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General Editor: Charles Moseley

# Henrik Ibsen: *A Doll's House*

S. H. Siddall

“Ibsen seemed  
to belong ...  
to another  
world”

# PUBLICATION DATA

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Published by Humanities-Ebooks LLP  
Tirril Hall, Tirril, Penrith CA10 2JE

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ISBN 978-1-84760-059-2

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S. H. Siddall

Tirril: Humanities-Ebooks, 2008

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## The Author

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Stephen Siddall was Head of English at The Leys School in Cambridge for 31 years and has taught Shakespeare courses for university students and for the University of Cambridge International Summer School in Shakespeare. Between 1988 and 2005 he directed 15 Renaissance classic plays for The Arts Theatre, Cambridge and, more recently *A Doll's House* and *Waiting for Godot* for the Horseshoe Theatre Company. He has also directed for BBC television and for the (open air) Pendley Shakespeare Festival. For Cambridge University Press he has written a student guide for *Macbeth* (2002), *Shakespeare on Stage* (2008) and *Landscape and Literature* (to be published in 2009)

# 1. Ibsen's Life as a Playwright

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1891 saw the publication of *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*. It was written by George Bernard Shaw, the most famous and controversial playwright in England. After Ibsen's death in 1906 Shaw revised the book several times, he wrote an obituary, several reviews and many articles about Ibsen's value and reputation as a great Norwegian who had become an even greater European. In 1911, Shaw declared that Ibsen 'seemed to belong not merely to another country and another order but to another world'. Ibsen would have enjoyed at least two aspects of Shaw's praise: he was unique and he didn't belong.

Future fame could hardly have been expected in his early life. He was born in Skien, a small Norwegian town, in 1828 into a family that was comfortable in his early years. Then his father lost money and they suffered hard times. At the age of 18 Ibsen became apprentice to an apothecary and fathered an illegitimate son, whose existence he tried to conceal and who played no part in his life afterwards. In his adolescent years he even held serious doubts about his own legitimacy. He was a bookish outsider when young, sometimes mocked and always introverted and solitary as he struggled with the shame of his father's fall from prosperity.

In 1850 he moved to Christiania (now Oslo) to study medicine, but failed to enter the university. But by this time he had begun to write: social commentary and satire for a magazine, but also his first play, *Catiline* (or sometimes *Catalina*), a large-scale historical tragedy in verse. His progress was rapid and in the following year, 1851, he was appointed playwright-in-residence at the main theatre in Bergen. Five years later he moved to a similar post at Christiania. This ten year period became for him a time of intense learning about theatre traditions, stagecraft and play-writing, with a focus on Scandinavian subjects, especially Norwegian art and culture. In 1858 he married Suzannah Thorensen and their son Sigurd was born the following year. Suzannah recognised Ibsen's talent and dedication (perhaps more than he recognised her support) and she dedicated her life to serving him.

In 1862 the theatre was suffering financial problems, which led to conflict with the theatre board. Ibsen left and in 1864 he was given a grant to travel to Italy. He chose a long exile of 27 years away from Norway, with only very occasional visits home.

He found that travelling away from his roots stimulated in him a creativity that both evoked his homeland and also encouraged a critique of it. As his fame developed, especially in Germany, so he cultivated its opposite: the solitary man's grumpy and truculent dislike of celebrity.

Ibsen was never a comfortable man or playwright. When Max Beerbohm wrote his obituary in the *Saturday Review* (26th May 1906), he commented on Ibsen's propensity for making enemies:

He was indeed a perfect type of the artist. There is something impressive, something magnificent and noble, in the spectacle of his absorption in himself—the impregnability of that rock on which his art was founded. But, as we know, other men, not less great than Ibsen, have managed to be human ... Innate in us is the desire to love those whom we venerate. To this desire, Ibsen, the very venerable, does not pander.

In Norway there was no doubt about Ibsen's status. In 1873 Oskar II at his coronation at Trondheim as king of the Swedish/Norwegian union did him a very rare honour: he was made a Knight of the Order of St. Olaf for his 'services to literature'. In 1874 students in Christiania held a torchlight procession in his honour at the opening of the new theatre season. At this stage in his career he was a poet and a dramatist of large-scale historical plays, to which he added the evocative pair in verse that took his reputation to a new level: *Brand* in 1866, the bleak story of an uncompromising priest, and *Peer Gynt* in 1867, a comic picaresque account of another search for fulfilment. This play includes the memorably symbolic moment where Peer strips away the layers of an onion to discover its core, but finds instead that the layers eventually peter out into nothing. Ibsen identifies neither with the austere Brand nor the self-indulgent Peer, but the notion of a search or spiritual journey was central to both his life and his art: 'In every new poem or play I have aimed at my own spiritual emancipation and purification.' These early plays assured his reputation; his equally memorable social realist plays were still to come.

In 1877 Ibsen had to face the news of his father's death. He had not been home, nor had he met his father for many years, while the rest of the family dealt with obligations which he might have been expected to share. A letter written to his uncle comes near to acknowledging a sense of guilt: 'Obviously in the eyes of outsiders it looks as though I have deliberately cut myself off from my family once and for all, and wilfully made myself a stranger.' What follows is Ibsen's attempt to set this feeling against his strong belief that an artistic vocation takes priority over normal duties and morality:

During my last visit to Norway I had a strong desire to visit Skien and my relatives in particular; but I felt a strong antipathy to the thought of any closer contact with certain dominant spiritual tendencies there, for which I have no sympathy at all, and over which a disagreement could easily have called forth unpleasantness or at least created an uncomfortable atmosphere which I would rather avoid ... I doubt whether in the long run I could be happy or work in Norway. My living conditions here, in the atmosphere of the outside world, where there is freedom of thought, and people take a broad view of things, are much to be preferred. On the other hand, living like this demands many sacrifices of many different sorts.<sup>1</sup>

This last sentence may feel like a devious way of evading the question of 'sacrifice'. Perhaps he would have sacrificed more by remaining close to his family? How much of a sacrifice is it to follow one's own artistic conviction? There are no simple answers (probably not for him either), and it is certainly true that his father's death brought to the surface moral issues that he might have preferred to keep hidden. Issues connected with concealment and exposure would dominate his future writing.

Ibsen was always alert to the social and political world around him, and it must have been clear that the era of romantic nationalism was coming to an end. Capitalist expansion was changing Europe; in 1872 Norway began a great development in railway building, which generally accompanies a new professionalism in any community. In the 1870s Ibsen was travelling throughout Europe, especially in Italy and Germany. *Pillars of Society* in 1877 started him on a new approach, writing plays which evoke and dissect middle-class life through close observation. *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* had been timeless plays set in the world of imagination: what followed were stories of private relationships in naturalistic settings. *A Doll's House* appeared in 1879, then in the 1880s he wrote *Ghosts*, *An Enemy of the People*, *The Wild Duck*, *Rosmersholm* and *The Lady from the Sea*. He wrote these plays in prose rather than verse, but firmly believed that he was still a poet in the theatre. His view of poetry (and that of his more perceptive commentators) was that the play's meaning extends beyond its ostensible theme and its naturalistically observed situation. His writing is 'poetic' in its intuitively felt subtext that includes echoes of language and motif that extend the play's imaginative range towards a deeper truth that has metaphysical connotations beyond its particular situation. For him 'poetic' was not a synonym for decorative or lyrical. In 1891 when *Ghosts* was widely attacked for its apparent

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1 Quoted by Robert Ferguson, *Henrik Ibsen: A New Biography*, (London: Richard Cohen Books, 1996) pp. 224–226

narrow ugliness, Ibsen's irritable reply was that 'the definition of poetry will have to be changed in Norway to conform to my play'.

*A Doll's House* came to him as a memory of real-life events very close to home. In 1872 a young woman, Laura Petersen, became a close friend of the Ibsen family after writing her first novel *Brand's Daughters*. Ibsen used to call her his 'skylark' and she became almost the daughter they never had. In 1873 she married a Danish schoolmaster, Victor Kieler. When he became ill with tuberculosis his doctor prescribed restorative travel to Switzerland and Italy, for which Laura paid by secretly taking out a loan. On their return they called on the Ibsens in Munich, where Laura told her story to Suzannah and her problems with paying back the loan. To contribute towards the repayment, Laura aimed to make money as a writer and asked Ibsen to make a public recommendation of her new book. He refused, believing that she was squandering her artistic talents on writing that was rushed and irresponsibly slapdash. Instead he urged her to confide in her husband: 'In a family in which the husband is alive it can never be necessary for the wife to—as you are doing—drain her own spiritual blood'. Ibsen, always the paternalist, believed that Victor would act with the chivalry that, in the play, Nora expected from Torvald. He would cope with the problem and 'he must inevitably feel it his duty and his responsibility to shepherd your talent'.

Laura forged a cheque to repay the loan, then—with the problem exacerbated—she confessed her folly and crime. Her husband was outraged, insisted on a separation, and condemned her as an unfit mother. She had a nervous breakdown and her implacable husband had her committed for four weeks to an asylum for the insane. The painful story ended two years later when Laura returned to her husband. This situation provided Ibsen with the core of his story, though in writing his play, he softened and complicated the marriage relationship and completely altered the story's conclusion.

When Ibsen recalled this story he was living in Amalfi in the Hotel Luna, a converted Franciscan monastery with a view over the Gulf of Salerno. He was writing with the freedom of sun and space around him, an atmosphere utterly different from the enclosed space in the play: the Helmers' house at Christmas. He worked so rapidly that he had completed his first draft between 25th May and 3rd August. Before writing his plays he always made detailed notes and absorbed himself totally in the characters and their situations. One day he told his wife that he had seen Nora in the street: 'She was wearing a simple blue dress'.

He was absorbed by Nora in his art; just so, ten years later in 1889, he became entranced by two young women in his real life. Helene Raff and Emilie Bardach