"We've Got to Do Better, It's Time to Begin, You Know All the Answers Must Come From Within": Ibsen's Influence on Feminism, Theater, and the Self

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"We've Got to Do Better, It's Time to Begin, You Know All the Answers Must Come From Within": Ibsen's Influence on Feminism, Theater, and the Self

Theatre Arts Capstone 2012

Jenny Aaron
The "father of modern drama," Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen, made a significant impact not only on theater, but also on society as a whole. While his career peaked in the late nineteenth century, his plays continue to be heavily performed and discussed around the globe. In particular, Ibsen has been very influential on women’s movements since the late 1800s. Throughout his work, feminist thought became more apparent in Ibsen’s plays. In giving his female characters (1) more psychological complexity, and (2) the desire to be independent (economically, politically, morally, etc.), he broke away from popular female character types of his time, shocking audiences and eventually changing the shape of theater and the world.

This essay will investigate Ibsen’s break from female stereotypes in four plays: Peer Gynt, A Doll’s House, Lady from the Sea, and Hedda Gabler. Each of these stories portrays different women trying to find their place in society. Just as his characters were trying to discover who they wanted to become in life, Ibsen was as well, and did so through his writing, which reflected his evolution as a philosopher and social critic. Rolf Fjelde, founding president of the Ibsen Society of America, remarked, "For the pressing question of the self and what to make of it... is simply the inward dimension of the objective predicament confronting the late nineteenth century man whose spiritual biography is written into the plays." Ibsen was fascinated with the idea of "the self" and, therefore, the search for oneself became a major theme in much of his work.

Throughout his life, Ibsen was known to have identified with the oppressed; people who had been told, implicitly and explicitly, that they need not or should not learn

about or educate themselves (as others were afraid it would lead to too much power among certain groups). In the 1800s, women comprised one of the largest oppressed groups in Norway, along with low-paid workers. Power would lead to economic freedom, which would, in turn, lead to and/or be a result of legal freedom, such as women having the right to vote or own property. Although he was captivated by the idea of freedom for women, Ibsen did not write about “women’s issues” for the sake of women’s rights (although he certainly helped to advance the cause). He wrote about these issues because he could see that society needed to be changed and that the imbalance between men and women was at the root of many sociological, as well as psychological and political, problems.

Many scholars consider Ibsen a feminist, however much he protested the label, because they recognize, unlike popular opinion then and now, that feminism is not “women are better than men,” it is “women must be equal to men,” an ideal that was deeply woven into his later works. His earlier works, however, differed in numerous ways. His first set of plays were folkloric and mostly written in verse, next he wrote plays not intended for the stage, then came the realist dramas, and, finally, a mix of realistic and symbolic plays.

When Ibsen first became a playwright, popular productions of the time were melodramas (tragedies about royalty) and well-made plays (written for the bourgeoisie). In addition to wanting to create more relatable tragedies by showing middle class characters, Ibsen’s work was clearly influenced by well-made plays. Well-made plays center around a secret. They also feature an “obligatory scene” in which the secret is

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revealed and a confrontation occurs between the protagonist and antagonist. Ibsen used this form and expanded on it in his “thesis plays.” Thesis plays are similar to well-made plays, but they also examine social issues and make the audience think in addition to be entertained.

Ibsen scholar, William Walter King claimed, “Ibsen was not so vitally interested in the drama as such (this does not imply its negation by him) as he was in the most profoundly serious questioning of that which he saw everywhere as being in the best interest of human nature.” As all people do, Ibsen tried to understand himself and human nature by observing the actions of others, including his characters. In writing, he was able to begin to work out conflicts he found within himself and in the world around him. Through his characters, he could hear different sides to various issues that concerned him and could recognize and decipher the psychology behind peoples’ actions.

Ibsen believed that people have free will and furthered his knowledge of this theory by reading the works of Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard, the original existentialist, believed that all people are individuals, responsible for their actions through the use of free will. This had a substantial impact on Ibsen’s work. Kierkegaard also claimed that an individual’s consideration to the “the aesthetic moral sphere” was said to imply much about whom one is and how one feels about life. Influenced by this claim, the set and props in Ibsen’s plays, specifically the later ones, are meant to highlight the characters’ strengths, weaknesses, and overall journeys. The way a

4 Brian Westerdale Downs. Ibsen: the Intellectual Background. (United Kingdom: Cambridge University, 1946), 80.
character feels about what they see around them offers the audience a much deeper understanding of that character than the plot does alone.

Many characters in Ibsen’s plays are not aesthetically happy with their surroundings, which creates an obstacle for them to overcome. As critics, Rick Davis and Brian Johnson said, “The Ibsen realist stage set defines the cultural environment from which individuals derive their identities... They, then, invariably struggle to change their environment or, failing that, to escape it.”

Through the actions of his characters, Ibsen, the social critic, often commented on how confining domestic environments could be. Most of the women examined in this essay felt confined by their domestic environments in various ways and, therefore, sought change.

Although Peer Gynt (1867) was not originally meant for the stage and is far from a realist play, the male lead, Peer, seeks to change his environment as well. He moves from place to place, searching for somewhere he can truly be happy. Solveig, his main love interest, on the other hand, is perfectly pleased with her environment. While she does leave her parents’ home in order to start a life with Peer, it seems as though she is absolutely content with her surroundings after that, as long as she has Peer on her mind and/or knows she will reunite with him one day. She does not seem to have any sort of thoughts besides those about Peer and her possible life with him. Her entire selfhood is governed by what is happening with Peer. Psychologist and writer, Georg Groddeck, questioned, “Does she not also waste her life by sitting in the mountains and waiting for a

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3 Davis and Johnston, Ibsen in an Hour, 6.
man with who she had only spoken three times, whom everybody calls a liar... Has Solveig nothing better to do than mind a few goats?" 6

Solveig’s overall self-image is based on what this one man thinks of her. Without him, she is not only alone, but also, essentially, nonexistent. After two brief conversations with Peer, in which he treats her with disrespect, she runs away to live with him and states, “You must be all to me, my friend, my life.” 7 Later in this scene, she tells Peer she will wait for him no matter how long he may be gone, and then proceeds to wait for the rest of her life. She wastes her life on a man who has never shown much romantic interest in her.

Like Solveig, Peer’s mother, Aase, was created, seemingly, in order to give Peer someone to go home to (when he feels like it). These women are solely in existence for Peer’s sake and he treats them as though he is well aware of the fact. Growing up, Peer relied on his mother’s attention. This same loving attention is the kind he receives from Solveig, another nurturer figure to him, and another woman from whom he is constantly running. Solveig is almost a replication of his mother, which is why he cannot see her as a sexual plaything like he can see other young women. While this shows that she is important to Peer in some way, she cannot see how special she is without him. Ibsen did not make Solveig into anything special, besides being special in the eyes of Peer. The idea of a woman’s importance being based on man’s view of them, as seen in Peer Gynt, drastically altered through the years as Ibsen’s writing and insights matured. As Ibsen’s

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plays moved from mythic to realistic, he became more of a social critic with the creation of his thesis plays.

Those social concerns came forward in his groundbreaking play, *A Doll's House*. Around the time when Ibsen began writing *A Doll's House* (1879), he befriended Camilla Collett, a Norwegian pioneer in women's liberation. Once a self-proclaimed “idle” housewife, she had much to say about her belief that women should be individuals with voices. She and Ibsen spoke often. Translator and historian, Brian Westerdale Downs, wrote, “The diatribes to which she gave voice undoubtedly made an impression upon him, though in talk he usually assumed an extremely conservative attitude, partly to tease her, but principally perhaps to stimulate her into stating her case in its extremest form.”

It is believed that these conversations led to Nora's ultimate decision in *A Doll's House* to leave her husband, Torvald, and their children. This decision, known as “the door slam heard around the world,” has been criticized, but also praised, by millions.

The infamous door slam is about much more than a woman leaving a man. It is about a woman who, in order to become an educated person, shuts the door on a world in which she is treated like a pet. In 1879, when *A Doll's House* was first performed, it was unheard of for a play to end with the “ingénue” walking out on her husband. Many audiences were appalled and the play was banned around the world. Ibsen was forced to rewrite the final scene for various productions throughout Europe. Researcher, Julie Holledge, explains, “In the German version [1880] she never leaves; her husband forces her to look at their sleeping children and she relents.”

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Somewhat similarly to her friend, Mrs. Linde, Nora ends up destroying her love life in order to make the money necessary to save her family. Mrs. Linde married for money to save her dying mother and care for her brothers. Nora took out a loan illegally so as to pay for a trip that saved Torvald’s life when he was ill, and then went on to work for years after to pay it off. When Torvald discovers this in the final scene of the play, he excoriates her as if she were a small child.

Professor of theater, Errol Durbach, states, “After *A Doll’s House* we are challenged to seek out heroic magnitude in ordinary and day-to-day existence and recognize the universality of Nora’s experience.” What scared and continues to scare some people about this play is the power that it has to reflect the life of the oppressed. Nora experiences many instances of oppression in the play such as her legal inability to take out a loan in her own name, having to hide from her husband the small jobs she worked hard at for years in order to pay back the loan, and the dehumanizing treatment she receives from her husband.

This play, like most great plays, allows people to identify with its characters and prods them to make correlations between issues of the play and issues in their own lives. This relativity is why *A Doll’s House* has been such a beneficial play to use to stimulate discussion and further women’s rights movements. Many women have seen themselves in the doll of Nora and realized that their relationships, cultures, and governments needed to change.

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10 Nora forged her father’s signature on the promissory note, since Torvald would not have signed for the loan, and since she was legally unable to sign it herself.

The idea that the main female character in a play could change from being single to being married was nothing new. The reverse, however, was a revolutionary idea that changed the scope of theater forever. This sort of psychological exploration to find and improve oneself was almost never done by a female character on stage. Unlike Solveig, Nora realized that she could not waste her life for someone else. She needed to stop being who she was in order to become the woman she wanted to be. Durbach explains, "She is the living answer to Peer Gynt’s ultimate question to the old buttonmolder: ‘What, after all, is this ‘being one’s self’?’ And she embodies the buttonmolder’s enigmatic reply in her creative/destructive choice to die as a doll in order to live the life of a woman: ‘To be one’s self is to kill one’s self.’"12 In order to become who she feels she has to be, Nora must “kill” the doll and move on from that life, only looking back in order to learn from her mistakes.

Nearly a decade later, in *Lady from the Sea*, Ellida Wangel is constantly looking back, hoping to catch a glimpse of her old self. While economic and legal issues are no longer in the forefront of the leading lady’s motivations, issues of “the self” become even more relevant. Ellida is drawn to the sea and to the mysterious man that promised her many years ago that they were married to each other as well as to the sea. The sea is a metaphor for Ellida’s selfhood. Critic, Robert Raphael, elaborates, “She must, she insists, maintain contact with the self which ‘repels and attracts,’ for she cannot resist the terror, she tells her [legal] husband, the terror which she admits is the attraction in her own mind.”13 The attraction in her own mind is to the mysterious man, representing her old

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self, and the sea, representing her free will and independence. She is afraid of these; of the unknown and of the freedom she could possess.

When the mysterious man comes back to town in the course of the play, he asks Ellida to run away with him, but only if the decision is out of her own free will. Ellida resolves that she must break from her husband, Dr. Wangel, in order to make the choice about what to do. She feels she needs to make the decision completely on her own, without any formal connection to either man who could sway her outcome. After some debate, her husband agrees to give Ellida her freedom, and, in the end, she chooses him.

Her choice to stay with Wangel is significant to her because she originally married him, essentially, only out of mutual loneliness, not love. Wangel was a widower in search of a replacement wife and mother to his children. He was willing to provide for Ellida and she, because of this offer, felt an obligation to agree. She says that she deeply regrets having “sold” herself in that way. Likewise, her stepdaughter, Bolette, agrees to marry her old tutor, Dr. Arnholm, in the last act. She has no romantic or sexual feelings for him, but thinks that marrying him is her only way to see the world and become better educated. While they both agreed to the deals they were presented at the time, Bolette and Ellida each feel that their engagements took away from their respective senses of self.

Marriage was not the only cause of a sense of loss of self for Ellida. Before the play occurs, Ellida had a child that died. With that, she felt that a part of her had died as well. Raphael argues, “Ibsen’s rather complex metaphorical structure in this play functions properly only if one considers Ellida’s child to be an offspring of her selfhood,
and hardly of her union with Dr. Wangel."14 While the child represents her selfhood, the child’s eyes, identical to the mysterious man’s in Ellida’s opinion, represented what the man symbolizes to Ellida- freedom. At the end of the play, once she feels her decision to marry Dr. Wangel is finally made out of free will, she is happy again because she feels freer. She is no longer afraid of herself or the unknown. “As for the unknown? ‘It neither lures nor frightens,’ she announces to Wangel, ‘I have been able to see into it, go out into it, if only I myself had desired. I have been able to choose it now. That is why I could also renounce it.”15

On the opposite end of the spectrum is Hedda Gabler, the title character of Ibsen’s 1890 play, who would never renounce the unknown. She lives for the knowledge of lives she knows she will never have. She is a gossip, creating drama for herself to keep from being bored. Professor of theater, Caroline W. Mayerson, asserts, “Her inability to perceive the difference between melodrama and tragedy accounts for the disparity between Hedda’s presumptive view of her own suicide and our evaluation of its significance.”16 Hedda’s suicide can be seen as the culmination of her envy of Thea’s relationships with Lovborg and Tesman, as fear of her personal future with a baby on the way as well as her economic future, or, as she declares, as an attempt to make something “beautiful”.

Hedda dedicates her life to “beauty,” which is also something she is constantly searching for on an aesthetic level. Hedda married Tesman, in part because of his money and the lifestyle that he could provide for her. She is always looking to buy things to

14 Ibid., 128.
15 Ibid., 130.
better her home and make it more attractive to others. She is a jealous person and forever wants to be the center of attention, especially in her own home. She wishes to represent beauty and excitement and is angered by those who surpass her in these categories.

When Thea comes to Hedda and tells her of her new friendship with Lovborg, Thea’s old “comrade,” Hedda becomes extremely jealous. She is not as much jealous of the possible romance between them as she is of not being the center of his attention any longer. Hedda is not only envious of the attention Thea receives, but also of many other aspects of Thea as well: Thea’s physical beauty, Hedda’s assumed notion of the excitement of Thea’s life away from her husband, and of the drama of her relationships.

Hedda is completely dependent on others. She depends financially on her husband, depends on men in general in order to feel physically attractive, and depends on everyone to be envious of her life to feel happy. Thea, on the other hand, is much more independent. She runs from her husband who treats her like property. She also has a great desire to learn and talks with Lovborg to educate herself, continuing to work on the manuscript she helped him to create, their “child,” after his death. Mayerson adds, “Having lost herself to find herself [à la Nora]... she is the most truly emancipated person in the play.”¹⁷

While Thea seems to be heading in the direction of being completely independent, Hedda does not seem to have an out in sight. She is pregnant and stuck in a marriage with a man who she not only finds completely boring, but who risks losing his money and social status in the beginning of the play. If Lovborg’s manuscript were published, Tesman’s career would effectively be over, leaving Hedda without money to decorate her

¹⁷ Ibid.
house and a low position on the local social ladder. Hedda, knowing this, burns 
Lovborg’s manuscript. She does this not only to save her husband’s career, but as a 
revengeful act against Thea, burning her and Lovborg’s “child”.

After she encourages Lovborg to kill himself, which he does, she is unsatisfied 
with his death. It is deemed an accident, not an act of free will and beauty, which makes 
Hedda exceedingly upset. At the same time, Thea and Tesman have been working 
together to piece back Lovborg’s manuscript in order to recreate it. As Hedda watches 
Thea make a “child” with another one of her men, and sees the reconstruction of the 
manuscript that will bring her financial ruin, she calmly goes in to the next room and 
shoots herself in the head. Mayerson explains, “With disciplined and direct aim she at last 
defeats the Boyg [of Peer Gynt], which hitherto she has unsuccessfully attempted to 
circumvent.” 18 Although her suicide can be said to be caused by the acts of other people, 
killing herself is truly an act of independence, an act of “the self”. She, at last, does not 
go roundabout (as the Boyg had advised Peer) her happiness by relying on others to make 
her feel happy and beautiful; she finally does so herself.

Hedda is a complex character, which makes her difficult and interesting for 
actresses to play and for audiences to watch. When Hedda Gabler went to England in 
1891, American Actress, Elizabeth Robins, took on the challenge of playing her. She and 
Marion Lea, who played Thea, felt that Hedda summed up the frustrations of many 
women. They knew that many of their male audience and critics interpreted “Hedda’s 
sadism and her ultimate suicide as mere melodrama, but as they pointed out: ‘...How

18 Ibid.
should men understand Hedda on the stage when they didn’t understand her in the persons of their wives, their daughters, their women fiends? ...Hedda is in all of us!”

What makes Ibsen’s plays so significant is that they have proven to be timeless. Downs explains, “Characters and actions in Ibsen’s realist plays are not only compelling representatives of our modern world. They are, as importantly, vessels or representatives of cultural forces whose conflicts go back centuries.” The issue of women educating themselves and becoming increasingly independent that he addresses in A Doll’s House, Lady from the Sea, and Hedda Gabler is one that has affected women for centuries and continues to affect us today.

In an initial draft for A Doll’s House, Ibsen wrote, “A woman cannot be herself in the society of the present day, which is an exclusively masculine society, with laws framed by men and a judicial system that judges feminine conduct from a masculine point of view.” While there have obviously been major improvements in women’s rights and the treatment of women since the late 1800s, this quote still holds somewhat true today. This year in America, for example, there have been congressional hearings about birth control access, a principal women’s rights issue, at which there were no female voices in the room.

Ibsen’s work is still vital to read, perform, and discuss today because just as he learned over time to give his female characters a voice, many countries today must learn to give their female citizens a voice. Women like Nora, Ellida, and Thea, who kill the dependent doll inside themselves in order to gain a voice and become stronger and

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20 Downs, Ibsen: the Intellectual Background, 121.
21 Davis and Johnston, Ibsen in an Hour, 15.
independent, have been role models for all people, women and men alike, and continue to teach important lessons as the years go by.

As recently as five years ago, a little over one hundred years after Ibsen’s death, feminist activist Megan Seely advised women, “We can be individuals who also find a common ground from which to speak collectively. We can share our stories, lead by example, and be activists in our daily lives. This is what it means to fight like a girl.”\textsuperscript{22} Ibsen gave women the common ground from which to speak. Now it is our job to continue the work he started and collectively fight for our equality.

\textsuperscript{22} Megan Seely. \textit{Fight Like a Girl: How to be a Fearless Feminist}. (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 16.