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## CRITICAL APPROACHES



## CHECK THE BOOK

Harold Clurman's *Ibsen* (1977) covers all the major plays and also contains advice for students wishing to approach them as a director, explaining how to make preliminary notes.

## CHARACTERISATION

It took Ibsen twelve months to plan *A Doll's House*, a process he described as one of becoming more closely acquainted with his characters. Writing the first draft, he said, was like meeting them during a railway journey, during which they chatted to him; the second draft was like 'a month spent with them at a spa ... I may still be wrong about certain essentials'; the third draft made them 'intimate friends ... as I see them now, I shall always see them' (quoted in Clurman, *Ibsen*, 1977, p. 22). All were imagined with a painter's visual flair: he complained of one of the first actresses to play Nora that her hands were the wrong shape. However, his years spent working closely with actors taught him to value their contributions. While reading alone will make it clear that the most trivial exchanges and simple actions convey a weight of unspoken meaning, it is for the performer to decide exactly how and when to make this meaning apparent. In his own lifetime Ibsen could have seen Nora dance the tarantella with passion or in a state of numbed exhaustion; a Helmer in late middle age or one whose pomposity was sharply at odds with his youthful good looks. All the characters should be understood as vehicles for experienced actors – not fixed entities but opportunities to make choices. The cultural climate and the political, social or geographical circumstances in which these choices are made will all yield different readings. All of them will offer something new to their audiences and bring the pages to life in a new way.

## NORA

Nora is one of the longest and most complex female dramatic roles, and Ibsen's characterisation was often misunderstood by his early audiences. The early nineteenth century perceived 'character' as a fixed set of traits peculiar to the individual and displayed with consistency throughout the **narrative**. They might learn from experience, but they did not take charge of their own growth as Nora chooses to do. The change from the flighty girl of Act 1 to the sober figure seated at the table with Helmer in Act 3 seemed

## Critical approaches

incredible. (As recently as 1977 the American director Harold Clurman admitted in his study of Ibsen that for a long time he had seen it as a flaw in the play.) Throughout the action, however, we see latent strengths in Nora; the real energy of the play lies in her process of self-discovery.

Ibsen rapidly establishes Nora as a figure with great zest for life: she takes pleasure in the Christmas tree, the taste of macarons and champagne. She is physically expressive and at ease, frequently touching and kissing Helmer affectionately and playing with her children (given the restrictions of nineteenth-century clothing for women, this suggests she is quite athletic). Her instinct is to reach out to people, and we see her embrace the nurse, Mrs Linde and Dr Rank. She has a kind of natural democracy; her cheerful admission that she preferred the talk of the servants in her father's house is a refreshing contrast to her husband's bluster about Krogstad's use of Christian names.

All this not only endears her to the audience but means that she is constantly seen in motion; her physical vitality reflects the dynamic nature of her inner journey. Nora's tarantella also makes clear that she has the instincts of a natural performer, turning to dance as a means of expressing what she cannot say; this alerts us to her dawning awareness that she is 'performing' the role of wife which society has scripted for her. The Nora perkily acting out the role of 'skylark' or 'squirrel' in Act 1 may well enjoy the game and even the power she has to wheedle money out of Helmer by '*playing with his waistcoat buttons*' (Act 1, p. 150). But already she thinks this is a precarious power that will wane '*When I'm not pretty any more*' (Act 1, p. 161), and at some point she may feel resentment at the '*tricks*' (Act 2, p. 187 and Act 3, p. 226) she has to perform in order to ask Helmer for anything – her predicament is, after all, the result of his stubborn refusal to look after his health. The actress playing Nora has considerable freedom in deciding how and when she will make this apparent. The conversation with Mrs Linde, in which Nora expresses her pleasure in '*working and earning money ... like being a man*' (Act 1, p. 162), may trigger new feelings in Nora about the flattery she uses moments later to get her friend a job at the bank – feelings which the performer can reflect in her face.



## CHECK THE BOOK

Ibsen read Madame de Staël's novel *Corinne* (1807), a story of doomed love between the free-spirited, passionate Corinne and a reserved Scottish aristocrat, while in Rome, and his choice of Nora's dance may have been prompted by that danced by the heroine, who explores the nature of performance. Her talent is to make 'the spectators experience their own feelings'. Nora's dance, a wordless message about herself as well as a plot device, shows that, like Corinne, 'everything was language for her'.

World events

**1814** Denmark cedes Norway to Sweden in Treaty of Kiel

**1828** Central German Customs Union founded

**1836** Mexican troops take the Alamo

**1837** Accession of Queen Victoria; first daguerreotype image produced

**1843** Ohm's law of sonic vibration discovered

**1844** Oskar I crowned king of Sweden and Norway

**1845** Karl Marx expelled from France

**1846** D. O. Hill takes first photographic portraits

Henrik Ibsen's life

**1825** Marichen Altenburg marries Knud Ibsen

**1828** Born in Skien on 20 March

**1835** Knud Ibsen loses the family home

**1843** Family moves to small farmhouse

**1844** Apprenticed to pharmacist in Grimstad

**1846** Illegitimate son, Hans Jacob Henriksen, born

Literary events

**1815** Eugène Scribe begins writing plays

**1828** Leo Tolstoy born

**1836** Nikolai Gogol, *The Government Inspector*

**1837–8** Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*

**1843** Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or: A Fragment of Life*; Edvard Grieg born; Theatre Regulation Act

**1844** Alexandre Dumas (Dumas père), *The Three Musketeers*

**1845** Richard Wagner, *Tannhäuser*

World events

**1847** Ignaz Semmelweis discovers infections that lead to infant mortality

**1848** Revolutions in France and Italy; Marcus Thrane's uprising

**1849** Gold rush in California

**1850** 12,000 employed in factories in Norway

**1851** Exhibition at Crystal Palace, Hyde Park

**1852** First airship flight over Paris

**1853** Giuseppe Mazzini leads uprising in Milan against Austrian rule

**1854** Britain enters Crimean War; loss of the Light Brigade

**1855** Telegraph network begun in Norway

Henrik Ibsen's life

**1849** Poem 'In Autumn' published; writes *Catiline*

**1850** Moves to Kristiania; *Catiline* published under pseudonym; edits *Andbrimner*; *The Warrior's Barrow* performed (revised version published 1854)

**1851** Starts as assistant director in Bergen

**1852** Trip to Denmark and Germany

**1853** *St John's Night* is staged

**1855** *Lady Inger* is staged (published in 1857)

Literary events

**1847** Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*; Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*

**1848** Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*

**1849** August Strindberg born

**1849–50** Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield*

**1850** Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*

**1851** Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

**1852** Death of Nikolai Gogol

**1853** Elizabeth Gaskell, *Ruth*

**1854** Charles Dickens, *Hard Times*

**1854–62** Coventry Patmore, *The Angel in the House*

**1855** Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*