

Ibsen, Volume II: Four Plays

Introduction by Brian Johnston

... *The author of The Pillars of Society and of The Doll's House, of Ghosts, of The Wild Duck, of Hedda Gabler, is destined to be adored by the 'profession' [He] will remain intensely dear to the actor and the actress. He cuts them out work to which the artistic nature in them joyously responds - work difficult and interesting, full of stuff and opportunity. The opportunity that he gives them is almost always to do the deep and delicate thing - the sort of challenge that, in proportion as they are intelligent, they are most on the look out for.* (Henry James: 'On the Occasion of 'Hedda Gabler' June 1891)

Henry James was closely involved in the stormy introduction of Ibsen to the London theatre in the decade beginning in 1889. As an ally of William Archer, Ibsen's translator and ardent advocate, and as the personal friend of Elizabeth Robins, the American actress then pioneering the "New Drama" in London, he not only promoted the Ibsen cause in articles and reviews but took an active interest in the production of the plays. In a review of *The Master Builder* in February 1893 he noted Ibsen's "peculiar blessedness to actors.... No dramatist of our time has had the secret, and has kept it better, of making their work interesting to them." He also noted how, *in performance*, an "extraordinary process of vivification takes place; the conditions seem essentially enlarged."

At the end of that decade, in 1900, James Joyce - a lifelong admirer of Ibsen - insisted, in his youthful review of *When We Dead Awaken* "if any plays demand the stage they are the plays of Ibsen... because they are so packed with thought... It is to prevent excessive pondering that Ibsen requires to be acted." Like Henry James, he saw the coexistence in Ibsen's drama of meticulous and delicate observation, yet also of the enlargement of the drama's terms:

Ibsen's plays do not depend for their interest on the action, or on the incidents. Even the characters, faultlessly drawn though they be, are not the first thing in his plays. But the naked drama - either the perception of a great truth, or the opening up of a great question, or of a great conflict which is almost independent of the conflicting actors, and has been and is of far-reaching importance - this is what primarily rivets our attention.

Both authors, then, noted a remarkable feature of Ibsen's dramas that becomes more apparent in the performance. Though the subject matter of the plays is the confined and reduced scene of nineteenth-century middle-class life - and mostly domestic life at that - the plays "open up" and explore the terms of a wide-ranging dramatic argument. Ibsen's realist method, as Joyce detected, expands from the innermost thoughts and feelings of individuals to the "great questions" and "great conflicts" of a universal human drama. How his dramatic method reveals the large subject in the small, the universal in the particular, is not a

matter of interpretation or translation only: It is the key to the power of the plays in performance.

Ibsen, himself a painter, was a contemporary of the Realist movement in painting - Impressionism - in which the "subject" loses its importance, while the artistic act itself becomes the subject. In *Romanticism and Realism: The Mythology of Nineteenth Century Art* (1984), Charles Rosen and Henri Zerner observe of Impressionism:

If contemporary life was to be represented with its banality, ugliness and mediocrity undistorted, then the aesthetic interest had to be shifted from the objects represented to the means of representation. This is the justification of the indissoluble tie of mid-nineteenth century Realism to art for art's sake; and though it is sometimes seen as an odd contradiction in Realism, it is, in fact, the condition of its existence.

Middle-class life "with its banality, ugliness and mediocrity" is the subject of Ibsen's art. Its invariable "means of representation" is to reveal behind images of familiar reality the presence of repressed or forgotten dimensions to our cultural identity. This procedure, creating the perspectives from which to "see" the subject adequately, is what I have termed the "supertext" of his plays and its emergence is the reason why, in reading and in performance, the "conditions seem essentially enlarged." Seeing "archetypal" dimensions to modern humanity may be no more "true" of its identity than modernity's less ambitious idea of itself: But it is arguably more adequate to our need, generating more liberating fictions to live by. The confined and limited scene of our everyday existence is revealed to be a meeting ground of universal spiritual forces, so that an acting method that renders convincingly the texture and rhythm of everyday reality need not sacrifice the larger dimensions of the dramas. This is their function: to get modern life to speak a more adequate, more liberating, language.

Ibsen's champions insisted his plays required a new kind of acting (for which the traditional profession, in the 1890's was unprepared) because they dramatized a new and very unsettling vision of the human condition. In his critical writings, Bernard Shaw insisted on the unsuitability of the old acting style for the New Drama - a theme taken up by William Archer and by Elizabeth Robins in *Ibsen and the Actress* (1928). The tremendous care with which the Ibsen plays were translated and prepared for performance despite pitifully impoverished means, the great respect for the author's text, and the evolution of a critical discipline to introduce, interpret, and champion the plays in the face of a hostile public, constituted a collaborative discipline between the scholars, critics, actors, and actresses that stood in extreme contrast to the cavalier indifference to the text of the traditional theater.

In the Elizabethan theatre from which most later poetic drama in English derived, implausible plotting and an almost reckless disregard for formal unity was amply compensated for by a dramatic language capable of resonantly articulating every shade of experience. The drama existed primarily for this art of poetic delivery in

which the "classical" actor was trained. By the nineteenth century, poetic drama had degenerated into an escapist and posturing costume drama whose rhetoric was utterly remote from the realities of modern industrial-capitalist society. Productions of Shakespeare on the commercial stage consisted of a handful of plays only, drastically "adapted" to the needs of extravagantly gorgeous staging and the ambition and vanity of actor-managers. Shaw remarked that if Henry Irving were to present himself on stage in as mutilated a condition as he presented Shakespeare's text a shriek of horror would go up from the entire audience.

In the late nineteenth century the theatre in Britain was just emerging from an extended period of social disrepute. For well over a hundred years, during the great flowering in Britain of Romantic poetry and the novel, no significant new drama appeared. The popular theater of the time was the very raffish melodrama. This inherited from the older poetic drama a conflict between endangered innocence and lurid evil, watched over by a universe intervening, after a sequence of violent reversals, finally and astonishingly on the side of innocence. The acting style of this theatre necessarily was broad in the extreme. The more discriminating middle classes who had stayed away from the theatre for over a century, gradually were wooed back by sophisticated and fashionable "well-made plays" plagiarized from Paris and bowdlerized in Britain. This was the timid strategy of a London theatre anxious to appeal to the largest possible public and desperate to escape its earlier, more disreputable condition by seeking middle-class approval and social respectability. It was a theatre terrified of alienating any section of its public by the slightest hint of subversive or "dangerous" subject matter. Fashionable playwrights and theater critics, anxious to protect an immensely lucrative trade, were vigilant against anything that might flutter the doves of the bourgeoisie.

How could a theatre, so terrified of controversy, satisfy the new audience's need for dramatic interest? As with Hollywood and Broadway today, the Parisian formula was to provide the maximum theatrical excitement with the minimum of intellectual risk. This meant presenting, through the perspective of a rigidly conventional morality and by means of technically artful plots, the perennial subjects of adultery and criminality in the fashionable classes. A favorite subject was "the woman with a past" attempting social status and respectability through marriage, only to be destroyed by the revelation of earlier sexual transgression - a plot eerily echoing the British theatre's own precarious bid for social acceptance. The sexuality, in the British adaptations of the well-made play, was so muted by the queasiness of the actor-managers and the watchfulness of the official Censor of Plays, that most of the point of the risqué Parisian originals was lost. It was considered a daring extension of the drama when Paula Tanqueray, the woman with a past in Arthur Wing Pinero's *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, was permitted a "sympathetic" measure of conventional self-condemnation before her inevitable disgrace. Oscar Wilde's attempt to infiltrate daring commentary on society's mores into his otherwise conventional well-made plays ended with his

own social disgrace and ruin - which only reinforced the theatre's extreme alarm over even the mildest challenge to the status quo. However a cultural "space" was emerging into which a dramatist, independent of the London commercial theatrical scene, could step.

Henry James' account of the actors and actresses eager to be engaged on work of aesthetic integrity, was true, also, of a new minority audience. In the 1890's, when the drama was almost universally considered unfit as a medium for serious writing, Ibsen was avidly taken up and championed, against astonishingly intense hostility, by those hungry for a theatre into which one could take one's intellect. Henry James, Thomas Hardy, George Moore, Oscar Wilde, Bernard Shaw, James Joyce were among the many who, with the progressive men and women in Europe (and later America), enlisted in the cause of Ibsen and the Independent Theatre movement. In 1886, Karl Marx's daughter, Eleanor Marx-Aveling, with William Morris' daughter, May, and the rising socialist of the New Criticism, Bernard Shaw, took part in a Bloomsbury reading of *A Doll House*.

The minority theatre, the cradle of serious modern drama, came into being in Berlin (1889) and London in 1891 to perform Ibsen's *Ghosts*. In Paris, Antoine's recently inaugurated *Theatre Libre* had performed *Ghosts* in 1890 and George Moore, sitting in the audience, was so overwhelmed by the play that he became a founding member of a new Irish Literary Theatre - later to become the Abbey Theatre. With Ibsen's plays, therefore, the modern theatre now followed the other arts by splitting into mutually hostile mainstream and minority camps. In those heady days, performing an Ibsen play was considered virtually an insurrectionary act, and Ibsen became the most vilified, championed, talked, and written about individual in Europe for decades. "It may be questioned," wrote James Joyce in his review of *When We Dead Awaken*, "whether any man has held so firm an empire over the thinking world in modern times." Within an astonishingly short time the theatre, through Ibsen, had shaken of its insignificance and disrepute to become a major cultural force in Europe.

Anthologies of modern drama, eager to construct neat linear accounts of dramatic evolution, usually place Ibsen at the beginning of the collection as "the father of modern realism" - which already means ignoring the half of his career in which he created major poetic and historical dramas. Furthermore, his "realistic" plays usually are seen as worthy exercises in a discipline - the faithful depiction of real people in real trouble - that later realists were to refine. It was fashionable to decry the "heaviness" of Ibsen's method while applauding the latest modish arrival on Broadway or the West End. Any visit to "The Best Plays" of 1920s, 30s, 40s, 50s, to the present day confirms the short shelf life of these acclaimed offerings and of their reviewers, whereas the architectural integrity of Ibsen's art maintains him, after a century, as a potent presence in our theatre and culture. But it is still necessary to demonstrate that Ibsen's realist method is an audaciously - yes, *poetic* - method that the modern theater hardly has begun to comprehend.