Theatre and Individualism: Henrik Ibsen, 'A Doll's House'

Transcript

Date: Tuesday, 26 January 2016 - 6:00PM
Location: Museum of London
Good evening - and welcome to the new calendar year. The Gresham College year follows the traditional academic calendar, so this is the third of my six lectures this year, according to that calendar. We've been listening to some traditional Norwegian folk music, to set the scene, the scene against which, to some extent, Ibsen rebelled. So at the end of the lecture we'll hear a striking modern take on traditional Norwegian music which I think he would have liked.

Two quotations from Ibsen: 'My call is not to answer', and, 'I do but ask'. These famous quotations will guide our exploration of the play this evening. *A Doll's House*, a three-act play by the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, is full of ambiguities. It asks questions, but doesn't answer them.

Its first performance was at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen, in Denmark, on 21 December 1879. It is often considered to be a feminist play as Nora, the heroine, leaves her husband and children in the closing scene, intent on self-discovery. Ibsen denied any conscious attempt to provide propaganda for the women's rights movement, and, in 1898 he addressed the Norwegian Association for Women's Rights in Christiania. There he delivered a kind of manifesto [I's blunt/direct manner]:

"I have never written a poem or a play to further a social purpose. I have been more of a poet and less of a social philosopher than most people seem inclined to believe. I thank you for your good wishes, but I must decline the honour of being said to have worked for the Women's Rights Movement. I am not even very sure what Women's Rights really are."

Ibsen was interested in human beings, simply and dramatically.

As a Norwegian writer Ibsen's work was disseminated via German, and the conclusion to the play found disfavour in the German theatre world and under great pressure, and very reluctantly, Ibsen wrote an alternative 'conciliatory' ending in which Nora is persuaded by her husband to stay. In a letter to a Copenhagen newspaper in 1880, Ibsen referred to the alternative ending as a 'barbaric outrage'.

As James MacFarlane rightly points out in his introduction to the Penguin translation of the play, Ibsen's 'art... gave impetus to that line of development in modern European drama for which the oblique, the implied, the subdued, the elusive, the symbolic are of the essence' (p.xiv). So this evening I want to explore the play, not explain it. I also want to raise various questions about the nature of theatre. In earlier lectures we have considered the genres of the novel and of poetry and I now want to move on to four plays in tonight's - and three subsequent evenings' - lectures.

The three subsequent lectures will be on Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and Stoppard's *The Real Thing*.

I have included the idea of 'individualism' in the title of this evening's lecture because insofar as Ibsen ever provided a clue to his intentions he described his concern to provide 'a description of humanity'. And this abstract, 'humanity' is described in the play through individuals and, in particular, the confrontation of the individualism of a married couple, Torvald and Nora Helmer.

At the climax of the play is an exchange between husband and wife. Helmer, declares, 'First and foremost, you are a wife and mother'. Nora replies, 'That I don't believe any more. I believe that first and foremost I am an individual, just as you are - or at least I'm going to try to be.'

But before we come to the play itself it's worth providing some context for it.

Ibsen's creative life almost exactly spanned the second half of the nineteenth century. His first prentice drama was published in 1850 and his last 'dramatic epilogue' was published at the end of 1899. But it was during the last quarter of the nineteenth century that he wrote the dramas which were to transform modern European theatre, the twelve 'dramas of contemporary life', as they are known, of which *A Doll's House* (1879) is one. And it was this play, and its companion piece, the drama *Ghosts* (1881), that made Ibsen's name internationally. *Pillars of Society* (1877), the first play in the series of twelve, was immediately translated into German, in various translations, and it was via German translations of his work that Ibsen came to be known internationally.

Henrik Ibsen, in full Henrik Johan Ibsen was born on March 21st, 1828 in Skien, a small logging town in southern Norway. He died on May 23rd, 1906. His father was a respected general merchant but in 1836 his business went bankrupt, and the family was disgraced. They continued to live in comparative wealth but their status within the community fell and never recovered. His father became melancholic and argumentative and his mother, who was
deeply devout, became increasingly withdrawn. Henrik left home as soon as he could, at the age of 15. He moved to Grimstad, a small hamlet some 70 miles further south. He found a job as an apothecary's apprentice and in the evenings, and into the early hours, he studied with a view to gaining university admission. It was during this period that he wrote his first play, *Catilina* (1850) inspired by his reading of Latin. That same year he moved to Christiania (now Oslo) and continued his studies for entrance to the university. But the following year, having spent very little time on his academic work and increasingly drawn to theatre, he was appointed director and playwright to a new theatre in Bergen. This was an extraordinarily lucky break. In addition to directing plays he was charged with writing a new play each year with a view to establishing a 'national drama'. The idea of 'national drama' was wholly antipathetic to Ibsen's nascent instincts in relation to theatre. Perhaps in reaction to his mother's dogmatic faith, Ibsen was interested, above all, in the way in which theatre could explore individuals' dilemmas – rather than providing answers. A 'national theatre', by definition, would have to be a theatre of the people, not of 'individuals'. And it would have to be polemical, encouraging a national identity, loyalty, and a national way of seeing things.

Ibsen's brief was a tall order both because of his own ideas about what theatre was, and because Danish theatre at the time was an odd mix of medieval Icelandic saga and naturalistic domestic drama, based on nineteenth-century French salon theatre.

For a number of years in Bergen and then at the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania (1857 to 1862), Ibsen experimented with various theatrical endeavours. He was dissatisfied with most of his work as, in the main, were his audiences. Then, in 1858 he married Suzannah Thoresen and this marked something of a turning-point. She was very widely-read and committed to the arts and this gave Ibsen greater confidence and, with a number of years' experience behind him, he started to write with new energy and control. *Love's Comedy (Kjaerlighedenskomedie, 1862)*, a satire on romantic illusions shows some of the mature Ibsen's anti-idealism. But commercially it was a disaster, universally slated by both the public and the critics. The year after he wrote and produced *The Pretenders (Kongsemnerne, 1863)*. This met with some approval but it came just too late. The family humiliations he had suffered as a child were repeated: the theatre in Christiania went bankrupt and Ibsen was out of a job. It seemed as though his career in the theatre was over. But Ibsen and his wife Suzannah, were not to be beaten. Just as his instinct to leave his family had been a good one, so his and Suzannah's instinct to travel abroad was to be a good one too. Again he was lucky: he secured a small state grant and in April 1864 he and Suzannah left for Italy. He distanced himself from what he called the 'petty mindedness' of his homeland and for the next 27 years lived abroad - in Rome, Dresden and Munich. And in self-imposed exile Ibsen freed himself from the requirements to write 'national' theatre. Now he could experiment, which he did for a few more years.

It was only when he took some of his critical ideas about contemporary society to an extreme, that he achieved first notoriety, and then critical success. The play was, *A Doll's House (Et dukkehjem, 1879)*. 'Society' here, is a family and a number of outsiders who disturb the precarious 'happy family' which is made up of Torvald Helmer, his wife Nora, and three small children.

Torvald is about to become a bank manager; he is also keeper of the family's finances and of family morals: 'No debts! Never borrow', we hear him tell Nora firmly as the play opens. The degree to which Nora feels oppressed by her husband's standards comes across when she says, at one point, 'I would simply love to say "damn" [humour]). Torvald is father not only to his children but also, to some extent, to Nora, whom he calls his 'sky lark', his 'squirrel', 'my precious little singing bid', his 'pet' (whom he describes, early on, as 'expensive for a man... to keep').

Nora's only (childish) rebellion is to buy macaroons which Torvald has banned. We will see this in a clip in a moment.

The stable but oppressive order is disturbed by a number of greedy individuals, one of whom threatens to expose an illegal act that Nora has unknowingly committed in order to have borrowed money to travel abroad for the sake of Torvald's health. This has all taken place before the play opens. Nora had been advised by a doctor that her exhausted husband, needed to rest in a warm climate; so they spent a year in Italy. But the trip was expensive and Nora, telling her husband that the funds were given to them by her father, borrowed money from the devious Nils Krogstad. This was at a time when a wife could not legally borrow money without the consent of a father or husband. Not only did she take the loan, she has also forged her father's signature and dated it – as it turns out - some days after her father's death. Krogstad has the I.O.U. Nora has acted out of her husband's standards comes across when she says, at one point, 'I would simply love to say "damn" [humour]). Torvald is father not only to his children but also, to some extent, to Nora, whom he calls his 'sky lark', his 'squirrel', 'my precious little singing bid', his 'pet' (whom he describes, early on, as 'expensive for a man... to keep').

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Mrs Linde has come to town in search of work and hopes that Torvald will provide her with a position in the bank. She accuses Nora of having acted rashly in relation to the loan. Nora replies, 'Is it rash to save your husband's life?' (p.14) Nora also took on little jobs on the side to earn extra income. She tells Mrs Linde, 'Last winter I was lucky enough to get quite a bit of copying to do. So I shut myself up every night and sat and wrote throughout the small hours of the morning. Oh, sometimes I was so tired, so tired. But it was tremendous fun all the same, sitting there working and earning money like that. It was almost like being a man.'

Mrs Linde is widowed and without resources and Torvald finds a position for her. This means that Krogstad is
passed over. And it is for this reason that he tries to blackmail Nora, threatening to tell her husband about the loan she had from him unless she persuades her husband to take him on. This she is unable to do. When Torvald learns about the loan Nora secured without his consent, he reacts with furious outrage and rejects her out of concern for his own social reputation which he calls his 'honour'. Nora implies that she will take her own life, 'When I've left this world behind, you will be free', to which Torvald answers, 'What good would it do me if you left this world behind, as you put it? Not the slightest bit of good.' (p.76). His decision is to maintain appearances:

'As far as you and I are concerned, things must appear to go on exactly as before. But only in the eyes of the world, of course. In other words you'll go on living here; that's understood. But you will not be allowed to bring up the children, I can't trust you with them.'

In the event Krogstad, for various complicated reasons associated with further twists in the plot, returns the I.O.U. When Torvald takes it from a letter from Krogstad, he announces to Nora, 'I am saved'. Nora, on the other hand, now realises that Torvald has never really loved her. Their marriage has been play-acting for the sake of appearances: 'You don't understand me. And I have never understood you until tonight. No, don't interrupt. I just want you to listen to what I have to say. We are going to have things out Torvald.' (p.79) She goes on to say,

'Our house has never been anything but a play-room. I have been your doll wife... And the children in turn have been my dolls. I thought it was fun when you came and played with me, just as they thought it was fun when I went and played with them. That's been our marriage, Torvald.'

And he replies: 'There is some truth in what you say, exaggerated and hysterical though it is. But from now on it will be different. Play-time is over; now comes the time for lessons... Both yours and the children's...'; Nora reminds Torvald that he had earlier said that she was not fit to bring up the children and he protests that he said this 'in the heat of the moment'. But Nora replies, 'On the contrary, you were quite right. I'm not up to it. There's another problem that needs solving first. I must take steps to educate myself. You are not the man to help me there. That's something I must do on my own. That's why I'm leaving you.' Torvald replies, 'You are out of your mind! I won't let you! I forbid you!'(p.81) A little later he says, 'Don't you care what people will say?' and then, 'Isn't it your duty to your husband and your children?' Nora replies, 'I have another duty equally sacred... My duty to myself.' Later in their exchange Torvald says, 'I would gladly toil day and night for you, Nora, enduring all manner of sorrow and distress. But nobody sacrifices his honour for the one he loves' and Nora replies, 'Hundreds and thousands of women have.' Torvald claims, 'But you are my wife, whatever you are', and Nora calmly replies,

'From what I've heard, when a wife leaves her husband's house as I am doing now, he is absolved by law of all responsibility for her. I can at any rate free you from all responsibility. You must not feel in any way bound, any more than I shall. There must be full freedom on both sides. Look, here's your ring back. Give me mine.'

Contemporary audiences - unsurprisingly - were scandalized by the play, particularly at Ibsen's refusal to provide a happy ending which was the contemporary convention. And Nora's decision to leave both her husband and her children was seen as a dangerous example that other women might think to emulate.

But Ibsen's interest was not in providing the 'happy dénouement'. He was interested in the individual and the individual's need for self-knowledge and self-determination. Torvald, who regards himself as setting the moral standard, emerges as a self-interested hypocrite and Nora turns out to be a childish idealist, and a highly destructive one.

So what did Ibsen bring to theatre - apart from scandal - and what does his contribution tell us about the fundamental nature of theatre as a genre? What can it do that other genres can't do? Why is it such a powerful and potentially disruptive cultural force?

In his wonderful set of essays, *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook sets out to answer some of these questions and he singles out the remarkable contribution made by the playwright, director, and actor, Antoine Artaud, about whom I wrote some years ago in one of my books. Brook writes:

'Railing against the sterility of the theatre before the war in France an illuminated genius, Antoine Artaud, wrote tracts describing from his imagination and intuition another theatre... in which the blazing centre speaks through those forms closest to it. A theatre working like the plague, by intoxication, by infection, by analogy, by magic; a theatre in which the play, the event itself, stands in place of a text.' (Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, p.55)

Ibsen's theatrical alchemy, more than half a century earlier, was very similar.

Thus far I have spoken about Ibsen's play as a play or rather essentially as a text, a fixed document. But a play is not theatre. What I'd like to do now is to explore the theatrical potential of *The Doll's House* and to tease out how the idea of individualism is conveyed not simply as a theme germane to the text, but through myriad theatrical techniques and the fact that individualism is also embedded in the individual actors who have had to wrestle with the part of Nora - we'll hear from some of them in a moment.
As Brook says of Artaud's work, 'It is a theatre in which the play, the event itself, stands in place of a text.' (Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, p.55) He also rightly points out that, 'The one thing that distinguishes the theatre from all the other arts is that it has no permanence.' (Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, p.144) So to explore the theatricality of Ibsen's play we have to fall back on audio recordings. This is a travesty of theatre, but we have no other way of proceeding this evening as we can't stage the play here and now! It would be fun if we could.

Theatre, as well as being ephemeral, is a collaborative art form involving a playwright, a theatre company, a director, a cast, a production team (involving various designers: set/lighting/costume/sound/stage management designers). Myriad choices have to be made by a large number of people.

So I would like to show some clips from various performances of the play, and to ask what works best in relation to a number of aspects of the play.

A key aspect of Ibsen's play is its powerful suggestion of the ways in which Nora is trapped. This, I'd suggest, is suggested theatrically in a number of ways. Nora never leaves the stage, she is present throughout and has nowhere to escape to or even to hide for long enough to enjoy a macaroon. The set must suggest claustrophobia. Nora never leaves the set – she is 'trapped' in the drama; Torvald's study, on the other hand, is a symbol of his importance/authority. It also allows him a privacy that Nora lacks. She has no 'room of [her] own', as Virginia Woolf famously entitled one of her essays.

At one point Nora tells her old friend about the hard times she has had earlier in her marriage and how she worked secretly to make some money: 'I shut myself up at night and sat and wrote through the small hours of the morning... sitting there and earning money like that. It was almost like being a man.' We aren't told where she shut herself up but the idea of having a space in which to be alone and in private is underlined here.

So what do we make of the Young Vic's production in which a revolving stage was used?

Firstly, the audience has 'access' to different parts of the apartment, as the stage resolves showing us into this room or that. Nora even has a room of her own. On the other hand the constant movement of the stage suggests the relentless passing of time, and Nora's only half-understood sexual energy, and the plot hurtling towards tragedy. The entrapment in which Nora finds herself is perhaps better suggested in this more conventional staging – in the round.

It is Nora's restlessness and childish energy that is foregrounded in a recent Irish production.

But in this production Torvald is shown here to be equally childish – which I don't think is quite right: his repressive earnestness needs to contrast with Nora's silliness.

One of the fundamental aspects of Ibsen's dramaturgy prevents us from escaping wholly into the drama. The German playwright Brecht coined the term 'alienation technique', in an essay in 1936. The point is that the audience must retain a critical distance from the play so as to be encouraged to think, not simply passively to watch.

Nora 'dresses up' and will perform a tarantella at a Christmas party. She is dressed, in effect as a 'doll'. This reminds us that we are watching actors in costume on a stage. And Nora, still a young woman, can still dress up and use her body as a 'currency'.

The stage allows for a marked distinction to be made between the seen and the 'unseen', the visible and the hidden. Explaining why he refuses to contemplate giving Krogstad a job, Torvald instils terror in Nora when he says, 'A man with things like that on his conscience will always have to lie and cheat and dissemble; he can never drop the mask, not even with his own wife and children.' And a moment later he says, 'A fog of lies like that in a household... it spreads disease and infection to every part of it. Every breath the children take in that kind of house is reeking with evil germs.' (p.33)

Here there is a conflation of the moral and the pathological, of ethics and disease: the invisibility of moral decay and the invisibility of pathogens. Similarly, Torvald can't stand the sight of mending lying about and asks Nora to get Anne Marie, the maid, to help her tidy it away. Appearance are of the utmost importance to him. 'Mending' becomes a symbol of the broken, the imperfect, the neglected, the abused, the worn out – and it mustn't be seen.

But the central themes of the play are about dependency and independence, repression and freedom, duty and self-knowledge, money/debt/loan sharks. All this culminates in the agonising closing scene, followed by the famous sound of the door slamming. Nora feels compelled to leave her husband and children so that she can grow into an independent adult being. Here it is Nora as an individual that matters.

At the time of the play – or at least within a decade or so, Freud was asking "What do women want?" and finding no answer. And George Bernard Shaw would later write, in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, in a chapter entitled "The Womanly Woman": 'The ideal wife is one who does everything that her ideal husband likes and nothing else.' This was his estimate of the commonly held idea of womanhood. But he went on to claim, 'Now to treat a person as a means to an end is to deny that person's right to live.'
So the play is about the importance of the individual, about the individual's 'right to live'. And the importance of individualism goes beyond the confines of the play. It is enacted by every actress who plays Nora. Different actors play Nora in different ways. They have to consider their own beings in order to 'be' Nora. This was expressed very well by Claire Bloom (born in 1931) [She is perhaps known mostly for the female lead in Limelight with Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, films and theatre productions with Richard Burton, and parts in two Woody Allen films. She has played Shakespeare’s women in the films Hamlet (1980) with Derek Jacobi, and Richard III with Laurence Olivier, among others.]

She also played Nora on Broadway in 1971 and went on tour with A Doll’s House from New York to Toronto and Washington D.C. Then there was a film production. When this was finished the Broadway production was resumed in London. Several years spent playing the character of Nora led to Bloom feeling very much at one with Nora, and in her first autobiography she wrote:

In that character was my two halves: the frivolous, silly, childish woman, and the stern woman. I wouldn’t say I learned anything from playing Nora; rather, I assimilated all my experience as a woman and brought it together as an actress. [...] I don’t remember a performance I didn’t enjoy.

This is what is required of the demanding role, 'to assimilate[d] all [their] experience as wom[e]n and br[ing] it together as actress[es]/actors'.

I’d now like to show three brief clips of interviews with two famous Noras – Janet McTeer and Hattie Morahan. First, Janet McTeer:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hZ8BhPrHb7U 1.5, 'He cottoned on' to 2.05 'gets caught out'.

And now two clips with Hattie Morahan who was awarded an Oscar for her Nora:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjWkq1lZCwY .10 – 1.14 and 3.1 – 3.4

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZaYUfGEIrjU .00 – 1.2

In some sense I think they have both to play the part while at the same time being themselves. All their experience as individual women, as we've heard, has to be brought to bear on the character. And for a 19th c male playwright to have written a play that makes that possible, is a remarkable achievement. And there will be many more Noras.

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