



Peter Cariss as Torvald Helmer and Jennifer Hales as Nora, his wife, in an emotionally highly charged scene from Ibsen's "A Doll's House"



A moment of happiness. Left to right are: Peter Cariss as Torvald Helmer, Ken Radcliffe as Dr. Rank, and Jennifer Hales as Nora



Women's Lib support from Ibsen

Picture by
Geoff Hnt

WHAT marked out Ibsen's "A Doll's House" — opening on Monday at the Questors Theatre, Mattock Lane, Ealing — from most of his other plays was the way it became an immediate, and controversial, success right from its very first production, in 1879.

The reason is not far to seek. The play dealt with the topic of women's rights, a sensitive point in the Europe of the late 19th century. Since the play's debut, we have seen the suffragette movement, in the early part of this century, and, very much in the news at the moment, the rise of Women's Lib.

There is no doubt that Ibsen was right on target with his subject material — as evidenced by his play's success, on a wide, international level, in the years following its first production.

Ibsen himself characteristically and repeatedly denied that any of his plays were social or moral tracts. He argued this as strongly over "A Doll's

House" as for any of his other works.

However, it is undeniably an interesting observation of the evolution of an individual woman's growth in awareness of her situation and her reaction to that situation.

Her reaction just happens to be somewhat radical in comparison with her contemporaries.

The play itself is based on fact. Nine years before writing "A Doll's House", Ibsen got to know a Norwegian girl who married a Danish schoolmaster.

FORGED

When her husband fell ill and had to move to a warmer climate, the girl forged a document in order to get a loan to pay for the move. When her husband discovered this, he demanded a divorce.

The story seemed to crystallise for Ibsen's mankind, rather than specifically woman's, fight against conventional morality and prejudice — though he did believe that women possessed an "instinctive genius that unconsciously hits on the right answer."

play their works in halls which often are acted out and choruses sung to the creak of chairs and the accompaniment of draughts and traffic noises.

Before criticism is made of past or present councils for not building the ideal centre, perhaps it would be more pertinent to ask if, after all, it is really needed. What conclusions are we to draw from the paucity of the attendance at the Arts Council meeting?

If we are really serious in our pleas for a centre, it is time the actors stopped acting and quit the stage long

Brentford & Chiswick
Times
- 5 OCT 1972

A doll's grouse

WOMEN'S LIB may be a recent catchphrase, but its origins date back to the last century.

One of the greatest exponents of Women's Lib was the playwright Henrik Ibsen, although he always denied any conscious effort to champion the woman's cause.

A Doll's House, which opens at the Questors Theatre, Ealing, on Saturday for eight performances, was an immediate success when it was first produced in 1879, not usually the case with his plays.

The question of women's rights was a controversial one at the time and Ibsen knew it would be popular for that reason alone.

"Since this work deals with problems that cannot but be regarded as exceptionally topical, I think it can be assured of a large sale," he wrote to his agent.

Nine years before he wrote "A Doll's House" Ibsen met a young Norwegian girl, herself a playwright, married to a Danish schoolmaster whose

poor health demanded that he should live in a warmer climate.

The couple were very hard up, so the girl, unbeknown to her husband, arranged a loan and took him to Switzerland and Italy. In her anxiety to provide enough money to keep them going, she forged a cheque.

When this was discovered by her husband he flew into a rage and demanded a divorce.

The story obviously sparked off a fire in Ibsen's creative store and "A Doll's House" is thought to have been inspired thereafter.

A newcomer to the Questors, Jennifer Hales, who has had wide experience in the theatre, is cast of Nora, the heroine of the story, with Peter Cariss as her husband, Torvald. The supporting cast includes Ruth Lister, Kenneth Ratcliffe, Robin Duval and Betty Ogden.

The musical **Fiddler on the Roof** is being presented at the Questors by the Cecilian Players from October 16th to 21st.

17 OCT 1972

Questors create a fine Doll's House

I WONDER whether, in these days of Women's Lib, it is harder to portray the injustices they lived under than it was 100 years ago when Ibsen created Nora Helmer in *A Doll's House*?

The thought crossed my mind as I watched the Questors' admirable production of the play under Sydnee Blake's direction.

Nora is her husband's plaything, without a will or personality of her own. When he learns that she has forged her dying father's signature on a bond for 12,000 dollars and advanced the date to three days after his death—all disinterestedly—the terrible row Torvald makes over it is the pretext for her walking out.

Jennifer Hales, a very beautiful and elegant Nora, and Peter Cariss, a cold and unresponsive Torvald, each had, I felt, one weakness complementary to the other though meeting from opposite directions.

During most of the first half of the play, Nora seemed to be enjoying rather than resenting being a powerless doll, and even wanting more petting and fussing than she was given. And Mr. Cariss, though thinking of her as nothing but an ornament, put very little warmth or tenderness into his endearments and didn't seem to enjoy his doll very much.

But when the crisis came we saw the best from both. Miss Hales put the case for her side with power and conviction and was completely victorious, happy and glorious.

The other parts were adequately filled by Ruth Lister as Mrs. Linde, Robin Duval as Krogstad and Kenneth Ratcliffe as Dr. Rank. The children got a deserved ovation. The set was delightful.

MAURICE REEVE.

Progress reduces Ibsen's impact

IBSEN'S "A Doll's House" — at The Questors Theatre, Ealing, until tomorrow — is a difficult and often puzzling play to come to terms with.

First produced nearly a hundred years ago in 1879 few plays can have a more contemporary plot, and yet parts of it seem dated in a way that only superlative playing could rescue.

In saying that the Questors' production falls a distance short of that ideal, I intend a compliment rather than a criticism, for no production of the play I have seen has made the play live entirely.

It is the story of a young, middle-class wife, Nora, who is regarded, with her own connivance, apparently, as an "expensive pet" by her pompous, sententious, recently appointed bank manager husband, Torvald.

Childish, selfish and thoughtless, she is, as she comes to see herself, "a doll wife" living in a doll's house.

Falsity

The play covers three short but tightly packed days around Christmas, in which Nora miraculously realises the falsity of her position, and more particularly of her marriage to Torvald.

The play readily invites description in terms of Women's Lib, and this lends it a topicality that it can scarcely have ever had, even at the time of its first production.

But it is exactly the contemporary relevance of the play that makes it hard to entirely accept. The current loosening of preconceptions about a wife's role means that Nora's walking out on the husband she discovers she no longer loves does not hit as hard as it must have done in 1879.

The last scene now seems rather bombastic in the self-consciously shocking attitudes that issue from Nora's suddenly mature mind. Not least because in this production Nora seems out to shock her husband as much as Ibsen is out to jolt the audience.

Theatre

This is a shame because for the play to be really convincing and absorbing today it must succeed dramatically as a piece of theatre, not intellectually as a social tract.

Despite some fine and sustained performances, Sydney Blake's production was never quite unified enough, on Saturday at least, to gather sufficient dramatic momentum to carry the audience with it.

Jennifer Hales, as Nora, began well with the childish but charming character of the first act, and was convincingly dis-

traught as she is made aware of what it means to have forged her father's signature on a document to borrow money, but she seemed to tire (not surprisingly) with the sheer weight of her part, and her control suffered.

But if the final scene did not convince, it was not her fault, nor even the fault of the excellent Peter Cariss as Torvald, but, as I have suggested, Ibsen's own fault. To so entirely reduce Torvald to a tipsy fool in the final scene is to load the dice more than the situation merits.

If Mr. Cariss' performance had a fault it was common to several others. The actor seemed aware of his own potential absurdity.

Serious

Kenneth Ratcliffe as the family friend, Dr. Rank, seemed more unwilling than most to take the character he was playing with complete seriousness. Certainly Rank is a man with a deeply ironic manner, but this should not become so flippant that we doubt the melancholy that broods within him and dominates him. With the inherited spinal disease that he knows is killing him, he carries much of the burden of the sense of an inevitable and often primitive sense of retribution that looms in the play, and in so much of Ibsen's work.

The scene in which Rank, without explicitly saying so, goes off to die, is potentially one of the most moving in Ibsen, with its cryptic parting line to Nora, "Thank you for the light", but it failed to hit the target.

While elements of the production are open to criticism it is extremely pleasant to be able to congratulate Ruth Lister as Nora's long-lost friend, Mrs. Linde, and Robin Duval as Krogstad, the man who Nora has borrowed from, and who Torvald has just sacked from the bank, on their excellent performances.

Mrs. Linde is an excellent foil for Nora; patient, mature, sad and hardworking, she is capable of describing work as "the great pleasure of my life" with complete conviction.

Victim

Mr. Duval was able to suggest both the malice and vindictiveness of Krogstad, and yet to convey the possibility of a sensitive and sadly wounded man underneath, who is victim as well as victimiser.

The scene in which Mrs. Linde and Krogstad, with no illusions about each other set about trying to build a new life together was the most brilliant and movingly played in the production.

The costumes were excellent, suggesting a unified sense of time and place, but the set, while efficient and well built, was perhaps not tinselly enough to suggest a doll's house, and so to make the Nora that emerges from it as disturbing as she might be.

But this was a strong and intelligent production with many things to recommend it, both large contrasts of mood and small details of movement, and one that provokes considerable thought as the worthwhile production of a major play should.

JM

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Not mad about the house

IBSEN'S "A Doll's House" is undoubtedly a play with a message, but more than that it is a recognised classic which happens to incorporate a message about women's liberation.

Accepting that, it is difficult to account for the failure of the Questors' current production, which has performances tonight, tomorrow and Saturday at 7.45 p.m.

The Questors set themselves such a high standard of production and performance that it comes as a shock when they inadvertently allow their standards to plummet.

Not that "A Doll's House" is bad by most amateur standards, but only in relation to the Questors' standards, which are professional standards.

So-called "classics" are usually distorted or misrepresented in the hands of amateurs and this was the main fault of the Questors production. It reduced "A Doll's House" to a rather ludicrous melodrama, totally unbelievable and at times embarrassing.

STRAINED

Credulity would be strained by the finest production of a play in which a husband treats his intelligent, attractive wife like a defective child, but it can and has been done.

Peter Cariss, as the studiously patronising husband, Torvald, gives a commanding performance and Jennifer Hales as his "little song bird" wife whose wings are a long time spreading — why has she put up with him for eight years, one wonders? — acts her heart away, becoming ever more breathless and histrionic.

Kenneth Ratcliffe as the ill-fated Dr. Rank and Robin Duval as the villain of the piece fare considerably better than the two main protagonists whose life of abject deception seems all too obvious from the outset. — Nick Smurthwaite.

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