



HENRIK IBSEN
A DOLL'S HOUSE

TRANSLATED BY MICHAEL MEYER
EDITED BY SOPHIE DUNCAN

A Doll's House

Henrik Ibsen (1828–1906) was a Norwegian playwright and poet whose realistic, symbolic and often controversial plays revolutionized European theatre. He is widely regarded as the father of modern drama. His acclaimed plays include *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, *Hedda Gabler*, *An Enemy of the People* and *The Pillars of the Community*.

Sophie Duncan is a Fellow in English at Christ Church, University of Oxford. She received her DPhil from Brasenose College, Oxford, where she was a Senior Hulme Scholar, in 2013. She then became Stipendiary Lecturer at St Catherine's and Supernumerary Fellow in English at Harris Manchester College, before returning to full-time research at Magdalen College. She has been a guest lecturer at King's College London and at the Bread Loaf School of English. Her research includes longstanding links with the world of professional theatre, and she works regularly as an historical advisor and dramaturg in theatre, television, radio and film. Her books include *Shakespeare's Women and the Fin de Siècle* (2016) and *Shakespeare's Props: Memory and Cognition* (2019). With Rachael Lennon, she is the co-author of *Women and Power: The Struggle for Suffrage* (2018).

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MICHAEL MEYER

with commentary and notes by

SOPHIE DUNCAN

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Chris Megson and Matthew Nichols

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Chronology

Events from Ibsen's life and career are shown in bold text; other theatrical events in standard type face; and social and political events in italics.

- 1828** **20 March: Henrik Ibsen is born in Skien, a small coastal town in Norway. His father, Knud Ibsen, is a merchant.**
- 1834–5** **Knud's business debts mean the Ibsen family property is seized; they move to a small country house in Vernstoep. Knud ultimately goes bankrupt.**
- 1843–4** **The fifteen-year-old Henrik leaves school early and is apprenticed to an apothecary, Reimann, in Grimstad (a shipping town). Desperate to attend university, Ibsen studies by night.**
- 1846** **Ibsen fathers a son, Hans Jacob Birkdalen, with Else Jensdatter, Reimann's domestic servant. Ibsen funds his education but never sees his son.**
- 1848 *Multiple revolts against European monarchies, originating in Sicily and spreading to the Austrian Empire, France, Germany and Italy. Economic crisis hits Norway. Ibsen supports Republican causes at public meetings.*
- 1849** **Aged twenty-two, Ibsen publishes his first play, *Catiline*, a verse drama set in ancient Rome. It sells only forty-five copies and theatres reject it.**
- 1850** **Ibsen moves to Christiana (modern-day Oslo) to revise for university entrance exams, but fails them. Ibsen's involvement in the Socialist movement deepens, via friendships with Aasmund Vinje and Theodor Abildgaard and a lifelong rivalry with left-**

- wing playwright and politician Bjornstjerne Bjoernson. Ibsen's first performed play, the nationalist romance *The Warrior's Barrow*, premieres.
- 1851 Ibsen becomes 'dramatic author' at Bergen's Norwegian Theatre. Over the next six years, Ibsen writes, directs and designs productions.
- 1852 Ibsen's 'fairy-tale' comedy *St John's Night* fails utterly at the Norwegian Theatre. Major European powers sign the Treaty of London, guaranteeing Denmark's existence as a country.
- 1855 Ibsen's *Lady Inger of Oestrat* (historical prose tragedy) premieres – another failure. Ibsen becomes fascinated with the Icelandic Sagas.
- 1856 Ibsen's medieval melodrama *The Feast at Solhaug* succeeds in Bergen. Ibsen becomes engaged to Suzannah Thoresen.
- 1857 *Olaf Liljekrans'* premiere is moderately successful; Ibsen becomes artistic director of the more radical Norwegian Theatre of Christiania.
- 1858 Ibsen marries Suzannah in June. *The Vikings at Helgeland*, another historical prose tragedy, is moderately successful.
- 1859 Birth of the Ibsens' only child, Sigurd.
- 1862 Ibsen attacked for his management of the theatre; Norwegian Theatre of Christiania closes, bankrupt.
- 1863 Ibsen desperately short of money; angry with Norwegian government for denying financial aid and for not supporting Denmark against Prussia and the Austrian Empire in what becomes the Second Schleswig-Holstein War (over contested ownership of the Schleswig and Holstein Duchies).
- 1864 Ibsen successfully directs *The Pretenders* (another historical prose tragedy). In April, Ibsen's 'exile'

- begins; he leaves Norway for Rome, via Copenhagen. Second Schleswig-Holstein War; Danish king renounces rights to the Duchies in favour of Austria.**
- 1866** *Brand's* sensational publication establishes Ibsen's Scandinavian reputation. The Norwegian government gives Ibsen grants and a stipend.
- 1867** *Peer Gynt* published; another success.
- 1868** Ibsen moves from Rome to Dresden.
- 1869** *The League of Youth*, a contemporary prose comedy, opens at the Christiana Theatre. Characters and themes explicitly prefigure *A Doll's House*, as one female character tells her husband, 'You dressed me up like a doll; you played with me as one plays with a child'. The critic Georg Brandes suggests that the female character has potential as a future protagonist.
- 1873** The critic Edmund Gosse's *Ibsen, the Norwegian Satirist* brings Ibsen to British attention. Wildly successful publication of Ibsen's final historical play, *Emperor and Galilean*.
- 1875** The Ibsens move from Dresden to Munich.
- 1876** Acclaimed premiere of *Peer Gynt* at the Christiana Theatre. Ibsen dislikes Grieg's score. *The Vikings at Helgeland* is Ibsen's first play performed outside Scandinavia at Munich's Hoftheater. It is a huge success.
- 1877** Publication of *The Pillars of Society*, which is especially successful in Germany.
- 1879** *A Doll's House* is published to huge acclaim in Scandinavia and Germany. World premiere at the Royal Theatre, Copenhagen. The Ibsens briefly return to Munich, but move back to Italy the following autumn.

- 1880 Progressive theatre critic William Archer's English translation of *The Pillars of Society* receives a single London matinée: first performance of an Ibsen play in England.
- 1881 *Ghosts*' publication scandalizes Europe. Scandinavian theatres reject the play; booksellers return copies to the publisher. *Assassination of Tsar Alexander II in Russia*.
- 1882 *Ghosts* premieres: a Norwegian-language production in Chicago. The first English-language production of *A Doll's House* opens in Milwaukee. *An Enemy of the People* is published to mixed reception. *Married Women's Property Act 1882* allows English, Welsh and Irish married women to own and transact property independently of their husbands.
- 1883 European premiere of *Ghosts* in Helsingborg, Sweden, before a successful Scandinavian tour. Polish actress Helena Modjeska plays Nora in *A Doll's House*'s American premiere (Louisville, Kentucky).
- 1884 Henry Arthur Jones's *Breaking A Butterfly*, a highly conservative rewriting of *A Doll's House*, opens in London. *The Wild Duck* is published.
- 1886 *Romersholt* is published to hostile reviews and rejection by theatres.
- 1888 Publication of *The Lady from the Sea*. In December, the first English edition of *The Pillars of Society*, *A Doll's House* and *The Enemy of The People* is highly successful.
- 1889 William Archer's English translation of *A Doll's House* opens at the Kingsway Theatre, London. The production, starring Janet Achurch as Nora, divides critics. Radicals such as George Bernard Shaw, Harley Granville Barker and W. B. Yeats are impressed, but the *Standard* newspaper calls it 'a morbid and

- unwholesome play'. The production tours to Australia, New Zealand, Egypt, India and America.
- 1890 Shaw delivers a lecture later published as *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, provoking controversy regarding Ibsen's socialism. William Heinemann offers Ibsen a publication contract. *Hedda Gabler* is published to negative reviews.
- 1891 *Ghosts* receives its London premiere from the Independent Theatre Society, horrifying conservatives. Ibsen is an instant celebrity. Ibsen finally returns to Norway to live; he is now a literary hero.
- 1892 Publication of *The Master Builder* and Lugné-Poë produces *The Lady from the Sea* in Paris. Oscar Wilde's *Lady Windermere's Fan* premieres to great acclaim in London.
- 1893 *New Zealand becomes the first country in the world to grant women suffrage*. George Bernard Shaw's *Mrs Warren's Profession* is banned by the London censors for its depiction of prostitution.
- 1894 French premiere of *A Doll's House*. Acclaimed publication of *Little Eyolf*.
- 1896 Publication of *John Gabriel Borkman*.
- 1898 Ibsen's seventieth birthday; Norway celebrates a national icon.
- 1899 First Ibsen production by the Moscow Art Theatre: *Hedda Gabler*, starring Konstantin Stanislavski as Lovborg. Publication and premiere of *When We Dead Awaken*.
- 1900–1 Ibsen suffers two strokes, the second leaving him unable to write or walk.
- 1901 *Death of Queen Victoria; succession of Edward VII to British throne*.

- 1903 *British suffragist Emmeline Pankhurst founds the Women's Social and Political Union: its female activists use direct action to campaign for the vote, and are known as militant 'suffragettes'.*
- 1905 *The Norwegian Parliament proclaims independence from Sweden.*
- 1906 23 May: Ibsen dies, aged seventy-eight.**
- 1911 *A Doll's House* receives its Asian premiere in Japan.
- 1913 *Norway grants women the vote.*
- 1914–18 *First World War. The UK grants certain women the vote (1918).*
- 1922 First (now lost) silent film version of *A Doll's House*, starring Alla Nazimova.
- 1923 Silent German film version, *Nora*, directed by Berthold Viertel and starring Olga Chekhova as Nora.
- 1945 *A Doll's House* premieres in India.
- 1973 Two film versions: one directed by Joseph Losey with Jane Fonda as Nora; the other directed by Patrick Garland with Claire Bloom.
- 1992 David Thacker directs a British television production, with Juliet Stevenson as Nora.
- 1993 *Sara*, Dariush Mehrjui's film, relocates the story to Tehran.
- 2012 Simon Stephens's heavily-cut 'version' opens at the Old Vic.
- 2019 Tanika Gupta's *A Doll's House* opens at the Lyric Hammersmith.

Cultural and Theatrical Contexts

Ibsen before *A Doll's House*

Ibsen began plotting *A Doll's House* on 19 October 1878, in a café in Rome. Since 1864, he and his wife Susannah had been in self-imposed, semi-impooverished exile from their homeland, Norway. As 'dramatic author' for Bergen's Norwegian Theatre, and later as the Norwegian Theatre of Christiania's artistic director, Ibsen had written numerous historical prose tragedies and overseen the Christiania theatre's slide into bankruptcy. He was nevertheless a respected cultural figure, celebrated during the 1863 Bergen choral festival. In exile, Ibsen had become famous for the verse tragedy *Brand* (1865) and the sweeping verse epic *Peer Gynt* (1873), both plays interrogating free will. Ibsen had also begun writing contemporary plays: *The League of Youth* (1869), a satire whose Stella anticipates Nora in her complaint to her husband and father that 'You have dressed me up like a doll; you have played with me as you would play with a child' (Act 4). In 1877, Ibsen wrote his first serious social problem play, *The Pillars of the Community*; *A Doll's House* was the second. Like all of Ibsen's plays, *A Doll's House* was written in Danish with Norwegian idioms (often called 'Dano-Norwegian', Törnqvist 2000: 50). From 1523 to 1814, Denmark and Norway had existed as a Dano-Norwegian union, ruled by the Danish monarchy. Although Norway became Swedish territory after the Napoleonic Wars, Danish remained key to Norway's written culture.

Real-life events partly inspired *A Doll's House*. Aged nineteen, the Norwegian-Danish novelist Laura Petersen sent Ibsen her sequel to *Brand* (*Brand's Daughters*), and they became friends. Ibsen nicknamed the attractive Petersen 'skylark' (as Torvald does Nora). In 1876, Laura's husband Victor Kieler contracted tuberculosis and doctors advised a trip to a warmer climate. Laura funded their travels via a loan she could not repay; when Laura wrote another novel and