

A Doll's House

by Henrik Ibsen
Adapted by Frank McGuinness

A Guide to the Play

by Mark Claxton

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How to Use This Guide

This study guide is intended for anyone who would like to enhance their appreciation and understanding of the Globe Theatre's production of *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen (adapted by Frank McGuinness). The guide contains background information about the play, but also explores the artistic vision and choices behind this particular production.

When deciding how best to make use of the guide, ask yourself this question: If you were to participate in a backstage tour, would you prefer to meet the actors, see the sets, and chat with the director before the show, or afterwards? That may inform your use of this guide, which is intended at least in part to take you 'behind the scenes' and can serve equally well as preparation for the show or as further exploration after you've already experienced it.

Important note: Some of this guide's content may give you information about the play's plot that you'd rather discover yourself while experiencing the show. If you'd rather avoid any potential spoilers, you might want to wait until seeing the play before reading any further.

Teachers who are preparing their students to experience *A Doll's House* can provide them with this guide's discussion questions ahead of time -- or simply allow them to experience the play and then use the questions or other sections of the guide to launch discussion in the classroom.

I hope this guide is both helpful and enjoyable to read. I welcome your comments and suggestions at markclaxton@sasktel.net.

How *A Doll's House* Changed Theatre Forever

In 1879, Henrik Ibsen had been writing plays for more than 30 years and had become a reasonably well respected figure within the world of Scandinavian theatre. When *A Doll's House* was published that year, however, Ibsen very quickly became the talk of literary Europe. Wherever the play was performed, audiences and critics alike were shocked and scandalized at seeing a properly Victorian marriage dissected before their eyes.

In fact, the play's first staging in Germany featured an alternate ending after the actress playing Nora refused to perform it as written. Ibsen buckled to pressure from the play's producers and wrote a final scene in which Nora, about to leave the home, sees her young children and collapses, overwhelmed by emotion. As comforted as audiences may have been by the implication that Nora was unable to leave her family, this ending was despised by Ibsen and failed to gain any popularity with subsequent producers. It wasn't long before Ibsen's uncompromising original vision was restored. Nora's decision to leave her children continues to provoke controversy today.

Ibsen certainly wasn't the first playwright to challenge social convention; it could be argued, to some extent, that theatre from the ancient Greeks to Shakespeare always involved at least some level of societal self-reflection. Most often, however, any real challenges to custom and morality were subtle, hidden between the lines of traditional stories and myths that celebrated a society's most dearly held values.

There was nothing subtle about Henrik Ibsen's criticisms of the social mores of his day. He used his plays to savage what he saw as the smug hypocrisy and repressive nature of the establishment.

Yet it wasn't only the storyline and theme of *A Doll's House* that changed theatre forever; it was also the ways in which Ibsen discarded the playwriting conventions of his day to depict realistic human beings in realistic situations, speaking in realistic dialogue.

Perhaps already put off by the play's story, a number of critics condemned *A Doll's House* for its 'static' and 'non-dramatic' final scene. Where was the revelation that would lead to a happy ending? Where was the neat and tidy resolution that would send the audience home happy? Ibsen provided none of these staples of the theatre of his day; instead, stunned and uncomfortable theatregoers watched as a husband and wife simply sat down and had their first 'serious conversation.'

Despite an unkind reception among many of his contemporaries, Henrik Ibsen's work inspired a new kind of theatre and emboldened playwrights around the world to tackle themes that were formerly taboo. By today's standards, his plays may seem relatively conservative on their surface; for those who pay real attention, however, they are potential dynamite.

A Play "on Behalf of Humanity"

While *A Doll's House* may be saddled with the descriptor 'classic drama,' director David Latham sees enormous relevance in Henrik Ibsen's play for anyone struggling to remain true to themselves in the face of pressures and expectations within today's society.

From the time it was first staged, *A Doll's House* has been considered a shot across the bow for women's rights. That's not how the writer saw it, however.

"Ibsen said he didn't write this play on behalf of women," Latham said in a recent interview. "He wrote the play on behalf of humanity."

In *A Doll's House*, Nora Helmer is forced to choose between living an honest, authentic life or protecting her comfortable home and marriage by conforming to the beliefs and expectations of those around her.

"What this play is really about is someone who wants to become the person they feel they really are," Latham said. "That's not changed at all. People today still 'find themselves.' People break away from the role society has placed upon them."

Latham said individuals in the 21st century continue to pay a high price to be their authentic selves. He pointed to men and women who leave dysfunctional relationships, walk away from long-time careers that never fulfilled them, or tell their family and friends about their homosexuality.

"In terms of the relevance of this play, I don't think it's changed at all," he said.

In that spirit, Latham is working to ensure the play's actors have themselves connected with the script and the truths within it that transcend history or geography.

"You don't want to do this play as a museum piece," he said. "You don't want it acted as it would have been acted when it was first done."

One of Henrik Ibsen's greatest contributions to theatre was to move away from elevated and artificial dialogue; in his plays, he attempted to reproduce how people of his time actually spoke, interacted, and thought.

"You have to make sure when people use his language today, they use it as human beings," Latham said. "If the work is really happening within the actors, then it can't help but have a contemporary feel to it."

Transformation or Revelation? An Actor's Discovery of Nora Helmer

A Doll's House received more than its fair share of criticism when it first emerged on European stages. One of the 'flaws' noted by critics was the extraordinary change that occurs in Nora Helmer in the play's final pages. For some, Nora's transformation from chattering 'doll-wife' to self-composed liberated woman was too dramatic, too profound to be accepted as realistic.

The extremity of Nora's personal odyssey also poses a challenge to actors playing the role; Nora Helmer has become regarded as one of the great female roles in the Western canon of theatre.

For Tova Smith, who is portraying Nora in the Globe's production, her character's journey was initially intimidating.

"When I first read it, the distance that seems to be travelled from Act One to Act Three seemed so huge," Smith said after wrapping up a recent day of rehearsing.

Yet, once Smith joined the rest of the cast in rehearsing the play, she made a discovery that revolutionized her view of Nora Helmer's transformation. In fact, she came to see it not as a transformation at all.

"She is the person she is," Smith said. "It's more like a revelation of the person who's actually there, as opposed to the transformation from one person to another person.

"Once that realization dawned, it was like, 'Of course,'" Smith said. "Because that's what it is to be a human being."

Smith said Nora Helmer is, in fact, just like every other person who adapts and evolves in order to survive in their society, but in the process loses connection with their truest selves.

"Everyone in her life has taught her not to listen to her own thoughts or her own convictions," she said. "Her choice is to begin to listen to her own voice instead of all the other voices."

While Smith is still finding the role to be emotionally and physically demanding, her discoveries in the rehearsal process have brought Nora to life for her.

"That's the incredible thing about this job," she said. "I did lots of reading before I started, read the play a million, trillion times, but it wasn't until I was actually doing it, trying to think her thoughts and be her, that this all started to dawn on me."

A Doll's House Awry: Set Design

Lorenzo Savoini, the Toronto-based set designer working with director David Latham on *A Doll's House*, has found the Globe's stage dimensions leading him in new directions.

"Doing it in the round really forces you to reconsider this play, which was written with the proscenium (the traditional audience-facing stage) in mind," Savoini said. "It forces you to rethink all the conventions that are in the script."

Like many of his peers, Savoini prefers what he calls an expressionistic approach over a realistic approach to set design. While subject to various definitions, the expressionist approach acknowledges the personal 'inner world' of the play's characters -- the lens of combined beliefs and feelings through which they see their outer world. By letting go of the need to realistically represent the characters' external surroundings, set designers can use images or metaphors within the play to convey inner states as well.

The set for *A Doll's House* is a prime example of how the outer *and* inner worlds of a character can figure into the design. Despite the play's title, you won't see a doll's house on the set. What you will see is a representation of the imminent collision between 'doll-wife' Nora Helmer's safe, warm environment and the cold, alien, outside world.

"I don't think it's an accident that the play is set in winter," Savoini said. "I think (playwright Henrik) Ibsen has made a bold metaphorical choice there. You have this cold, relentless, Norwegian winter that is pounding outside, and on the inside you have what people keep referencing as 'so cozy in here.'

"You have this cozy, seemingly idyllic life, but in fact Nora has to go out into that slightly terrifying world outside," Savoini said.

With Savoini's design, that outside world is represented by a white border surrounding the stage, and by tree branches that will actually encroach on what should be the interior of the Helmer home.

While the presence of the branches may puzzle some audience members, Savoini sees that as part of the live theatre experience.

"I think it's okay for an audience to go through a play asking those questions, not completely understanding why," he said. "It makes a lot more sense when you get to the end of Act Three."

The set will also feature furniture pieces that, upon closer look, may seem oddly sized relative to each other.

"The chaise looks a little too large compared to the piano, the stove is unusually small compared to the chaise," Savoini said. "Everything is kind of like a messed up little doll's house."

That, Savoini said, was pure serendipity: he had deliberately "messed up" the scale of the furniture to accommodate the limited space on stage. As a result, he had created another way of conveying a world going awry.

"It was a beautiful accident," Savoini said. "I'm so pleased with it, but it was nothing I particularly planned."

A Doll's House, Scene by Scene

Act One

Christmas Eve, in the 19th century home of Torvald and Nora Helmer

After arriving home from a round of Christmas shopping, Nora Helmer is scolded by her husband, Torvald, for her carelessness with money. Torvald has recently been appointed manager of the Savings Bank, but will not be collecting any salary until well into the new year. Their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of two visitors -- old family friend Dr. Rank, and an unknown woman.

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Nora is stunned by the arrival of Kristine Linde, a once close friend she hasn't seen in 10 years. During their visit, Mrs. Linde - a widow of three years - confesses that she had never loved her husband, a wealthy man she had married in order to provide for her ailing mother and two young brothers. Learning of Torvald's recent appointment, she asks Nora if he may be able to find a position for her at the bank. Nora vows to help her friend, and also makes a confession of her own: in order to pay for a convalescent year in Italy for Torvald when he was deathly ill, she had secretly borrowed a significant sum from a moneylender and has been covertly working and scraping to repay the loan ever since. Mrs. Linde is appalled, as it is illegal for a wife to borrow money without her husband's consent. The maid arrives and announced the arrival of a gentleman wanting to speak to Torvald.

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The gentleman just arrived is Neils Krogstad, a Savings Bank employee. Nora and Mrs. Linde, who both recognize Krogstad for their own reasons, are startled and disturbed by his appearance. Nora quickly points him to her husband's study. Shortly after, Dr. Rank leaves Torvald's study to pay a visit to Nora. Rank condemns Krogstad, a disgraced former lawyer, as 'rotten to the core.' Nora introduces Rank to Mrs. Linde, and the three are soon after joined by Torvald, who has curtly sent Krogstad on his way.

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Cajoled by Nora, Torvald tells Mrs. Linde he can likely offer her a position at the bank.

When the room is invaded by the Helmer children, Ivan and Emmy, Torvald exits to attend to business, and Rank and Mrs. Linde also take their leave.

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Nora is playing hide-and-seek with the children when she is startled by the sudden re-appearance of Krogstad. She quickly ushers the children out of the room.

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Krogstad asks Nora if Mrs. Linde, whom he has just seen walking with Torvald, will have a position at the Savings Bank. He then asks her to use her influence to ensure he keeps his job -- a junior position that represents his hopes of regaining some respectability in the town. As the two converse, we learn that Krogstad is the man from whom Nora borrowed the money. He threatens to tell Torvald about their agreement if he loses his job. When Nora remains defiant, Krogstad plays his trump card: he has proof that Nora forged her father's signature on the loan contract -- a serious crime that would disgrace the Helmers if revealed. Before leaving, Krogstad promises to drag Nora into the gutter with him if he should lose his position at the bank.

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As the children return to the room, a terrified Nora dismisses them and tries to distract herself by decorating the Christmas tree.

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Torvald returns and asks if anyone had called. He has just seen Krogstad coming out of the house, and is angry when Nora initially tells him no one had paid a visit. Nora admits that Krogstad had asked her to put in a good word for him, but tells Torvald nothing more. When she asks her husband what Krogstad had done to put him in such deep disgrace in the town, the answer only deepens her fear: Krogstad had been caught forging a signature. Before returning to his study, Torvald accuses Krogstad of poisoning his own children by his corrupting influence. When the Helmer children's Nanny appears and tells Nora they want to see her, she orders that they not be let near her. As Act One closes, she swears never to be responsible for poisoning her own children.

Act Two

It's Christmas Day, and Nora is alone in the room, terrified that she may receive a visit from the authorities. As the Nanny enters with a box of fancy dress-clothes for the party that the Helmers will host tomorrow evening, Nora asks her how she was able to give

up her daughter for adoption. She wonders aloud if they would forget her if she went away forever. The Nanny exits, and shortly thereafter Nora is frightened at the sound of an arriving visitor.

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The visitor is Kristine Linde, who has heard that Nora was asking for her. Mrs. Linde agrees to mend the fisher girl costume that Torvald wants Nora to wear for the party tomorrow evening. As Mrs. Linde begins her sewing, she asks about Dr. Rank, whom she had met the previous day. Nora explains that their dear family friend is mortally ill. When Mrs. Linde sees the affection Nora holds for the elderly and wealthy man, she assumes Nora has borrowed the money from him and insists that Nora end the relationship. Nora finally convinces her that Dr. Rank is only a dear friend, but Mrs. Linde has perceived that Nora is keeping a secret.

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As Torvald enters the room, Mrs. Linde exits to visit the children. Nora makes another desperate attempt to persuade Torvald not to dismiss Krogstad. Enraged by Nora's persistent intercessions on behalf of a man he despises, Torvald instead summons the maid and dispatches her with Krogstad's dismissal letter.

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Nora is paid a visit by Dr. Rank, whose illness is progressing rapidly. As the two talk, laugh and flirt, Nora finally decides to ask her old friend for help with her desperate situation. She is stopped short, however, when the dying man suddenly declares his love for her. Shocked and upset, she no longer feels she can confide in Rank. When the maid arrives and whispers to Nora that Krogstad is waiting to speak to her, Nora tells Rank a surprise costume has arrived and asks him to go keep Torvald occupied in the study.

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Krogstad has just received his letter of dismissal and demands an explanation from Nora. When he threatens to reveal her forgery, she hints that she will end her own life before such disgrace can be brought upon her. Krogstad is undaunted. He is determined to regain a place in society and has decided to blackmail Torvald with Nora's secret. On his way out of the house, he drops a letter in Torvald's locked post box.

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When Mrs. Linde arrives with the mended costume, she finds a despairing and

desperate Nora. She soon realizes that Krogstad was Nora's moneylender. Mrs. Linde then reveals that she and Krogstad were once in love. If Nora can delay Torvald's opening his mail, she will try to convince Krogstad to ask that his unopened letter be returned to him. When Torvald and Dr. Rank return to the study, Nora distracts her husband from the post box by insisting that he help her with the dance she is preparing for the party. As they practice, Torvald is disgusted by the speed and violence of Nora's dancing, but is convinced to leave his mail and all business alone until after the next night's dress party. Mrs. Linde returns and Nora sends Torvald and Rank to the dining room for dinner. Mrs. Linde bears bad news: Krogstad has left town for the night. A resigned Nora dismisses her friend to the dining room and calculates how many hours remain before her secret is uncovered and she will have to end her life.

Act Three

It is the night of the Helmers' dress party, and Nora and Torvald are upstairs dancing. Mrs. Linde has left a note for Krogstad, who finally appears. Krogstad is stunned when Mrs. Linde proposes that the two of them need each other and asks Krogstad to give her 'someone to work for.' Initially skeptical and suspicious, Krogstad is convinced and overjoyed by Mrs. Linde's expressed faith in him. When he offers to ask for his letter back, however, Mrs. Linde instead insists that the secrecy in the Helmer home has to end. When she hears the dance music ending upstairs, she sends Krogstad on his way.

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Torvald, inebriated and eager for some private time with his wife, leads a resistant Nora into the room. He is surprised, and not entirely pleased, to find Mrs. Linde there. When he goes to his study to light some candles, Mrs. Linde whispers to Nora that disclosure of her secret is inevitable and she must tell Torvald everything. She exits, leaving Nora and Torvald alone.

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When Nora continues to resist Torvald's advances, he chides her for not behaving as his 'prize possession' should. He grows more and more insistent for Nora's attentions, when they are interrupted by a knock on the door.

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Torvald is irritated by the arrival of Dr. Rank, who lets Nora know in coded language that his death is imminent and he will not be returning. Rank stays long enough to ask Torvald for a cigar and then bids them farewell.

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After Rank's departure, Torvald finally retrieves his mail from the post box. When he finds one of Rank's visiting cards with a black cross drawn upon it, Nora tells him about their friend's impending death. She uses the sad news to finally deflect Torvald's attentions. As Torvald goes to his study to read his mail, Nora prepares to leave the house and drown herself in the icy waters outside. Before she can make her escape, however, a stunned and confused Torvald re-appears, holding Krogstad's blackmail letter in his hand. When Nora admits the truth of Krogstad's story, Torvald is furious. Berating Nora harshly, he commands that she will never leave the house again and will not be allowed to raise the children. He will agree to Krogstad's demands in order to preserve appearances, but his love for Nora is gone. He is taken aback when the front door bell suddenly rings.

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The maid has brought a letter from Krogstad, addressed to Nora. Torvald seizes the letter, opens and reads it. He is profoundly relieved and overjoyed to learn that Krogstad has repented of his blackmail and returned the incriminating loan contract. Immediately forgiving of his wife, Torvald vows to take better care of his 'bewildered, helpless, little creature.' He is confused, however, when Nora returns to the room in her day clothes and insists that Torvald sit down so they can have an honest conversation. In the ensuing dialogue, a strikingly calm and resolved Nora tells her husband that she has never been happy in their home, that he is a stranger to her, that she has been wronged by his domineering and condescending ways. As a stunned Torvald protests and condemns and invokes the sacred duties of a wife and mother, Nora stands her ground and announces that she is leaving him. The play ends with a grief-stricken Torvald, alone in their drawing room and clinging to a faint hope of reconciliation, as the front door slams shut.

Questions for Discussion

1. What do you think about Nora Helmer's choice at the end of the play? Did she do the right thing? Why, or why not? What other choices do you feel she could have made?
2. In the play's first act, Nora emphasizes to Mrs. Lynde how happy she and Torvald have been for the past several years. Yet, in the final scene, she insists to Torvald that she has never been happy. How is this possible? Is Nora not telling the truth?
3. As a man and husband, does Torvald Helmer have any redeeming qualities? Or is he simply the play's "villain," an evil character who makes his wife's life miserable?
4. Nils Krogstad begins the play as a man who has been shamed and cast out of "polite society" because he forged a signature. Under what circumstances might our society today condemn and ostracize a person?
5. In this play, a married couple separates, and a formerly separated couple is reunited. If you were to write a fourth act for 'A Doll's House,' what would the future hold for Nora and Torvald? For Krogstad and Mrs. Lynde?
6. When Krogstad offers to retrieve his blackmail letter from the Helmers' post box, Mrs. Lynde forbids it. Yet this letter contained information that would publicly destroy the Helmers. Did Mrs. Lynde betray Nora by allowing the letter to reach Torvald? Why did she not save her friend from this catastrophe?

For Further Exploration

Other plays by Henrik Ibsen

Hedda Gabler

While Nora Helmer eventually comes into her own in *A Doll's House*, many theatre lovers believe she can't hold a candle to Henrik Ibsen's most notorious creation. Hedda Gabler, in the play that bears her name, is a self-absorbed, manipulative anti-heroine whose attempts to escape her unhappiness bring disaster all around her. Truly evil, or more a victim of her society's restrictions on women? After reading the play (or seeing it, if you ever get the opportunity), you can decide for yourself. The 1975 film version (entitled *Hedda*) earned Glenda Jackson an Oscar nomination for Best Actress.

An Enemy of the People

What happens when the truth conflicts with the will of the majority? Ibsen poses this question with his drama about a conscientious doctor who attracts the wrath of politicians and business owners when he questions the safety of his town's main tourist attraction, its therapeutic (and contaminated) baths. An amazingly prophetic play for its depiction of the dark side of a capitalist democracy.

Film

In 1993, Iranian filmmaker Dariush Mehrjui wrote and directed *Sara*, a full-length feature based on *A Doll's House* and replacing Norwegian couple Nora and Torvald with Iranian couple Sara and Hessam. While the film remains largely unavailable outside Iran, it is a testimony to the continued relevance of Ibsen's challenge to traditional male-female roles.

In 1973, *A Doll's House* was adapted to film twice. One version, directed by Patrick Garland and starring Claire Bloom and Anthony Hopkins, is essentially a Broadway play on film. The other, featuring Jane Fonda and directed by Joseph Losey, is more cinematic. Both earned decent reviews at the time of their release, with Fonda's overtly feminist performance attracting some controversy.

You're not likely to find either film on the shelves at your local video store, but they are available for ordering online.