones

Humble Boy is a comedy about broken vows, failed hopes and the joys of bee-keeping.

All is not well in the Humble hive. Felix Humble is a Cambridge astro-physicist in search of a unified field theory. Following the sudden death of his father, Felix returns to his middle England home and his difficult and demanding mother, where he soon realises that his search for unity must include his own chaotic home life.

“Sad, very sad; funny, very, very funny....this is a seriously wonderful play.”
Sunday Times

Humble Boy premiered at the National Theatre in August 2001, with a cast including Simon Russell Beale, Diana Rigg, and Dennis Quilley. The play was the winner of the Susan Smith Blackburn Award 2001, the Critics' Circle Best New Play Award 2002, and the People's Choice Best New Play Award 2002.

Directed by Mark Sutherland

Wednesday 25th April to Saturday 28th April 2007

7.45pm Compass Theatre, Ickenham

Box Office : 020 8866 7075

ABOUT PROSCENIUM

George Woollands and Margaret Rendle founded Proscenium in 1924.

The company's first production was the now little-known “The Tide” by Basil McDonald Hastings. Since then, the company has performed nearly 250 plays, using Harrow as a base since 1945.

In this time Proscenium has built up a strong reputation for performing challenging plays (both classic and contemporary) to a high standard.

For more information on Proscenium, and to join our mailing list, please visit our web site :

<http://www.proscenium.org.uk>