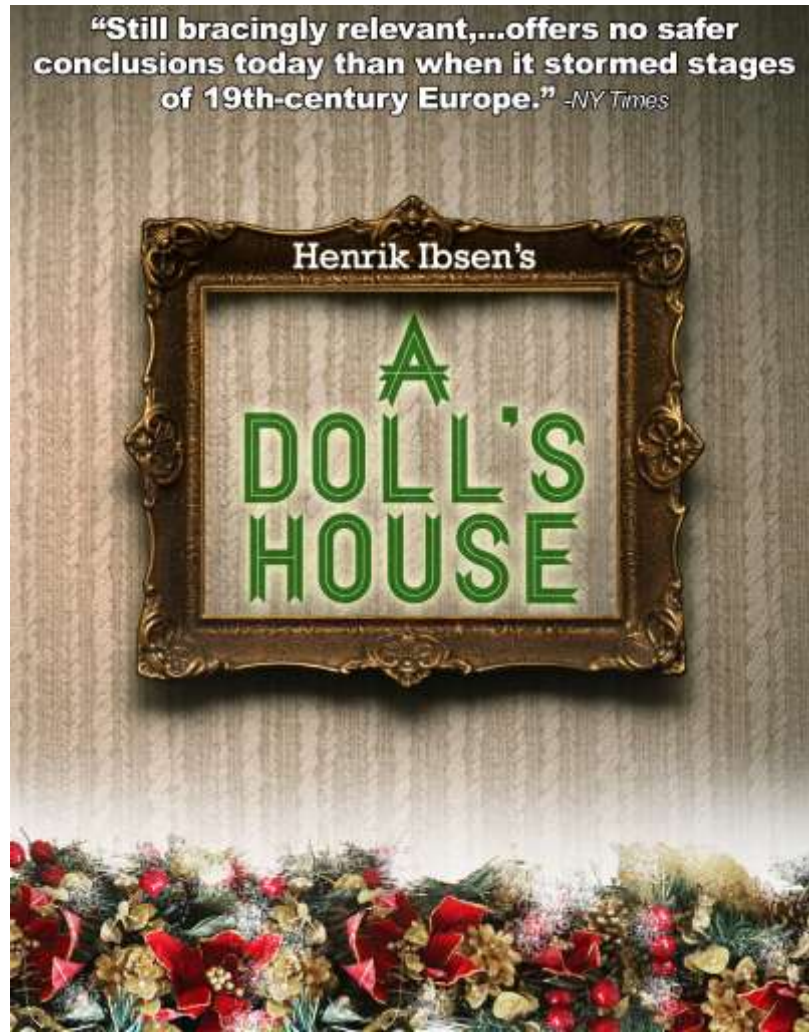




A Study Guide for Educators



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American Stage Theatre

American Stage is Tampa Bay's best professional regional Equity theatre. Founded in 1977, the company's mission is to create the most satisfying live theatre in the Tampa Bay area, accessible to all members of the community. The vision of American Stage is



to preserve the greatest human stories from our past, while creating the most defining stories and storytelling of our time. American Stage presents its six-play Mainstage Series in its 182-seat Raymond James Theatre each year. The very popular American Stage in the Park celebrates its 26th Anniversary year. The theatre's other programming includes: "After Hours" Series, School Tour, and camps and classes for children and adults.

It is American Stage Theatre Company's goal to share the enriching experience of live theatre. This study guide is intended to help you prepare for your visit to American Stage. Teachers are permitted to make copies of any and all parts of this study guide for use in the classroom. Should you have any comments or suggestions regarding this study guide, or if you need more information about scheduling trips to see an American Stage production, please feel free to contact us:

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Theatre

Elements of Theatre

1. Theatre usually engages many forms of art including:

- Writing
- Visual/Design
 - Scenery & Props
 - Costumes
 - Sound
 - Lighting
 - Casting
- Music
- Dance/Movement

2. Elements of Drama:

- **Character**
WHO are the characters and what is their relationship to each other?
- **Plot/Story**
WHAT is the story line?
What happened before the play started?
What do the characters want?
What will they do to get it?
What do they stand to gain or lose?
- **Setting**
WHERE does the story take place?
How does this affect the characters' behavior?
How does it affect the plot?
How does it affect the design?
- **Time**
WHEN does the story take place?
What year is it? What season? What time of day?
How does this affect the characters, plot and design of the play?

Other Elements to Explore

Conflict/Resolution, Action, Improvisation, Non-verbal communications, Staging, Humor, Realism and other styles, Metaphor, Language, Tone, Pattern and repetition, Emotion, Point of view.

General Questions

*These **questions** were designed to promote classroom **discussion** of any play. Use these questions as a model to help you design your own analysis techniques.*

1. How does the play start?
2. What does the playwright do to set the scene? How are the characters introduced?
3. What other techniques does the play use to help you jump into the story?
4. Who is the main character?
 - What does he/she want? (Objective)
 - How will he/she get it? (Actions/Tactics)
 - What is stopping him/her? (Obstacles)
 - How does the character change throughout the play?
5. Why is the play set in the time period that it is? How would the play be different if the time period was different?
6. Is there a character who helps the main character come to decisions and changes?
How? Opposition? Reflection?
7. Is there a villain/antagonist in the play?
Does there need to be a good character and a bad one?
8. What makes the play relevant? What makes it important?
9. What are the elements that make this piece suitable for the stage, as opposed to television, film or a novel?

A Doll's House

Exploring the Play

About the Playwright – Henrik Ibsen

Henrik Ibsen was the second of six children born into a well off merchant family in the small seaside timber port of Skien, Norway. However, his father's general store failed in 1834, and he was forced to declare bankruptcy. This traumatic event fostered a sense of uncertainty about his place in the world; Ibsen even suspected that he was an illegitimate child. The poverty and poor schooling of his early years left a lasting impression on Ibsen, and Ibsen displayed a temperament that was an odd mix of shyness and belligerence.

He left school at 15 to begin work as a pharmacist's assistant in the nearby town of Grimstad. Flouting social conventions, which would become a theme throughout his life, Ibsen engaged in practical jokes, drunkenness, gambling and sex. He fathered an illegitimate child with a local maid when he was 18.



Norway had just recently gained its independence from Denmark, and Ibsen developed a patriotic fervor mixed with the revolutionary politics that were circulating throughout Europe since the French Revolution. In 1848, Ibsen composed his first play, *Catiline*, about a revolutionary in ancient Rome, but failed to get it produced. He moved to Oslo in 1850 to attend the University of Christiania where he fell in with a group of political radicals who shared his revolutionary outlook. He joined an underground revolutionary group that was broken up by the government, an experience that disabused Ibsen from political involvement for the rest of his life. Unfortunately, he failed the Greek and Mathematic portions of the entrance exam and was not admitted to the university. Luckily, he started to find success in theater: *The Burial Mound* was produced in 1850.

About the Playwright – Henrik Ibsen (continued)

The following year, with the help of a famous violinist, Ibsen became a playwright in residence with the Norwegian Theater in Bergen, where he was expected to produce at least a play a year about the glories of Norwegian history. However, these historical plays were often more concerned with an individual's attempt to gain mastery over his surroundings and fight the constraints of his contemporary customs. Ibsen would spend the next 10 years directing over 150 plays. However, the plays Ibsen wrote during this period found little success. The common consensus was that Ibsen would be a mediocre playwright at best.



Suzannah Thoresen

In 1857, he married Suzannah Thoresen, a prototypical “liberated woman” that Ibsen would later criticize in some of his most famous plays. When the Norwegian Theater went bankrupt in the early 1860's, Ibsen fell into despair and turned to drink, despite having to support his family. He enjoyed success with one play, but his unemployment and despair, which echoed the experiences of his father, drove the playwright to the point of a nervous breakdown. He petitioned the Norwegian government to supply financial support so he could travel and devote himself to writing. In 1863, the government gave Ibsen a few short-term grants to travel throughout Europe. In 1866, while staying in Italy, Ibsen finally found his voice when he wrote *Brand*, a play of stark Kierkegaard-influenced self-denial. The play, which was not produced but sold in book form, became such a success that the Norwegian government awarded the playwright a small pension for life. The following year came *Brand's* thematic antithesis, *Peer Gynt*, a play concerning the destructive effects of overweening self-affirmation.

“Everything I have written has the closest possible connection with what I have lived through inwardly – even if I have not experienced it outwardly. In every new poem or play I have aimed at my own spiritual emancipation and purification – for no man can escape the responsibilities and the guilt of the society to which he belongs.” - Henrik Ibsen, letter to the newspaper, Ludwig Passage, June 16, 1880

About the Playwright – Henrik Ibsen (continued)

The Scandinavian world started to shower Ibsen with honors. Though these philosophically minded verse plays had turned Ibsen into the most prominent Scandinavian playwright in Europe by the end of the decade, Ibsen decided to start writing straightforward “naturalistic” plays in everyday language. The first of these plays was *The Pillars of Society* in 1877, a play critical of certain aspects of contemporary Norwegian culture, shady business practices and gender inequality. The following year, the controversial contemporary domestic drama, *A Doll's House*, caused a stir throughout Europe and ushered in the age of modern Realism in theater. Ibsen, in his later years, became increasingly aloof and isolated, rarely attending social functions or cultivating friendships (which he viewed as a costly luxury.) In 1891, at the age of 63, he returned to Norway where he was greeted as a national treasure. However, his success did not seem to satisfy him. The plays of his later period express a sense of regret about devoting his life to art at the expense of his personal relationships (or lack thereof.) He suffered a stroke in 1901 that left him debilitated until his death in 1906.

Ibsen's Most Notable Plays

- 1850 - *The Burial Mound* also known as *The Warrior's Barrow*
- 1866 - *Brand*
- 1867 - *Peer Gynt*
- 1879 - *A Doll's House*
- 1881 - *Ghosts*
- 1882 - *An Enemy of the People*
- 1884 - *The Wild Duck*
- 1886 - *Rosmersholm*
- 1888 - *The Lady from the Sea*
- 1890 - *Hedda Gabler*
- 1892 - *The Master Builder*

“He who possesses otherwise than as something to be striven for possesses something dead and meaningless, for by its very definition freedom perpetually expands as one seeks to embrace it, so that if, during the quest, anyone stops and says: ‘Now I have it,’ he shows thereby that he has lost it.” – Henrik Ibsen, letter to George Brandes, February 14, 1871

Characters

Nora Helmer

- The play's protagonist
- Married to Torvald
- Has been sheltered and babied by her father and now her husband
- Inexperienced in the ways of the world
- Appears impulsive and materialistic

Torvald Helmer

- Nora's husband of 8 years
- A lawyer who has recently been promoted to bank manager
- Focused on business
- Sees himself as responsible for the financial welfare of his family and as a guardian for his wife
- Particularly concerned with morality
- Comes across as stiff and unsympathetic

Dr. Rank

- Close friend of the family
- Torvald's physician
- Sick from consumption of the spine (congenital syphilis) as a result of his father's exploits



Janet McTeer as Nora and Peter Gowen as Krogstad in the 1997 Broadway Production

Characters (continued)

Mrs. Linde

- An old schoolmate of Nora's
- Widow
- Has worked hard to support her mother and younger brothers since the death of her husband but now her mother is dead and her brothers are grown
- Pressed for money
- Asks Nora to help her secure a job at the bank
- Was once in a romantic relationship with Krogstad

Nils Krogstad

- Employee at the bank that Torvald has just taken over
- Loaned Nora money for a trip to Italy
- Involved in a work scandal many years previously
- Due to the scandal, his name was tarnished and his career stunted



Gillian Anderson as Nora in the 2009 Donmar Warehouse Production, UK

Anne-Marie

- Raised Nora and has stayed on to look after Nora's children

Helen

- A housemaid employed by the Helmers

“The glory of Ibsen is that he refused to make certain fatal separations. He refused to separate the individual from the collective, the personal from the social.” - Eric Bentley, In Search of Theatre, 1953

Synopsis

From gradesaver.com

A Doll's House traces the awakening of Nora Helmer from her previously unexamined life of domestic, wifely comfort. Having been ruled her whole life by either her father or her husband Torvald, Nora finally comes to question the foundation of everything she has believed in once her marriage is put to the test.



Janet McTeer as Nora in the 1997 Broadway Production

Having borrowed money from a man of ill-repute named Krogstad by forging her father's signature, she was able to pay for a trip to Italy to save her sick husband's life (he was unaware of the loan, believing that the money came from Nora's father.) Since then, she has had to contrive ways to pay back her loan, growing particularly concerned with money and the ways of a complex world.

When the play opens, it is Christmas Eve, and we find that Torvald has just been promoted to manager of the bank, where he will receive a huge wage and be extremely powerful. Nora is thrilled because she thinks that she will finally be able to pay off the loan and be rid of it. Her happiness, however, is marred when an angry Krogstad approaches her. He has just learned that his position at the bank has been promised to Mrs. Linde, an old school friend of Nora's who has recently arrived in town in search of work, and he tells Nora that he will reveal her secret if she does not persuade her husband to let him keep his position. Nora tries to convince Torvald to preserve Krogstad's job, using all of her feminine tricks (which he encourages), but she is unsuccessful. Torvald tells her that Krogstad's morally corrupt nature is physically repulsive to him and impossible to work with. Nora becomes very worried.

The next day, Nora is nervously moving about the house, afraid that Krogstad will appear at any minute. Her anxiety is reduced by being preoccupied with the preparations for a big fancy-dress party that will take place the next night in a neighbor's apartment. When Torvald returns from the bank, she again takes up her pleas on behalf of Krogstad. This time, Torvald not only refuses but also sends off the notice of termination that he has already prepared for Krogstad, reassuring a scared Nora that he will take upon himself any bad things that befall them as a result. Nora is extremely moved by this comment. She begins to consider the possibility of this episode transforming their marriage for the better—as well as the possibility of suicide.

Synopsis (continued)

Meanwhile, she converses and flirts with a willing Dr. Rank. Learning that he is rapidly dying, she has an intimate conversation with him that culminates in him professing his love for her just before she is able to ask him for financial help. His words stop her, and she steers the conversation back to safer ground. Their talk is interrupted by the announcement of Krogstad's presence. Nora asks Dr. Rank to leave and has Krogstad brought in.

Krogstad tells her that he has had a change of heart and that, though he will keep the bond, he will not reveal her to the public. Instead, he wants to give Torvald a note explaining the matter so that Torvald will be pressed to help Krogstad rehabilitate himself and keep his position at the bank. Nora protests against Torvald's involvement, but Krogstad drops the letter in Torvald's letterbox anyway, much to Nora's horror. Nora exclaims aloud that she and Torvald are lost. Still, she tries to use her charms to prevent Torvald from reading the letter, luring him away from business by begging him to help her with the tarantella for the next night's party. He agrees to put off business until the next day. The letter remains in the letterbox.

The next night, before Torvald and Nora return from the ball, Mrs. Linde and Krogstad, who are old lovers, reunite in the Helmers' living room. Mrs. Linde asks to take care of Krogstad and his children and to help him become the better man that he knows he is capable of becoming. The Helmers return from the ball as Mrs. Linde is leaving (Krogstad has already left), with Torvald nearly dragging Nora into the room. Alone,



Janet McTeer as Nora and Owen Teale as Torvald in the 1997 Broadway Production

Torvald tells Nora how much he desires her but is interrupted by Dr. Rank. The doctor, unbeknownst to Torvald, has come by to say his final farewells, as he covertly explains to Nora. After he leaves, Nora is able to deter Torvald from pursuing her any more by reminding him of the ugliness of death that has just come between them, Nora having revealed Dr. Rank's secret. Seeing that Torvald finally has collected his letters, she resigns herself to committing suicide.

Synopsis (continued)

As she is leaving, though, Torvald stops her. He has just read Krogstad's letter and is enraged by its contents. He accuses Nora of ruining his life. He essentially tells her that he plans on forsaking her, contrary to his earlier claim that he would take on everything himself. During his tirade, he is interrupted by the maid bearing another note from Krogstad and addressed to Nora. Torvald reads it and becomes overjoyed. Krogstad has had a change of heart and has sent back the bond. Torvald quickly tells Nora that it is all over after all: he has forgiven her, and her pathetic attempt to help him has only made her more endearing than ever.



Gillian Anderson and Toby Stevens as Torvald in the the 2009 Donmar Warehouse Production

Seeing Torvald's true character for the first time, Nora sits her husband down to tell him that she is leaving him. After he protests, she explains that he does not love her—and, after tonight, she does not love him. She tells him that, given the suffocating life she has led until now, she owes it to herself to become fully independent and to explore her own character and the world for herself. As she leaves, she reveals to Torvald that she hopes that a "miracle" might occur: that one day, they might be able to unite in real wedlock. The play ends with the door slamming on her way out.

"Ibsen is a born polemist, and his poetic utterance was his first declaration of war. ... No one who, like Ibsen, believes in the rights and powers of the emancipated individual, no one who has felt himself, as early as he did, at war with the world around him, has a favorable opinion of the multitude. ... In Ibsen's eyes, the average man is small, egotistical, and pitiful. he looks upon him, not from the purely scientific, but from the moral point of view."- George Brandes, *Second Impressions*, 1899

Production History

From gradesaver.com



Betty Hennings as Nora in the world premiere at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen, 1879

The world premiere of *A Doll's House* took place at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen on December 21, 1879. The premiere date was fitting for the Christmastime setting of the play. Two weeks earlier, a print run of 8,000 copies of the script had been published, and it already had sold out. Some critics likely had read the text well in advance of the production. The production, largely naturalistic, retained a symmetrical arrangement of furniture along the walls, giving perhaps a slightly abstracted feel. Betty Hennings was the first Nora, and the production was directed by H. P. Holst.

Contrary to popular belief, word spread reasonably slowly about the play. It was two years before the play was performed outside Scandinavia and Germany, and ten years before a recognizably faithful version was seen in England or America. France did not see the play until 1894. By the time it took its place in the European theatre annals, Ibsen was over sixty.

The year 1880 saw the German production of *A Doll's House* starring a well-known actress, Hedwig Niemann-Raabe, who wanted to play the lead role but who refused to play the final scene as written because "I would never leave [my] children." Ibsen accepted the difficult challenge of writing an alternative, "happy" ending himself rather than have



World premiere of *A Doll's House* at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen 1879

someone else do it for him. In this version, Nora does not leave the house, but she is forced by Helmer to the doorway of the children's bedroom. Nora sinks by the door, and the curtain falls. It was this version that opened in Germany. Notably, Niemann-Raabe eventually reverted to the original text.

Production History (continued)



The impact of *A Doll's House* was global. The play resonated profoundly in China and in 1935 there were so many Chinese productions of *A Doll's House* that it was dubbed the “Year of Nora.” The most famous Chinese Nora was Jiang Qing, the notorious Madame Mao, Gang of Four member and one of the architects of the Cultural Revolution. Other playwrights weighed in, writing their own sequels and parodies including *Nora's Return*, *How Nora Returned Home Again: An Epilogue*, *A Doll's House Repaired*, and *Breaking a Butterfly*.

In most versions, Nora either repents, remaining in the marriage, or is duly punished for abandoning her family. In *The Doll's House—and After*, Torvald becomes an alcoholic and their children eventually succumb to criminality and suicide due to Nora's abandonment. Ultimately these rewrites, revisions, and parodies fell out of fashion but Ibsen's masterpiece remains as timeless as ever.

Ibsen's play has maintained its place in the popular repertoire and is regularly performed. Actresses such as Claire Bloom, Janet McTeer (who won a Tony Award for the role), Cheryl Campbell, and Tara Fitzgerald have portrayed Nora onstage. This has fast become one of the most coveted female roles in drama. Torvald, the play's second lead, it is probably fair to say, has attracted fewer first-rank actors.



A Doll's House as a modern dance piece at the Captiol Theatre Beijing in 2010

Production History (continued)

One of the most unusual modern productions was a fascinating 2007 production by Lee Breur, which played at the Edinburgh Festival and which cast dwarves in the male roles in order to play with the gender bias in Nora's society. This version rendered comic Torvald's insistence on patronizing his "poor little Nora," especially since he was small enough to be (at one point, actually) picked up by his wife.



Lee Breur's production of *A Doll's House* at the Edinburgh Festival in 2007

There have been three major film versions. Patrick Garland's film stars Claire Bloom as Nora, Anthony Hopkins as Torvald, and Ralph Richardson as Dr. Rank. Joseph Losey's stars Jane Fonda and rather awkwardly depicts some of the events that occur before the play. A low-budget version by David Thacker looks dreadful in some ways but nevertheless contains a series of fine performances, not least from Trevor Eve as Torvald.



Lee Breur's production of *A Doll's House* at the Edinburgh Festival in 2007

Comments on the Play

“[Through A Doll’s House] marriage was revealed as being far from a divine institution, people stopped regarding it as an automatic provider of absolute bliss, and divorce between incompatible parties came at last to be accepted as conceivably justifiable.”- August Strindberg, preface to Marriage, 1885

“The real Helmer is in his mental make-up much less liberated than Nora herself; he reveals himself as being a pitiable and egotistic slave of the male society of which he is so conspicuous a defender. It is not the human being in him which speaks to Nora at their final confrontation; it is society, its institutions and authorities, which speak through him. Ibsen’s exposure of him is total; and Helmer’s oratio morata when the danger is past – “I am saved!” – is on the verge of caricature.” - Bjørn Hemmer, Ibsen and the Realistic Problem Drama, 1994

“A Doll’s House exploded like a bomb into contemporary life. The Pillars of Society... though it attacked reigning social conventions, still retained the traditional theatrical happy ending, so that it bit less sharply, but A Doll’s House knew no mercy; ending not in reconciliation, but in inexorable calamity, it pronounced a death sentence on accepted social ethics... Those who were against social and moral upheaval, against female emancipation, came to see in Ibsen their greatest most dangerous enemy.” - Halvdan Koht, Henrik Ibsen: eit diktarliv, 1954 (reprinted in Ibsen: A Biography by Michael Myer, New York; Doubleday, 1971

Style

“To be a poet is, most of all, to see.” –Henrik Ibsen

Realism

From the Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre's *A Doll's House* Study Guide

When Henrik Ibsen began writing his plays in 1850, he inspired an entire movement of theatre, one that scholars consider to be the beginnings of modernism in theatre; this movement is called Realism. Realism often touched on the parts of life that could be considered ugly or distasteful; topics that included things that Victorian society rarely spoke of in the privacy of their own homes, let alone in the public setting of the theatre. Henrik Ibsen embraced this view wholeheartedly and wrote all of his plays to include subject matter deemed largely inappropriate by many theatre-goers.



Janet McTeer as Nora in the 1997 Broadway Production

A story told simply and well is often taken for granted by contemporary audiences and it is easy to forget that realism was both revelatory and profoundly disturbing for 19th-century audiences. Realism as a dramatic form was a revolutionary response to Victorian hypocrisy, the explosive writings of Darwin, Marx, and Freud, as well as to the stultifying conservatism of melodrama, the dominant artistic genre of the 19th century. Melodrama trafficked in heaving emotions, exhilarating spectacle, and two-dimensional characters. Audiences expected tidy endings, villainy punished, and virtue rewarded. While melodramatic writers did focus on social ills such as poverty in *The Poor of New York* and the evils of alcohol in *Ten Nights in a Barroom*, their viewpoints upheld the status quo and forwarded a conservative agenda. Many found Ibsen's ending of *A Doll's House* troubling as it offers an unsettling resolution at odds with the established well-made play

structure.

Style (continued)

As an additional departure from the melodramatic tradition, Ibsen includes no villain in the piece, for he was uninterested in two-dimensional characterization. Though Torvald's condescension and infantilizing of Nora might rankle, he is simply a man of his time who adores his wife; and to be fair, Nora encourages Torvald's paternalistic behavior. Nora's nemesis, Nils Krogstad, doesn't actively wish for the destruction of the Helmers but merely fights for his threatened livelihood. Krogstad has paid for his past indiscretions but society will not forget, insisting that he remain a pariah. Thus society itself is the antagonist: its blindness, its hypocrisy, its insistence on strict adherence to prescribed gender roles. Additionally, the notion of a woman seeking self-actualization was unthinkable, for women had no identity outside the home, and Nora's rejection of the "cult of domesticity" was frightening. Audiences were variously enraged, thrilled, and bewildered.

Most of the "heroes" of his plays dealt largely with going against the social and moral systems put forth by society. Ibsen often liked to make the audience question which characters were really in the right. Ibsen once stated, "In the good there is bad, and in the bad there is good." Ibsen wanted his audience to walk away not sure of who really was the true hero.

Realism

- Tried to make plays as honest to everyday life as possible.
- Did not include soliloquies or asides that were addressed to the audience.
- Dialogue was written as brief and overlapping as normal speech.
- The language had a second meaning underneath.
- Playwrights did not break the "fourth wall."
- Plays were supposed to supply a means for discussion and contemplation.
- Endings of these plays often left the plot points unresolved.
- The playwrights chose to write characters that had deep inner conflict.

Themes



Gillian Anderson as Nora and Christopher Eccleston as Krogstad in the 2009 Donmar Warehouse Production

The Role of Men and Women in Society

This play focuses on the ways that women are perceived in their various roles, especially in marriage and motherhood. Torvald, in particular, has a very clear but narrow definition of women's roles. He believes that it is the sacred duty of a woman to be a good wife and mother. Moreover, he tells Nora that women are responsible for the morality of their children. In essence, he sees women as childlike, helpless creatures detached from reality on the one hand, but on the other hand as influential moral forces responsible for the purity of the world through their influence in the home.

Ideas of “manliness” are present in more subtle ways. Nora's description of Torvald suggests that she is partially aware of the inconsistent pressures on male roles as much as the inconsistent pressures on female roles in their society. Torvald's own conception of manliness is based on the value of total independence. He abhors the idea of financial or moral dependence on anyone. His strong desire for independence may put him out of touch with the reality of human interdependence.

Frequent references to Nora's father often equate her with him because of her actions and her disposition. Although people think he gave Nora and Torvald the money for their trip to Italy, it was actually Nora. She has more agency and decision-making skills than she is given credit for. Nora seems to wish to enjoy the privileges and power enjoyed by males in her society. She seems to understand the confinement she faces simply by virtue of her sex.

Themes (continued)

From *Drama for Students*, ©2012 Gale Cengage

Marriage as an Unequal Partnership

At the heart of *A Doll's House* is the marriage between Nora and Torvald—one fairly typical of the era. Is it a good or exemplary marriage? Is it an equitable relationship for the woman?

A close analysis of the dialogue shows a very unequal relationship with Torvald holding all the power. In fact, the interactions between husband and wife serve a specific purpose: they illustrate the banality of the discourse between the two. Torvald does not address his wife regarding any subject of substance. Instead, he bestows her with pet names that often begin with the personal pronoun “my” and often include the diminutive



Janet McTeer as Nora and Owen Teale as Torvald in the 1997 Broadway Production

“little”: “Is that my little lark?” In this respect, Torvald may think he is flattering his wife. However, he is actually reducing her to a cute, harmless pet—one that is clearly owned.

And like a pet, Nora is expected to obey her owner/husband and his petty tyrannical rules: she is forbidden from eating macaroons and must do so on the sly—which she clearly resents. Additionally, when Torvald addresses Nora, he

belittles her by constantly bringing up her lack of responsibility with money. Depending on the translation, Nora is “spendthrift,” “prodigal” and “little moneybags.” All of these terms, spoken affectionately, are passively aggressive.

A Doll's House has few stage directions indicating tone of voice, so there is a great deal of freedom in the manner in which the actor can play the part Torvald. He can be played like a patriarchal tyrant or a fatuous, passive-aggressive sexist. The second option is, perhaps, the better choice; Torvald’s utter obliviousness to his own oppressive behavior is a driving force in the play. He berates his wife for knowing nothing about worldly matters but, ultimately, is himself unaware of the measures she has taken to save his life. Torvald is so self-centered that he continues to see his wife how he wants her to be or how she fails to be his ideal woman; he never sees the actual woman she is.

“You have never loved me. You have only thought it pleasant to be in love with me.” – Nora, A Doll’s House

Themes (continued)

“A lawyer’s profession is such an uncertain thing, especially if he won’t undertake unsavory cases; and naturally Torvald has never been willing to do that.” – Nora, A Doll’s House

Materialism

Torvald in particular focuses on money and material goods rather than people. His sense of manhood depends on his financial independence. He was an unsuccessful barrister because he refused to take "unsavory cases." As a result, he switched jobs to the bank, where he primarily deals with money. For him, money and materialism may be a way to avoid the complications of personal contact.

Respect and Reputation

The men of *A Doll's House* are obsessed with their reputation. Some have good standing in their communities and will do anything to keep it; others have lost their good name and will do anything to get it back. Though the play is set in the living room of a private residence, the public eye is constantly peeking through the curtains.

Disease and Morality

Dr. Rank has inherited his consumption from his father, who lived a morally questionable life, and in much the same way, Nora worries that her morally reprehensible actions (fraudulently signing her father's name) will infect her children. Corruption, the play suggests, is hereditary. As he does in other plays, such as *The Wild Duck*, Ibsen explores the tension between real life and moral ideals.

Higher Moral Values vs. Societal Mores and Laws

As Nora reveals to Mrs. Linde, she faced a moral crisis at the beginning of her marriage. Unable to procure, in a legal manner, the funds needed to save her husband’s life, she resorts to forging her father’s name as guarantor of the loan. She places her love and concern for her husband’s well-being above the law. Since she diligently works to pay back the loan, the offense does not seem so severe; it is a crime in definition only. In a higher sense, Nora has not acted in an immoral manner. However, those who adhere to societal standards, like her husband, ultimately have different values. Torvald values social respectability and honor above all else, including actions done out of love. Nora values love over social honor. Consequently, a conflict emerges regarding their prioritization of values.

Themes (continued)

The Unexamined Life is Not Worth Living

This paraphrase to a Socrates aphorism applies to Torvald and Nora. However, Nora eventually stops to look at herself and her marriage and doesn't like what she sees. So she steps out of her old persona and into a new one, and then walks into an uncertain future. She has begun examining her life.

Symbols

From shmoop.com

Christmas and New Year's

The play is set during the holidays; it's Christmas time for the Helmers and New Year's is swiftly approaching. Christmas and New Year's are both associated with rebirth and renewal. Several of the characters go through a kind of rebirth over the course of the play.

Both Nora and Torvald have a spiritual awakening, which could be seen as a rebirth. Nora's trials and tribulations wake her up to the pitiful state of her marriage. When the "wonderful thing" fails to happen, she realizes she'll never be a fully realized person until she severs herself from her husband. When she slams the door behind her, she is in a way reborn. Nora is not alone in her spiritual awakening, however. Torvald's last line, "The most wonderful thing of all?" seems to indicate that Nora's words haven't fallen on deaf ears. Torvald, like his wife, has realized the complete inadequacy of his existence. By the end of the play, both Helmers have been reborn.



Gillian Anderson as Nora in the 2009 Donmar Warehouse Production

Symbols (continued)



Vintage Norwegian Christmas card

Christmas and New Year's (continued)

Krogstad and Christine are reborn as well. When these "two shipwrecked people join forces," they each get a fresh start in life. Both of them view their renewed love affair as a chance for salvation. Krogstad hopes that it will help increase his standing with the community, and that Christine's influence will make him a better person. Christine is overjoyed that she will have someone to care for.

Christmas Tree

The Christmas tree itself can also be seen as symbolic. For one, its presence reminds us what season it is, and brings to mind all the points made in the above section.

Beyond that, however, it can be seen as being directly symbolic of Nora.

First, the tree seems to mimic Nora's psychological state. At the beginning of Act Two, stage directions tell us, "The Christmas Tree is stripped of its ornaments and with burnt-down candle-ends on its disheveled branches." But what does that have to do with Nora? Stage directions go on to say that, "[Nora] is alone in the room, walking about uneasily." Basically, Nora is a mess and so is the tree. She's gotten the bad news from Krogstad, and as a result her mind is just as disheveled as the tree.

You could also interpret the tree's state as symbolic of Nora's disintegrating web of lies. The pretty decorations which Nora used to cover up her deceit are falling away. Soon the bare ugly truth will emerge.

Last, Nora's function in the household is pretty much the same as the tree. She's merely decorative, ornamental if you will. She dresses up the tree just as Torvald dresses up her for the Stenborgs' party. It's interesting that she tells the maid not to let the children see the tree until it's decorated. This is reminiscent of when she tells Torvald that she can't be seen in her costume until the party. It seems that Ibsen built in many parallels between Nora and her tree.



Symbols (continued)

From gradesaver.com

Dress and Costume

Nora's fancy dress for the party symbolizes the character she plays in her marriage to Torvald. Take note of when Nora is supposed to be wearing it and for whom. Note too that when she leaves Torvald in the last act, she first changes into different clothes, which suggests the new woman she is to become.



Janet McTeer as Nora in the 1997 Broadway Production

The Masquerade Ball

The masquerade ball that Torvald and Nora attend represents the lies and deceit that people resort to in everyday life. At a masquerade, people hide behind masks. Their true selves cannot be seen through the costume. Nora is hiding behind a mask of lies, keeping the truth from her husband and Dr. Rank. She is pretending and “playing a part” much like people do at a masquerade ball. It is not long after the ball that the mask comes off and the truth is revealed.

The Tarantella

A tarantella is a folk dance from southern Italy that accelerates from its already quick tempo and alternates between major and minor keys. In its constant fluctuation, it is like Nora's character. In this Act, it serves as Nora's last chance to be Torvald's doll, to dance and amuse him. Also, the tarantella is commonly (and falsely) known as a dance that is supposed to rid the dancer of the bite of the tarantula. Applied

to the play, its use suggests that Nora is trying to rid herself of the deadly poison of an outside force, however fruitlessly. Rather than alleviating the bite, though, the music and her life only continue to accelerate and spin out of control.

Mrs. Linde - *“But Nora, darling, you are dancing as if your life depended on it.”*
 Nora - *“It does.”* - *A Doll's House*

An Interview with the Director – Seth Gordon



Why did you want to direct A Doll's House?

I've never directed a play by Henrik Ibsen, who is considered, along with Shakespeare and the Sophocles, one of the greatest playwrights of all time. This play in particular is one that interests me now for two reasons. One is that most productions of it in this country are saddled by translations that tend to lean toward British dialects, and I'm hoping that our production, while set in the period, will have a contemporary American dialect. I'm hoping it will make it easier for our audience to relate to the story and the characters.

I also consider the play to be particularly relevant today. It has things to say about the politics of marriage and the confluence of life choices made for passion and life choices

made for necessity that I think will really speak to people.

What is your relationship to this play or to Ibsen's work prior to being involved in this production?

Ibsen is among the most highly regarded of playwrights, and I've studied this play since high school. I've seen several productions and have thought much about how I might approach it over the years. This is my first opportunity to put all this to the test.

In your opinion, what is the biggest challenge of directing this play?

One of those challenges has already been largely met, as we have worked on a script that we hope will seem contemporary and domestic to our audience here in Florida. Making a play that takes place in Norway in the 1880's reach out and touch today's audience is our main challenge. We also have on our hands a classic play that many have heard of or seen in other productions or perhaps on television. Moving everyone's pre-conceptions about the play out of their heads so that the audience can see the play fresh is also our challenge.

An Interview with the Director – Seth Gordon (continued)

You are working with a classic text. What are the contemporary resonances of this play?

Without creating a spoiler alert, I'll say that the event at the end of the play, momentous and controversial when the play was first staged, is something of a normal occurrence today. Having said that, many of the events that lead up to it are ones that our audience will recognize in their own lives, whether they have personally experienced these things in the same way or not.

While many women are now more emancipated than Nora, or perhaps they perceive themselves to be so, many relationships experience the same social and political inequality today. Many women continue to perceive themselves as economically dependent on their significant other, and it has a direct effect on the life choices they make. And many marriages continue to take place in one form of a doll's house or another, where the fabric of the marriage is essentially a fallacy both participants have independently chosen to believe.

How will you approach or underline the central ideas of the play?

Part of my job is to facilitate a production that allows the actors and designers to illuminate the play's central ideas, and to eliminate the barriers they may face as they strive for excellence in their work. Mr. Ibsen has done a marvelous job in telling a story with very compelling ideas. I have helped create an adaptation that best helps our audience understand the play in the language they speak, and I hope we have created a world on the stage of American Stage Company, through our choices for the set, the furniture, and the clothes the actors wear, that best illuminates the characters' wants and desires.



In terms of illuminating the play's central ideas, they come from clarifying Nora's emotional journey through the play, and that journey belongs to the marvelously skilled and talented Katherine Tanner. I hope I'm able to be her third eye and help her take the audience on that ride.

An Interview with the Director – Seth Gordon (continued)

What inspires you as a director?

Directing a play involves telling stories, solving problems and removing the barriers my colleagues might face toward doing their best work. I am also the person who, as my title suggests, provides the direction everyone will take, so we're all moving toward the same goals. As I am meant to provide the leadership and inspiration for everyone else, I look to the script I'm working on for my own inspiration.

I enjoy working on a production the most when there are two goals achieved. One is finding a script that involves characters whose journeys are affected by world events I wish to share with an audience. They can't affect the world events, but they strive vigorously to overcome them. The other goal is to find colleagues to work with who challenge and inspire me, and whose company I truly enjoy. I've achieved both goals with this project.

As a director, what is your preferred rehearsal process?

I try to tailor how a schedule is created for rehearsal to the needs of the script. In this case, the main goals will be to make sure the play is staged in a way that best illuminates the story and the emotional journeys of the characters, and to make sure that Katherine Tanner, who is playing Nora, best executes her characters' trajectory through the play.

I also work toward creating an atmosphere in rehearsal that allows for collaboration, where everyone contributes, the actors feel a sense of ownership of the decisions that go into their performances and what's left onstage are the best ideas we came up with, regardless of their origin.

A Doll's House

Exploring the Context of the Play

Inspiration for the Play

From the Donmar Warehouse's *A Doll's House* Study Guide



Laura Petersen

Ibsen was inspired to write *A Doll's House* as a direct result of the traumatic events in the life of the successful Norwegian writer, Laura Petersen (1849-1932). In 1871, eight years prior to writing his play, Ibsen got to know Laura when she sent him a sequel she had written to his play *Brand*. He called her his 'skylark', the pet name given to Nora in the original script. Laura's husband contracted tuberculosis and was advised by his doctor to travel to a warmer climate to recover his health. She secretly arranged a loan to finance the trip. When repayment of the loan was demanded in 1878, she did not have the money and forged a check. The forgery was discovered and the bank refused payment. It was at this point that she gave her husband a full account of her actions.

Despite the fact that her motive had been to save his life, he treated her like a criminal, telling her she was not fit to bring up their children and committing her to a public asylum. When she was discharged, she begged her husband to take her back, for the children's sake, which he begrudgingly agreed to do.

At the end of 1878, Ibsen recorded some *Notes for a Modern Tragedy*, excerpts from which are printed below:

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 up 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....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 honorable, on the side of the law, and sees the situation with male eyes.

Inspiration for the Play (continued)

By placing these ideas at the heart of his play, Ibsen was contributing to the topical debate about women's positioning in society which was taking place in Norway at the time; their roles were restricted to those of wife, mother and sexual partner. However, in his native Norway, Ibsen's contribution to this debate in *A Doll's House* was overwhelmingly seen as an outrage with his seminal notion that a woman could walk out on her husband and children.

This fury followed the play to England ten years later, when it received its first production at the Novelty Theatre in London, on June 7, 1889, with Janet A Church making theatrical and social history as Britain's first Nora. It is difficult today to conceive of the shock and outrage caused in Victorian England by Ibsen's play, *A Doll's House*. In this play Ibsen deliberately challenged all the cozy assumptions of Victorian England about marital relationships, sexual politics and patriarchal control, a view corroborated by academic Joan Templeton:

"Ibsen was accused not merely of advocating the destruction of the family, and with it, morality itself, but of a kind of godless androgyny; women, in refusing to be compliant, were refusing to be women." - Joan Templeton, *Ibsen's Women*

"The wife in the play ends by having no idea of what is right or wrong; natural feeling on the one hand and belief in authority on the other have altogether bewildered her.

A woman cannot be herself in contemporary society; it is an exclusively male society, with laws drafted by men and with a judicial system that judges feminine conduct from a masculine point of view...

Spiritual conflicts. Oppressed and bewildered by their belief in authority, she loses faith in their moral right and ability to bring up her children, bitterness. A mother in modern society, like certain insects who go away and die when she has done her duty in the propagation of the race. Love of life, of home, of husband and children and family. Bow and then, she shakes off her thoughts. Sudden return of dread and terror. She must bear it all alone. The catastrophe approaches, inexorably, inevitably. Despair, resistance and destruction."

Henrik Ibsen, *Notes for the Tragedy of Modern Times*, preliminary notes for *A Doll's House*, October 19 1878

Ibsen's Women

From the Roundabout Theatre's *Hedda Gabler* Study Guide



Women in Ibsen's plays are often used to showcase his ideas of modernity and how Victorian values are not in the best interests of anyone. At this time, moral standards were held in the highest of regard within the middle and upper classes. What people did and didn't do was based upon the question, "Is it proper?" Women of the Victorian age (so named after Queen Victoria of England) had a very particular position in society. Women were to be seen and not heard. They were first their father's property and, after marriage, their husband's. All mention of emotions and anything dealing with sexuality was expressly forbidden. An unmarried woman needed a chaperone with her at all times to save her from being described as a soiled woman with a sordid past.

Because it was deemed inappropriate for a woman to make her own money, the only way for her to be supported would be to marry. If women did not marry at a young age they were considered a lesser member of society and often became destitute, unless a family member would graciously take them in. In this time period, a woman who put herself first was considered an outcast and would often not be accepted by her own family.

Ibsen wrote many of his heroines as women who stood up for themselves; women who did not do what their husband or society thought was proper. Ibsen believed domesticity to be a chain around women's necks. It stifled them and took away their right to be people; their right to live. Because of Ibsen's resistance to the Victorian belief structure, some scholars state that Henrik Ibsen was one of the most profound feminist writers of his time.

"I must educate myself – you are not the man to help me in that. I must do that for myself. And that is why I am leaving you. I must stand on my own feet if I am ever to understand myself and my surroundings" – Nora, A Doll's House

Victorian Women's Rights in Norway

From enotes.com

In 1888, married women in Norway were finally given control over their own money, but the Norway of Ibsen's play predates this change and provides a more restrictive environment for women such as Nora Helmer. In 1879, a wife was not legally permitted to borrow money without her husband's consent, so Nora must resort to deception to borrow the money she so desperately needs. Ibsen always denied that he believed in women's rights, stating instead that he believed in human rights.



The issue of women's rights was already a force in Norway several years before Ibsen focused on the issue, and women had been the force behind several changes. Norway was a newly liberated country in the nineteenth century, having been freed from Danish control in 1814; therefore, it is understandable those issues involving freedom—both



political and personal freedom—were important in the minds of Norwegians. Poverty had already forced women into the workplace early in the nineteenth century, and the Norwegian government had passed laws protecting and governing women's employment nearly five decades before Ibsen's play. By the middle of the century, women were granted the same legal protection as that provided to male children. Women were permitted inheritance rights and were to be successful in petitioning for the right to a university education only three years after the first performance of *A Doll's House*.

But many of the protections provided to women were aimed at the lower economic classes. Employment opportunities for women were limited to low-paying domestic jobs, teaching, or clerical work. Middle-class women, such as Nora, noticed few of these new advantages. It was the institution of marriage itself that restricted the freedom of middle-class women.

Victorian Women's Rights in Norway (continued)

Although divorce was available and inexpensive, it was still socially stigmatized and available only if both partners agreed. The play's ending makes clear that Torvald would object to divorce, so Nora's alienation from society would be even greater. There was no organized feminist movement operating in Norway in 1879. Thus Nora's exodus at the play's conclusion is a particularly brave and dangerous act. There was no army of feminist revolutionaries to protect and guide her; she was completely alone in trying to establish a new life for herself.

“I have been your doll-wife, just as I used to be Papa’s doll-child; and the children, in turn have been my dolls. I thought it was great fun when you played with me, just as they do when I play with them. That is what our marriage has been, Torvald.”
– Nora, *A Doll’s House*

Christmas in Norway

From enotes.com

Christmas Celebrations



Christmas was an important family holiday in Norway and was viewed as a time of family unity and celebration. Thus it is ironic that the play opens on Christmas Eve and that the Helmer family unity disintegrates on Christmas Day. Christmas Day and the days following were traditionally reserved for socializing and visiting with neighbors and friends. Costume parties, such as the one Nora and Torvald attend,

were common, and the dance Nora performs, the tarantella, is a dance for couples or for a line of partners. That Nora dances it alone signifies her isolation both within her marriage and in the community.

A Doll's House

Discussion Questions

From A Teacher's Guide to the Signet Classics Edition of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*

Act I

1. From the beginning of Act I, Torvald calls Nora several pet names. What do these names suggest about Torvald's perception of his wife and his marriage?
2. Compare Nora's and Kristine's lives since marriage. Who is better off? Explain.
3. What crime has Nora committed?
4. Do Nora's motives for committing the crime excuse her in some way?
5. What does Nora's tree decorating and chattering at the end of Act I reveal about her character?

Act II

1. When Nora sees the box of masquerade clothes, she wants to "rip them in a million pieces!" What does Ibsen symbolize with this characterization?
2. Discuss the foreshadowing in Nora's conversation with Anne-Marie.
3. Why does Torvald make such a decisive show of mailing the letter firing Krogstad against Nora's pleas?
4. After Dr. Rank professes his love, Nora demands the lamp be brought in. Why? Is this light real or artificial? What might Ibsen be suggesting about truth and light in the Helmer's household?
5. Some histories of the tarantella dance explain that it is used to fight off the venomous effects of a spider bite. Other interpretations suggest it represents a woman's frustration in oppression. Which of these explanations best fits Nora's violent practice at the end of Act II? Might both apply? Explain.

Act III

1. Why is Kristine willing to "risk everything" for Krogstad?
2. Why does Kristine encourage Krogstad to let Torvald read the letter revealing Nora's deception?
3. Dr. Rank suggests Nora should go to the next masquerade dressed as "Charmed Life," and that she should dress "just as she looks every day." What is the implication about Nora's daily life? Is it charmed? Or is the charm a masquerade? Explain.
4. Discuss the irony in Torvald's accusation that Nora has played with him "like a puppet."
5. Helmer's pronouncement that "before all else, (Nora is) a wife and mother" is contradicted by Nora's "before all else, I'm a human being." Is this issue significant today, or is it only a sign of Ibsen's time? Explain.
6. Discuss Nora's decision to leave her family. Is it truly the only way she can reclaim her identity and humanity?
7. The last sound the audience hears is the door slamming shut after Nora's departure. Examine the theatrical, literary, and historical significance of this stage device.

A Doll's House

Activities for Further Exploration of the Play

From A Teacher's Guide to the Signet Classics Edition of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*

Marriage Debate

Play an audio recording of Ani DiFranco's song, "Wishin' and Hopin'." Provide students with the lyrics, including:

*Show him that you care, just for him
Do the things that he likes to do.
Wear your hair just for him, 'cause
You won't get him, thinkin' and a prayin'
Wishin' and hopin'.*

Divide the class into two groups. One group will argue that such gender roles of dominance and submission still exist in today's society; the other will argue that today our society no longer desires such gender specific behaviors, and that true love and marriage is based on mutual respect. Ask each side to prepare supporting points, as well as predict what the opposing side will say. Challenge them to make connections to their own lives. Hold a class debate, complete with cross examinations and rebuttals.

Modern Scene Rewrites

To illustrate the point that period plays have relevant meaning and messages for all eras, groups can re-write, re-interpret and re-enact scenes for new settings. While these scenes are fun to create and enjoyable to watch, challenge students to keep the playwright's objectives, tone, and themes intact. Students might be asked to re-write Nora's revelation scene set in the 1950's era, or to re-interpret the tarantella as a modern dance.

Advice Column

To examine point of view, ask students to write a "Dear Abby" type response. Advise Nora or Torvald how to repair her/his life at the end of the play. Students can post their responses on a bulletin board for all to see and discuss.

Activity Sheet

Reflections on the Performance

Let's use our senses to reflect on the production of *A Doll's House* at American Stage Theatre Company

Visually: *scenery, lighting, props, costumes, the physicality of the actors.*

Which of these had the strongest effect on you? _____

Why do you think they affected you so strongly? _____

How did these elements help you understand the story? _____

Aurally: *sound effects, vocal quality, diction, theatre acoustics.*

Which of these had the strongest effect on you? _____

Why do you think they affect you so strongly? _____

How did these elements help you understand the story? _____

Texture: *fabric of costumes, scenery, sound, lighting*

Which of these had the strongest effect on you? _____

Why do you think they affect you so strongly? _____

How did these elements help you understand the story? _____

Writing Activity

Be a Theatre Critic

A very strong element in the success or failure of a new production is the Theater Critic. Use the following outline to write a review of the American Stage production of *A Doll's House*.

Paragraph 1: About the Play – Part I

1. What was the title of the play?
2. Who wrote the play?
3. Which theater company produced it?
4. What was your overall reaction to the play?
5. Give a brief synopsis of the plot of the play.

Paragraph 2: About the Play – Part II

1. What aspects of the production (i.e. sets, costumes, lights, sound, acting) were similar to how you envisioned them? What aspects were different? What aspects would you like to have changed and why?
2. What scenes in the play did you find most/least interesting, entertaining and enjoyable? What about those scenes made you like or dislike them so much?
3. Did the production move too slowly, quickly, or at the right speed?

Paragraph 3: About the Characters/Performers

1. Did any characters touch you personally? Who was your favorite?
2. Were the character's motivations clear? In other words, could you understand what each character wanted?
3. Which actor do you think gave the best performance? What did this actor do that made you think she/he gave the best performance?
4. How did the way the actors used their bodies onstage enhance their performance?

Paragraph 4: About the Set

1. Did the set provide the right environment/atmosphere for the production? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. Did the set reflect the themes and style of the play?
3. Were there any interesting details in the set? If so, what?

Paragraph 5: About the Lighting and Sound

1. Did the lighting establish the right mood and atmosphere for the production? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. Did the music/sound add to the mood and atmosphere of the production or did it take away from it?

Paragraph 6: About the Costumes

1. Were the costumes appropriate for the mood and style of the production? If so, why? If not, why not?
2. Did any of the costumes reflect a character's personality or wealth? What clues did the costumes give about the characters?

Paragraph 7: Conclusion

Would you recommend this production to someone? If so, to whom? If not, why not?

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