

"a doll's house": stage design and costumes



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One of the foremost characteristics of Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* is that its plot appears linearly defined, which, in turn, explains the semantic realism of play's overall sounding. As it is the case with most of Ibsen's other plays, throughout *A Doll's House*, characters' existential stances never cease undergoing a qualitative transformation. The way characters position themselves at play's beginning is different from the way they position themselves at play's end. As it will be shown in this essay, stage design and costumes in "*A Doll's House*" influence the characters' self-positioning and the way the conflict unfolds.

There are reasons to believe that the realism of this particular play reflects the actual workings of the author's analytical mindset. Ibsen never ceased being aware of the fact that the extent of play's realistic sounding demonstrates the degree of presented characters' intellectual flexibility, extrapolated in the particulars of how they address life's challenges.

As Kaufmann (1965) put it, "[Ibsen] knows that truth never is a possession, but a constant effort to find the appropriate response to every situation which demands a decision" (22). The legitimacy of such our hypothesis can be explored with the play's synopsis.

Nora Helmer is a married woman, who helped her husband Torvald Helmer (bank clerk) once by borrowing a large sum of money from the bank, after forged her dad's signature. Torvald is entirely unaware of the forgery that had taken place. Initially, he is a loving husband, who affectionately treats Nora, even though he also appears to be utterly ignorant of Nora's basic

humanity - throughout the play, Torvald treats her as a pretty but soulless doll. Krogstad is another important character in "A Doll's House"

When being faced with the prospect of losing his job in Torvald's bank, he threatens to blackmail Nora (because of her forgery) if she does not convince Torvald to refrain from firing him. Eventually, Torvald finds out about Nora's forgery and becomes enraged over his wife's presumed infidelity.

In act 1 of "A Doll's House", he ends up accusing Nora of moral depravity while suggesting that under no circumstances should Nora have considered keeping secrets from him. Torvald's behavior opens Nora's eyes to the fact that she has been loyal to an unworthy man who was unable to address life's challenges and for whom the continuous observation of social customs meant so much more than ensuring his wife's happiness.

It begins to dawn upon Nora that her staying with Torvald may very well be compared to the stay of a bird in the cage. After having realized it, Nora decides to leave Torvald, who, in her eyes, has been downsized from a respectful head of the household to a regular moralistic hypocrite, unable to appreciate Nora in a way she truly deserved. Nora says good-bye to Torvald and her children and embarks upon the quest to find her lost sense of identity.

The earlier provided outline of the plot points out what can be considered the first indication of the play's dramaturgic uniqueness - the sharply defined dramatics sounding of its themes and motifs. Therefore, it comes as not a particular surprise that the action in A Doll's House appears spatially limited.

As was pointed out by Jakovljevic (2002): " Ibsen's family drama [A Doll's House] is set within the space of perspectival constraints.

The entire play takes place in this single set that represents the living room in a middle-class family flat" (432). What it means is that, while staging A Doll's House, directors must focus their attention on ensuring the psychological plausibility of themes and motifs, contained in this particular play, as their principal priority. The best way to accomplish this is by exposing the essence of psychological anxieties experienced by the play's characters, as such that relate to the worries on the part of the audience's members.

Within the context of Ibsen play's staging, ensuring action's psychological plausibility will not represent much of a challenge.

The reason for this is simple – unlike what it is commonly assumed, A Doll's House is not solely concerned with exploring the theme of women's liberation from patriarchal oppression. It also exposes what accounts for the existentialist incompatibility between husband and wife – subject matter that even today remains utterly relevant.

As noted by Haugen (1979): " Ibsen's Nora is not just a woman arguing for female liberation; she is much more.

She embodies the comedy as well as the tragedy of modern life" (vii). In other words, there is a clear rationale for a modernist staging of A Doll's House, as it would emphasize the play's contemporary themes and motifs. One way of ensuring the conceptual relevance of Ibsen's play for a modern

audience is to stage an unconventional production. The following is how four elements of theatre (set, costumes, characterization, and audience participation) can reflect a modernist staging of A Doll's House.

A Doll's House does not leave the boundaries of one single room. That eases up the process of designing the set. Given the minimalistic traditions of the modernist theatre, a table and several chairs on the foregrounding of "A Doll's House" would be more than adequate.

The importance of an onstage environment, as an additional instrument of ensuring action's plausibility, is lessened. That's because, after all, "A Doll's House" is a kind of play that can be called primarily verbal. One can see this from the below quote: "In a word, A Doll's House is a play about writing. It is a play about writing with consequences, about words that act and generate action" (Jakovljevic 433).

Nevertheless, to make unraveling of the plot more authenticated, the trappings of a middle-class home may be utilized as well. By simplifying onstage set to a minimum, the director will be able to "kill two rabbits with one shot": to modernize the play's action in the eyes of the audience, and to emphasize the sheer extent of play action drama.

The dramaturgic value of A Doll's House is Ibsen's ability to expose characters' psychological anxieties, rather than his talent in authenticating the realities of 19th century's Norwegian living. Therefore, modern production should dress actors in contemporary or 'minimalist' costumes.

It will provide an additional stimulus for the audience to focus on play's themes and motifs if Torvald, Krogstad, and Dr. Rank wear black trousers and black golf sweaters. Nora and Mrs. Linde can wear black shirts and matching tight skirts. In its turn, this costume symbolism will substantially increase the extent of production's intellectual appeal.

The suggestion, in this respect, correlates with the point, made in Cima's (1983) article: " The director might choose to present A Doll's House so that the action is ' to discover oneself' (a ' feminist' approach), or he might focus on the action ' to play the game" (15). By having actors dressed in minimalist costumes, the director will prompt them to be more focused on ' playing the game,' as opposed to being concerned with maintaining the spirit of historicity.

The utilization of ' minimalist' costumes in " A Doll's House" is the pathway towards ensuring production's modernist sounding.

As mentioned earlier, with the possible exception of Torvald, the characters in Ibsen's play are in the state of undergoing a constant intellectual transition. For example, the way how Nora reacts to life's challenges in Act One is qualitatively different from the way she responds to these challenges in Act Three.

It means that, while striving to ensure the genuineness of actors' onstage performance, the director will have to look into creating objective preconditions for actors' interaction to serve the purpose of revealing developmental aspects of played characters' psychological makeup: " With the advent of Ibsen's plays... a revised category of gestures became

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necessary: the autistic gesture, or subtle visual sign of the character's soliloquy with himself" (Cima 22).

That can be achieved with the means of encouraging actors to perform in a mostly spontaneous manner while going as far as even indulging in verbal interaction with the audience if thought contextually appropriate.

The success of using a modernist approach to theatrical productions depends on turning viewers into active participants, often despite their desire to remain passive. Encouraging actors to improvise thought-provoking remarks, even if these remarks have nothing to do with play's actual script, can do this.

In A Doll's House modernist staging, actors needed to expose parallels between Torvald's behavioral superficiality and that of many of today's effeminate men. The latter, despite their willingness to 'act responsibly,' exhibit several psychological weaknesses in their daily lives.

For example, while coming up with his moralistic speeches, Torvald may very well refer to political correctness, as the source of conventional morality, which will undoubtedly trigger strong emotional reactions in the audience.

The legitimacy of an earlier outlined production proposal can be explored concerning Gardner's online article, where she elaborates on the particulars of Erica Whyman's staging of A Doll's House. According to Gardner (2008), Whyman had made the deliberate point in representing the play's plot as unraveled in the fifties. "The 1950s setting works very well; it is a period far

enough away in time for the stifling social code of Ibsen's play not to jar, but modern enough to connect with today" (Guardian).

Moreover, judging from Gardner's point of view, Whyman considered it entirely appropriate, altering the semantic subtleties of play's characterization. " Well-meaning but misguided Torvald is no villain; indeed, initially it is the beautiful Nora - a self-conscious spoiled child - who is the least appealing of the protagonists" (Guardian).

Whyman had no reservations about modernizing the, which contributed immensely to production's success with the audience. How Whyman had gone about staging Ibsen's play points out to the fact that it would indeed be appropriate, on the director's part, to utilize the modernist approach to the clothes symbolism and stage design of A Doll's House - just as it was initially hypothesized in the paper.

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Erica Whyman's fifties-styled production of A Doll's House.