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Review of Lucas Hnath's *A Doll's House, Part 2*

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A review of Lucas Hnath's *A Doll's House, Part 2* at the Donmar Warehouse (10 June–6 August 2022).



Despite being able to claim one of the most infamous endings in theatre history, Henrik Ibsen's 1879 play *A Doll's House* has seen its final scene revisited and rehashed perhaps more than any other dramatic work. When Ibsen's central character, Nora Helmer, closed the door on her household, her husband, and her children, it may have ensured the play's legacy as a feminist classic, but the door has hardly remained shut. Ibsen himself was grudgingly forced to write an alternative ending for the German premiere in February 1880, in which Nora remained with her family.¹ *A Doll's House* has continued to spur the imaginations of writers for over a century, with countless retellings, sequels, and adaptations that have attempted to grapple with Nora's actions during the course of Ibsen's play, and her future, which Ibsen left unwritten.² In Britain some of the more recent and notable versions include Tanika Gupta's adaptation at the Lyric Hammersmith in 2019, which reimagined the play in colonial India, with Nora as a young Bengali woman married to an English bureaucrat; and Stef Smith's *Nora: A Doll's House* at the Young Vic in 2020, which placed Nora in three different periods, marking the continuities between women's experiences in 1918, 1968, and the present day.³ Also in this list is the new production of *A Doll's House, Part 2* by Lucas Hnath, originally premiering in the US in 2017, and recently restaged (10 June–6 August 2022) at London's Donmar Warehouse by a new cast and director, James Macdonald. The production once again opens the door into Nora's life by imagining her return, fifteen years later, to the house she left.

Hnath's play retains a fidelity to many characteristics of the original. The characters and setting (nineteenth-century Norway) remain the same, as does the Ibsenian focus on legal structures as key mechanisms of social power and women's oppression. But while Ibsen directly represented the legal manoeuvres, deception, and manipulation that allowed the characters' actions to unfold, Hnath keeps these elements offstage and instead presents a script largely based on a series of duologues, allowing each of the four characters to offer their perspectives on Nora's actions, and on the question of marriage and commitment more broadly.

In Macdonald's production the audience is seated on all four sides of the stage, which is taken up completely by the structure of a tall, black house. As the performance begins, the house is raised away, leaving a notably sparse stage, empty of props and

¹ Clemens Räthel, 'Redecorating *A Doll's House* in Contemporary German Theater – Multiple Authorship in Ibsen's *Nora*', *Ibsen Studies*, 20 (2020), 67–87 (pp. 69–70).

² Mary Christian, "'A Doll's House Conquered Europe': Ibsen, His English Parodists, and the Debate over World Drama', *Humanities*, 8.2 (2019) <<https://doi.org/10.3390/h8020082>>.

³ *A Doll's House*, Lyric Hammersmith <<https://lyric.co.uk/shows/a-dolls-house/>>; *Nora: A Doll's House*, Young Vic <<https://www.youngvic.org/whats-on/nora-a-dolls-house>> [both accessed 31 July 2022].

scenery except for multiple chairs laid out across it. Though Hnath's play text specifies that there should be a 'prominent' door on stage, Macdonald's production sidelines this by using a side door to the stage which is inconspicuous and unmarked. These images of the original play then — the house and the door — fall away from prominence. So too does any continuity with the language of the original: Hnath has written his play in contemporary, colloquial dialogue, reflecting his efforts to address a more modern set of debates around marriage, monogamy, and gender roles.

Yet much of the Naturalism of Ibsen remains, if in a less familiar form. The audience, which remains lit throughout the production and whose members can see each other clearly, is placed in a set-up that echoes Naturalism's pursuit of scientific enquiry: spectators are positioned to examine, studying the drama closely from all angles. The stripping back of scenery to chairs is also notable. As Eleanor Skimin writes, the choreographic device of the seated conversational scene was essential to the staging of bourgeois interiority in Naturalist theatre.⁴ Breaking with the traditional Aristotelian motors of action and movement, writers such as Ibsen had to find new ways to present the domestic, and often sedentary, exchanges that characterized European bourgeois life. Domestic chairs, and their arrangement on stage, thus became 'the key bodily configuration' for staging private lives and individual interiority (Skimin, p. 81).

Macdonald's staging strips the production back to allow these private exchanges to take precedence, successfully focusing the audience's attention on the personal turmoil of the characters. This, alongside the use of modern language, allows the play to find resonances with a contemporary audience's views and experiences of marriage, despite its setting in nineteenth-century Norway. A sense of personal intimacy, intensified by the seating configuration, is also integral to Hnath's script, which consists of a series of scenes staging dialogue between Nora and each of the other characters in turn, a format which gives the play a polemical quality as the characters staunchly defend their own actions, or condemn those of others. Nora, played by Noma Dumezweni, and Torvald, played by Brían F. O'Byrne, clash over their competing accounts of their marriage, and whose version of past events is most legitimate. In doing so, the text questions the legitimacy of speaking for others in moments of shared experience and attempts to challenge Nora's version of events, nuancing the relationship between the characters.

In Hnath's sequel Nora has reluctantly returned to her former home, fifteen years after her departure, after discovering that Torvald never filed their divorce papers (he has also, it transpires, allowed people to believe that Nora is dead rather than

⁴ Eleanor Skimin, 'Reproducing the White Bourgeois: The Sitting-Room Drama of Marina Abramović', *TDR: The Drama Review*, 62.1 (2018), 79–97 (p. 81).

admit that she left him). That Nora remains married has put her in a precarious legal and financial position: married women were not legally permitted to sign contracts or engage in business.⁵ Nora has gone on to write several successful books under a pseudonym, which encourage women to leave their unhappy marriages. An influential judge, whose wife left him as a result of Nora's writing, has discovered Nora's identity, and threatens to expose her as a married woman unless she publicly apologizes for her writings. Nora's fury at facing ruin, once again, at the hands of a man, is palpable, and drives her to plead, first with Torvald, and then with her estranged daughter Emmy, for her divorce. Dumezweni's Nora is proud, poised, and self-assured. She wears her success openly, both through her lavish clothes that display her independently established wealth and her self-composed manner, which is maintained in the face of open hostility at her return.

Nora is, however, legally and financially vulnerable, and in desperate need of Torvald's cooperation to grant their divorce. Hnath's plot forces her to fight her case with her family, arguing for the legitimacy of her actions and the righteousness of her cause, which Dumezweni represents with sturdy conviction. Throughout the play, Nora remains adamant in her insistence that marriage is an antiquated and oppressive model, telling the housekeeper, Anne Marie (played by June Watson), that 'marriage is cruel, and it destroys women's lives' (Hnath, p. 19). Torvald, who has never remarried and still misses his wife, counters her arguments, as does her daughter Emmy, whom Nora approaches in the hope that she can convince her father to file for the divorce.

Emmy, in Ibsen's play, appears briefly on stage but has no dialogue, and this absence of original characterization allows Hnath to craft her according to the needs of his own text, more so than any of the other characters. Played by Patricia Allison, Emmy seems deliberately designed to instigate a more contemporary debate about marriage. Now in her late teens, she greets her mother without animosity or resentment. Allison plays her with an air of calm serenity: she is seemingly unaffected by her mother's return and able to approach her parents' predicament logically. Nora expects her young, confident daughter to share her view of marriage as a patriarchal contract, but is taken aback to discover that Emmy favours it, and argues: 'It's the fact that we're bound together, that it's difficult to leave, that actually makes people stick around and try' (p. 64). This is echoed by Torvald, who admits to problems in their marriage, but contends that Nora should have stayed and tried to 'tough it out' with him (p. 38). This argument for marriage as a lifelong commitment allows Hnath's play to speak directly to more modern conversations, but by placing Torvald's plea for redemption at the heart of the

⁵ Lucas Hnath, *A Doll's House, Part 2* (London: Nick Hern Books, 2022), p. 30.

text, Hnath has to elide some significant details of Ibsen's play that would otherwise throw Torvald's claims into doubt, most notably that he banishes and denounces Nora. Hnath's text is therefore more interested in staging an intellectual and moral debate than exploring the precise details of the characters' actions and predicaments.

Beyond its discussion of the merits of marriage, Hnath's text is also keenly focused on the question of narrative and accountability. Early on, Nora notes that 'there's something in our time and place and culture that teaches us to expect and even *want* for women who leave their families to be punished' (p. 16, emphasis in original). She, of course, rejects this, and revels in recounting to Anne Marie her self-made success and wealth as a writer, despite the difficulty she faced leaving her husband. Yet in a fictionalized retelling of her marriage in one of her novels, the heroine dies of consumption; Nora observes that the story would never have been published if the character had gone on to live. In a similar manner Ibsen was compelled to provide an alternative ending for his German audience in which Nora stayed with her family, which he described as a 'barbaric act of violence against the play', but one he had to offer to ensure the play's production (Räthel, p. 70). Nora is insistent on reclaiming her narrative, despite living under conditions that will not allow her to write it as a truthful account.

This honesty about Nora's options, her chances of survival, and her account of her marriage, are key concerns of the play. Nora's written account of her life and marriage has brought her fortune, but it also prompts an argument with Torvald, not only about Nora's prior actions, but about her depiction of Torvald in her books. It is Torvald's rehabilitation that becomes the centre of much of the dialogue, as he argues how unfairly he has been portrayed. This is aided by O'Byrne, who lends Torvald a comedic yet sympathetic quality, portraying him as a man who is weary and worn down by his wife's actions, while still holding deep affection for her. Hnath's production tries to nuance the events of Ibsen's play, showing that Nora's departure — though powerful — casts her as a heroic individual with little attention to the perspectives of those left behind. Nora has found, to her frustration, that she cannot fully escape the social and economic ties that bind her to others — and that the world is not ready for a woman who moves freely as an individual. As Emmy tells Nora, by encouraging women to leave their husbands, 'It's like you've saved them from a drowning boat, but you've left them with no way to get back to shore' (p. 64). Women who followed in Nora's footsteps and abandoned their husbands and families would find themselves in a precarious position, in a society unwilling and unable to support their choice. But Nora and Torvald's argument also rests on who has the right to have the final word on someone else's story — a question that is perhaps also raised by the play itself, written by another male writer, which invites significant compassion for Torvald and scrutiny for Nora.

Macdonald's production is fast paced and engaging: the back-and-forth sparring between the characters sometimes gives one the feeling of being at a boxing match — a sense that is heightened by the in-the-round seating arrangement. By the final scene the debates are so polarized, and each character so cemented in their position, that it is difficult to see how a resolution will take place. Someone has to move, and ultimately it is Nora who does. By the time she makes her second exit from her marital home, she has decided to reject her dependency on Torvald and accepted the necessity of facing those legal and social forces that compelled her to return. Critics have often suggested that Ibsen's play is more invested in the question of individual freedom than of women's rights, and that Nora represents a broader question of personal liberty.⁶ Hnath's play re-anchors this discussion by reminding us that women's liberty under such conditions would always have been limited, and that leaving Ibsen's play as it stands perhaps ignores the difficult reality that faced women making such choices. But it also forces Nora back into a predicament that she seemed to have escaped in 1879. Nora can no longer act on personal desire by evading the law, but has resolved to directly confront the material barriers that oppress her. While Torvald and Emmy argue for the enduring value of love and familial ties in spite of their shortcomings, Nora insists that no such love can exist within the suffocating legal and social structures that work to oppress women. The play attempts to provide a corrective to the optimism of Nora's original exit, forcing her to grapple with the realities of her situation, in an effort to ultimately fight them.

⁶ Joan Templeton, 'The *Doll House* Backlash: Criticism, Feminism, and Ibsen', *PMLA*, 104 (1989), 28–40 (p. 28).

