

“STOP TRYING TO WIN!” CONTINUITY AND REFRAMINGS IN *A DOLL’S HOUSE, PART 2*

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ABSTRACT

Under what terms can the twenty-first century stage bring Nora Helmer back into her husband’s house? Lucas Hnath’s *A Doll’s House, Part 2* (2017) attempts the paradoxical exercise of re-opening the discussion between characters which the end of Henrik Ibsen’s play had irrevocably separated, as though to satisfy our postmodern appetite for sequels (Genette, Eco). This paper examines the form of Hnath’s play as both a continuation of the “drama of ideas” concept and as a modern reframing, with more abstraction, irony and immediacy, of Ibsen’s issues. It argues that Hnath’s play participates in an ambition to “declassicize” Ibsen (as encouraged by Fuchs), while reaffirming the Norwegian playwright as our “contemporary” according to Agamben’s conception of the term. Beyond its endlessly open discussion of gender issues, this paper also seeks to replace Hnath’s play within American theatrical traditions, questioning how far innovation can go within the bounds of realism.

RESUMEN

¿En qué términos puede el escenario del siglo XXI devolver a Nora Helmer a la casa de su marido? *Casa de muñecas, parte 2* (2017), de Lucas Hnath intenta el paradójico ejercicio de reabrir la discusión entre los personajes que el final de la obra de Henrik Ibsen había separado irrevocablemente, como para satisfacer nuestro apetito posmoderno de secuelas (Genette, Eco). Este artículo examina la forma de la obra de

Hnath como continuación del concepto de “drama de ideas” y también como un replanteamiento moderno, con más abstracción, ironía e inmediatez, de los temas de Ibsen. Sostiene que la obra de Hnath se propone cuestionar a Ibsen como “clásico” (como alentaba a hacerlo Fuchs), al tiempo que reafirma al dramaturgo noruego como nuestro “contemporáneo” según la concepción que Agamben tiene del término. Más allá de su interminable debate abierto sobre las cuestiones de género, este trabajo también pretende reubicar la obra de Hnath dentro de las tradiciones teatrales estadounidenses, cuestionando hasta dónde puede llegar la innovación dentro de los límites del realismo.¹

INTRODUCTION

The twenty-first century loves a good sequel or an alternate plot. The fact is verifiable on screen and in print, across highbrow and lowbrow art forms, giving rise not just to endless superhero movies, but also to murder mysteries set in Jane Austen’s Regency world—from P.D. James to Claudia Gray—or to avant-garde plays grounding their scenes in old melodramas, for example when Branden Jacobs-Jenkins explodes Dion Boucicault’s nineteenth-century *The Octoroon* to offer his own version entitled *An Octoroon* (2014). As Anne Crémieux and Ariane Hudelet summarize, in today’s context “the serial form reigns supreme, both culturally and economically” (Hudelet & Crémieux 1), and this interestingly prompts the writing of sequels and alternate stories even for narratives conceived by their original authors to have a very definite ending. This is typically the case with Shakespeare’s characters, who find themselves resuscitated, like the heroine of the popular musical & *Juliet* (2019) or becoming the protagonists of new plays by walking out of their initial scenes, as *King Lear’s Fool* decides to do in Tim Crouch’s *Truth’s a Dog Must to Kennel* (2022). Poised between homage and irreverence, raising audience enthusiasm as well as critical suspicion, parallel plots and follow-up stories claim a broad territory of blended comfort and surprise as they revisit, reframe, and rejuvenate well-known narratives. Lucas Hnath’s *A Doll’s House, Part 2*, which premiered at South Coast Repertory and then on Broadway in April 2017, is no exception to that rich trend of palimpsests. As the title makes explicit, the play audaciously reopens one of the most emblematic doors of Western theater: the one Nora Helmer had scandalously shut in her husband Torvald’s face at the

¹ Translation provided by editors

end of Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* (1879), leaving him and their children in order to pursue her personal freedom. Hnath himself admits that adding a “Part 2” label to one of the foundational plays of modern theater is so audacious that he first saw it as a joke, confessing in an interview: “something about the title made me giggle and felt a little naughty. And then the joke turned into a real thing when I just started playing around with the original Ibsen play and trying to figure out where the space is to say more, to continue the conversation” (in Haskins & Riedel).

What mood, what tone, what shape could the pursuit of this conversation take? Is it not perilous, not to say sacrilegious, to add a fourth act after Ibsen’s resounding third? Giving such a towering classical play the “serial” treatment breeds an inherent form of humor, which design artists put to good use as they created the posters for the play’s many American productions in the wake of its successful premiere: the “Part 2” tag was consistently plastered below the original title in a cheekily different font, and sometimes supplemented with ironic visuals such as a moustache and horns crayoned over the portrait of an elegant nineteenth-century woman, a lady’s fingers crossed behind her back, or a female silhouette poised on the swing of an open birdcage.² Other production images, however, sought to complicate the relationship between Hnath’s play and Ibsen’s beyond its postmodern facetiousness: the cover of the TCG edition of the play features a black and white picture of Laurie Metcalf’s body lying on the floor in period dress,³ arms and legs spread out, and cropped so that Nora is instantly mistaken for a corpse. While this cover is willfully misleading—since Hnath’s Nora is livelier than ever—the intimation is intriguing from a metatheatrical point of view. It prompts an interrogation as to whether the stylistic and thematic debates raised by the original *A Doll’s House* are dead or alive, justifying Charles McNulty’s humorous characterization of the set as the “domestic crime scene of a very cold case” (McNulty b). It insinuates

² I am here conflating stylistic choices and details which can be observed on posters for a variety of productions, including the Broadway premiere (directed by Sam Gold, 2017), the Ensemble Theatre Cincinnati production (directed by Regina Pugh, 2019), the Sherman Playhouse production (directed by Michael Schaner, 2021), and the Silver Spring Stage production (directed by Claire Deriennic, 2021) (please see bibliography for links).

³ In the Broadway premiere of *A Doll’s House, Part 2* directed by Sam Gold at the John Golden Theatre in 2017, the initial cast was as follows: Laurie Metcalf as Nora, Chris Cooper as Torvald, Jayne Houdyshell as Anne Marie and Condola Rashad as Emmy.

that revisiting them 140 years later means reawakening ghosts, anatomizing the consequences of Nora's decision for contemporary audiences, perhaps performing an autopsy of Ibsen's formal choices. Such questions resonate compellingly with Umberto Eco's analysis of innovation and seriality, according to which audiences succeed in reaching an aesthetic enjoyment of variations on a well-known theme "the same way as one succeeds in appreciating a 'beautiful funeral' even when the deceased was a dear person" (Eco 182). Following this logic, appreciation of Hnath's play must rely on a double form of awareness, which evaluates formal innovation in the sequel even as it participates in the celebration—and burial?—of the original work.

This brings us back to Gérard Genette's study of "literature in the second degree," in which he famously theorizes that the *hypertext* (Hnath's play) relates to its *hypotext* (Ibsen's) through elaborate processes of transformation, evocation, and grafting. These processes can develop according to one of three dominant moods—the playful, the satirical and the serious—but Genette is careful to specify that categories are porous, and that many works of literature position themselves on the border between the playful and the serious (Genette 44). This permeable boundary is precisely the territory inhabited by *A Doll's House, Part 2*, which qualifies neither as parody, fan fiction, or political treatise, but offers a tribute to Ibsen's masterpiece with a degree of playfulness, while standing on its own as a thoughtful exploration of the contemporary iterations of Nora's feminist choices, and of Ibsen's realistic ones. If our inveterate consumption of televised seriality has taught us anything, it is that part 2 usually leads to part 3,⁴ which means that closure and ultimate resolution cannot be the objectives of any sequel, though viewing the debate from other angles and exploring its modern-day avatars can. In order to investigate the thematic, formal and symbolical resonance of Hnath's hypertext in such a cultural context, the following pages propose to explore the play's conceptual aesthetics and its ironic metatextuality, which does not preclude earnest polemical engagement, by taking into account the play's script as well as specific production choices. This analysis will further allow for a clearer delineation of the theatrical relationship between the contemporary, thoroughly American "Part 2" and the

⁴ A play entitled *A Doll's House, Part 3* was in fact written by Michael Breslin and Patrick Foley in 2018, though the creators openly stated they had not read Hnath's sequel, their interest lying with an exploration of seriality itself, and with questioning performance aesthetics, rather than continuing a narrative cycle.

nineteenth-century Norwegian original which, inevitably, becomes “Part 1” in retrospect.

STRIPPING IT BARE

In 1996, Elinor Fuchs argued in favor of staging Ibsen “against the grain” of realism and psychological approaches, making the following observation:

The plays of Ibsen have almost always been produced on the stage with an interest in consistency and unity to which many interesting issues of form have fallen victim. Perhaps it is time to de-classicize the works of “classical modernism.” A postmodern approach would not only open plays to the entire perspectival range of postmodern criticism, but especially seek out in them clashes among perspectives that will keep audiences awake, and the works themselves alive. (66)

Some productions have since found a way to answer Fuchs’s plea, such as the *Mabou Mines DollHouse* (2003), which toured the world with its unique casting choices, causing audiences to reevaluate who fit in the doll-size world of the play (the men, all of short stature) and who was out of scale in such a society (the very tall women).⁵ Hnath’s approach is less radical, but it participates in the same dynamic of “opening” Ibsen’s play to new resonance, by continuing it and shifting its aesthetic balance. *A Doll’s House, Part 2* corresponds to what Eco terms a “retake,” in which an author “recycles the characters of a previous successful story in order to exploit them, by telling what happened to them after the end of their first adventure” (167). In Hnath’s play, Nora comes back fifteen years after she left her family because she has found out that Torvald never filed for divorce and they are still, in fact, married. Requiring an official divorce so as to avoid fresh scandals in her professional life, Nora thus comes “in need of a favor—not forgiveness” (Moore 14), and in the process has long conversations with Torvald, her former servant Anne Marie, and her daughter Emmy about the cost of the past fifteen years for each character. On the face of it, Hnath offers to bring Nora back into her husband’s house only to officialize her right to have left it in the first

⁵ The *Mabou Mines DollHouse* was conceived and directed by Lee Breuer; it premiered at St. Anne’s Warehouse in 2003 before touring extensively, until 2011.

place, positioning “Part 2” as a variation and meditation on the original plot rather than the invention of a thoroughly new instalment. This reflexive stance is palpable in the structure and set of Hnath’s play, which strips the plot almost bare of events and accidents in favor of discussion and operates a subtle shift from the archetypal realistic aesthetics we—abusively, as Fuchs argues—tend to associate with Ibsen.

Rather than a paragon of homogenous realism, Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* is more interestingly read as a gradual subversion of the dominant genres of its time. In fact, as Marthe Ségrestin reminds us, the play’s generic hybridity originally proved as controversial as its scandalous plot:

When the play opens, because of Nora’s frivolous games, the audience can recognize the configuration of a comedy. Then, the appearance of the “villain” Krogstad reorients the play towards a melodrama, where Helmer could play the hero’s part; but this melodramatic option is thwarted by his refusal to take on the expected part. The great settling of scores then leads to recategorize the play as drama of social protest, with Nora rebelling against her condition as a submissive wife and against a husband whose name tellingly allies the evocation of Thor, the most powerful of warrior gods, with the word *vald*, connoting power and domination.⁶ (20)

Comedy, melodrama, social drama and ultimately tragedy, as Ségrestin goes on to demonstrate with regards to Nora’s alienation and final decision, all contribute to the formal construction of *A Doll’s House* and the rich invention of its realism. Hnath’s play does not seek to emulate this generic complexity but takes its cue from Ibsen’s third and most famous act in favoring verbal debate over action, while eschewing the tragic mood to oscillate between comedy and gravitas. The play is structured in such a clean, clear way that it almost sounds like a metatextual analysis of the characters, whose number is reduced to four instead of Ibsen’s eleven. The scenes are arranged in five movements labelled not as acts but rather as chapters, or episodes, each bearing the name(s) of the character(s) whose subjectivity they dig into: “Nora,” “Torvald,” “Anne Marie,” “Emmy,” “Nora & Torvald”—four sequences highlighting four points of view and a final synthesis, or confrontation which, inevitably, ends in Nora leaving again. The set is stripped as clean as the structure, giving the

⁶ All translations of French quotations are my own.

play an abstracted quality that contradicts the naturalistic profusion of furniture, props, letters, and Christmas presents we expect to find around Nora. The stage directions describe the space as “a room. It’s quite spare. Some chairs, maybe a table, not much else” (13), and require the costumes to be “[p]eriod, more or less” (14). This calculated vagueness is echoed in the dialogue when Nora alludes to her current address as “the particular city in which I live” without naming it (56): the play is set in Norway but does not feature a single Norwegian detail or allusion.⁷ Rather than any form of realistic Scandinavian representation, Hnath is interested in staging the idea of Norway—almost a metaphysical Norway, the way Sarah Ruhl stages a “metaphysical Connecticut” in *The Clean House* (7)—that is to say a stylized space, more attune to moods and mindsets than historical detail.

The sense that we are witnessing a play of ideas rather than a drama of action is heightened by Hnath’s indications that the space “ought to feel a touch like a forum,” and should feature a “very prominent door to the outside” (13). The emblematic door of Torvald’s house grows to conspicuous proportions and acts as a portal between the two plays, opening up a space for direct debate—a forum, or as one reviewer saw it, “a cross between a courtroom and a boxing ring” (Gillinson)—to examine the decisions of *A Doll’s House* and their consequences against the passing of time and generations. The door is in fact important enough to have had its own promotional video when the Denver Center for the Performing Arts produced the two plays in rep: a clip was posted to explain how the door changed from opening manually (in Part 1) to opening by itself (in Part 2), in a clear suggestion that the space of Hnath’s play is more strictly verbal—where a wish opens a door—than naturalistically corporeal (Lenk). In this respect, *A Doll’s House, Part 2* takes to their logical conclusion the quintessential mechanics of Ibsenism, outlined by George Bernard Shaw as “the introduction of the discussion and its development until it so overspreads and interpenetrates the action that it finally assimilates it, making play and discussion practically identical” (Shaw b 152-153). Hnath further endows this discussion with a sense of

⁷ Tellingly, when productions do make choices that stress historical accuracy, the result is perceived as incoherent. Reviewing the Steppenwolf Theater’s production directed by Robin Witt, Catey Sullivan thus had little patience with the contradiction between visual and aural clues, stating that “Hnath [...] gives the dialogue a contemporary vernacular that is at odds with the specificity of the setting and costume designer Izumi Inaba’s elaborately detailed period garb” (Sullivan).

immediacy by handling language in a direct, clear-cut manner that allows the dialogue to build around an alternation of fast-paced exchanges and ponderous silences. A telling example can be found in the opening scene, when Nora re-enters her old house: her questions and Anne Marie's answers are arranged as one long sentence, with very little punctuation, and swift repetitions of the past participle "gone" which resonate ironically with her return:

NORA. The house is—

ANNE MARIE. yes—?

NORA. it's so ...

ANNE MARIE. different?

NORA. from what I remembered

ANNE MARIE. same house

NORA. less stuff

ANNE MARIE. you forget things

NORA. there was a cuckoo clock used to be there, is that—?

ANNE MARIE. gone

NORA. the cabinet with the trinkets

ANNE MARIE. gone

NORA. and my piano

ANNE MARIE. that's gone too. ("Nora," 22-23)

The syntax is as pared-down as the room is empty of trinkets. With minimalistic verticality, Hnath imprints a dynamic cadence to the dialogue and performs a metatextual decluttering of expectations built around Ibsen, effectively "declassicizing" his legacy, as Fuchs would put it.

“A LOT OF PEOPLE THOUGHT YOU WERE DEAD”

Hnath is not by any means the first to propose a sequel to *A Doll’s House*. In fact, rewriting the ending—something Ibsen himself was coerced into doing so the play could be performed in Germany—and imagining what happens afterwards has proved such a popular practice from the first that Ségrestin describes Ibsen as “straightaway dispossessed” of his story (10). As early as 1880, Danish writer Elfride Fibiger suggested that the play end not on the door closing, but, after that, on a discreet ringing of the doorbell anticipating Nora’s return to her marriage.⁸ In a diametrically opposed choice, German director Thomas Ostermeier had Nora kill Torvald point-blank in the final confrontation, cancelling all possibilities of return or change.⁹ Between these two poles, there have been many cabaret burlesques, vitriolic sequels or militant vindications of the play, not to mention the initial melodramatic reinterpretations tellingly entitled *The Child Wife* (first US production) or *Breaking a Butterfly* (first UK production).¹⁰ These various sequels do not necessarily take the form of theater plays, but can range from fiction to musicals—like the very forgettable *A Doll’s Life* of 1982.¹¹ Because the original play’s denouement is, for Nora and for women’s rights, at once an “end of the old order”¹² and the beginning of something new, feminist defenses and continuations appeared early on: Edna Dow Cheney’s *Nora’s Return* (1890) thus chronicles a transformation in Nora and Torvald’s mindsets through

⁸ Elfride Fibiger suggested this in an article entitled “Tanker ver Fru Nora Helmers Bortgang” (*Dagens Nuheder*, Feb. 1, 1880). Ségrestin discusses the contents of this article in her introduction to *Réparer Une Maison de poupée? Réécritures et suites de la pièce d’Ibsen à la fin du XIX^e siècle* (56).

⁹ Ostermeier’s *Nora (A Doll’s House)* was a Schaubühne production, notably invited to the Avignon festival in 2004.

¹⁰ Performed in Milwaukee in 1882, *The Child Wife* is a lost adaptation by William M. Lawrence which presented a watered-down version of Nora and used the revised ending Ibsen authorized for Germany, in which Nora stays. As for *Breaking a Butterfly*, by Henry Herman and Henry Arthur Jones, it completely adapts Ibsen’s play into an English melodrama where Torvald accepts the role of the hero, and a benevolent old friend saves the day (1884).

¹¹ *A Doll’s Life* was created by Larry Grossman (music), Betty Comden and Adolf Green (book and lyrics), and directed by Hal Prince. It closed after only five performances.

¹² In a 1897 review, Shaw summed up the significance of Ibsen’s play in the following terms : “Yet there is an underlying solemnity caused by a fact that the popular instinct has divined: to wit, that Nora’s revolt is the end of a chapter of human history [...]; for when the patriarch no longer rules, and the ‘breadwinner’ acknowledges his dependence, there is an end of the old order [...]” (Shaw a).

their diaries over a period of two years, while Shaw's short story "Still After A Doll's House" (1890) features a strong Nora vehemently and successfully exposing Victorian hypocrisy. Hnath winks at this long tradition of imagining Nora's future and grafts his own sequel playfully, to use Genette's terminology, by having the other characters repeatedly tell Nora that the entire population of their town—and even Emmy, for a time—believed she was dead. This reads both as a conceivable assumption about a missing mother and as a metatheatrical allusion to all the authors who had Nora die of guilt or consumption, or all the spectators who thought her dilemmas no longer relevant. Other allusions to the past provide comic echoes scattered across the play, as when Anne Marie drily asks Nora to leave: "There's the door, I know you know how to use it" (100). Such a line provokes tense laughter at the abruptness of the reversal it operates, not only in terms of agency and power dynamics, but also because it sweeps away decades of condemnation and justification with one sarcastic turn of phrase.

Having engaged the spectators' interest and complicity through ironic playfulness, Hnath proceeds to focus the conversation not on the past, but on the present, prompting us to speculate about Nora's chosen profession through a long anaphoric guessing game, and allowing the tension to build up from one confrontation to the next. As soon as Nora reveals herself to have become a writer of "[b]ooks about women" (42), it is clear that Hnath's sequel is built around a strong feminist character, whose fervor and clear-sightedness are reminiscent of Shaw's Nora. Marie Itzerott and Walter Besant had already imagined sequels where Nora took up the writing profession, but both punished her severely, either with death or her daughter's suicide, for leaving the private sphere as well as her family.¹³ Hnath's Nora is, on the contrary, a successful and satisfied author who has "[n]o regrets" (93) and never wavers in her defense of women's freedom. Her principles and word choice sound entirely familiar to today's audiences, as when she criticizes Torvald's superior attitude by denouncing "this thing that men do of/ standing in front of women/and looking down at them, telling them how the world works,/ educating them, us, me/ about how things should be/ as if you were some kind of expert" (83). This reprobation of "mansplaining,"

¹³ Walter Besant's sequel in prose "*The Doll's House—and after*" was published in *The English Illustrated Magazine* of 1889-1890. Marie Itzerott's play *Nora oder "Ueber unsere Kraft"* was published in 1903 in Germany.

arranged in lines that suggest a crescendo rhythm, echoes routine twenty-first century warnings and confirms Jaswinder Blackwell-Pal’s assessment that “Hnath has written his play in contemporary, colloquial dialogue, reflecting his efforts to address a more modern set of debates around marriage, monogamy and gender roles” (3). While he maintains an Ibsenian attention to the legal system and the pressures it imposes upon women’s lives, Hnath is less concerned with the judicial intricacies of a given period, and more with allowing a thorough, no-holds-barred conversation to take place, allowing each character to defend his or her view of marriage, duty and freedom in ways that resonate directly with today’s audiences.

In a very polarized debate which the play refuses to settle, Nora finds herself clashing not only with Torvald, but also with the other women in the play, who bring in the differing points of view of other generations and positions. Anne Marie, who stayed behind and took care of the Helmer household, stands for the women whose lower-class labor allows other women to pursue professional and feminist lives, and she reproves Nora’s ungratefulness in vehemently explicit terms:

ANNE MARIE. Fuck you, Nora.¹⁴
Fuck you.
You have zero gratitude.
I raised your kids.
You should be coming in here—first words out of your mouth
should have been:
Thank you Anne Marie.
Thank you for abandoning your own life, your own child
and raising mine, so that I could go off to do my little thing. (“Anne
Marie,” 106)

¹⁴ In her analysis of motherhood anxieties in the play, Alison Walls repeatedly refers to the profanity of this passage, along with the eager laughter it occasioned at the John Golden theater, as evidence of a semi-repressed collective urge to condemn the absent mother. While I fully agree that this is a deeply ambivalent point of the dialogue, I would nonetheless add that the Broadway production clearly made casting and delivery choices meant to heighten the comedy of the piece, which is not the only option the play makes available. The tone of such a passage and the reactions it occasions can vary depending on directing and acting, as evidenced by Charles McNulty’s back-to-back reviews of the Costa Mesa and New York productions, which led him to remark that in the second case, and in spite of stunning performances by the actors, some of the play’s dramatic strength was “sacrificed in the quest to wring as many laughs from Broadway theatergoers as possible” (McNulty b).

As for Emmy, the daughter who faces her absent mother with poise rather than resentment, she ironically turns out to have ambitions diametrically opposed to her mother's. To Nora's dismay, she longs for possession, not to say reification, by the man she loves:

EMMY. I want to be held.
 I want to be possessed.
 I want to be somebody's something—
 I can see you cringe when I say what I'm saying.
 But that's about you, and it's not about me,
 and I'm telling you what I want,
 and you may want something different for yourself,
 but don't make my wants about your wants. ("Emmy," 152-153)

The immediate, everyday orality of these speeches belies the period costumes and stresses the relevance of the play's questions across time, as the conversation is broadened to include further arguments and counterarguments, pushing Nora to make renewed courageous choices for her daughter's sake as well as her own:

NORA. You think I've never given you anything, but
 you don't know what I've given you—
 because what I'm trying to do for you—
 the kind of world I'm trying make for you—
 it hasn't happened yet.
 But it won't happen this way—not if I let you or Torvald
 fix this problem for me. ("Emmy," 162-163)

And so, even when Torvald gives her the divorce at great cost to his social dignity and even his physical integrity, Nora ultimately refuses to take it. She decides instead to face the legal consequences of her having done business and had affairs while unknowingly married, fighting it all by herself in public so as to encourage change and uncompromisingly, "like a dreamy Chekhov character" (McNulty a), defend her vision for a society where "everyone will be free—freer than they are now" (Hnath 197). The above three quotations from the play insistently place first- and second-person pronouns at the beginning and ends of lines, like opposing poles that mimic dissent on the very page and invite the actors to passionate delivery. The anaphoric and epiphoric quality of the dialogue endows it with an intensity that suggests nothing is "dead" about Nora or the questions she raises. In this way, Hnath not only reframes Ibsen's debates for the twenty-first

century with further arguments and immediate language, but he also glosses the "contemporariness" of the original play. According to the analysis of Giorgio Agamben, contemporariness can be defined as a "relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism," which implies that our contemporary moment acquires visibility once placed in relation to other periods (Agamben 11). By encouraging us to confront issues of gender, freedom, and commitment through, with and beyond *A Doll's House*, Hnath's play invites us to view Ibsen, with fresh eyes, as our contemporary.

THEATRICAL FRAMES

If the play is supposedly set in nineteenth-century Norway, but with anachronistic register and no real effort at naturalistic design, we have to wonder if it isn't, in fact, set in a rehearsal room. In writing this, I am not suggesting that there is any definite secret reading to the play, but rather that Hnath's sequel is, perhaps before anything else, a theater lover's sequel, which celebrates an approach to Ibsen's legacy steeped in the American tradition of psychological acting. The way *A Doll's House, Part 2* eschews period language and metaphorical expression in favor of clear-cut immediacy is reminiscent of rehearsal exercises in which performers seek to unearth the subtext of a scene, its unspoken feelings and intentions, by rephrasing lines in their own words and visualizing the characters' pasts, presents and futures. Something about the articulate fluidity of the dialogue thus evokes American actors of Ibsen freely improvising around their parts and creates another layer of metatheatricality even though the Fourth wall is never broken. This dynamic also embodies Hnath's ambition to allow Nora and Torvald to stop "stepping around each other" as they do for most of the original play, and actually "have it out" in the sequel (in Haskins & Riedel). The game, Hnath suggests, is not over, and it may never be, but after decades of public debate on gender roles, characters can cut straight to the heart of the question, calling each other out on the tacit implications of their attitudes and language. When Nora refuses the divorce Torvald has gone to great lengths to give her, he exclaims in frustration "I CAN'T WIN WITH YOU!" which she counters with a forceful imperative: "THERE'S NOTHING TO WIN!/ STOP TRYING TO WIN!" (179). Here Torvald openly uses the verb "win" to mean "earn your approval," but Nora picks up on the underlying idea of prevailing or conquering and, with sharp clarity, cuts through the rhetoric to denounce the power struggle and deflect it. The two

long scenes between former husband and wife repeatedly give free rein to this zeal for unearthing motivation, innuendo, and emotion as they run the gamut of honesty, from voicing pent-up accusations to admitting responsibility, discussing other lovers and acknowledging that neither has yet experienced the “true marriage” the end of Ibsen’s play called for. The therapeutic echoes of their confrontations are unmistakable, for instance when Nora reproves Torvald, in thoroughly contemporary fashion, for his lack of healthy, demonstrative anger:

NORA. Here’s another thing that bothers me:
You don’t get angry.

TORVALD. Of course I do.

NORA. Maybe once you’ve ever gotten—

TORVALD. right now. I feel angry.

NORA. Right now.
You feel angry

TORVALD. damn right I—

NORA. I don’t believe that you are angry, that you’re in it, that you’re inside of that feeling of feeling angry right—no, I think you’re just outside of it, looking at it like it’s some interesting thing. (“Torvald,” 85-86)

The tension of the dialogue builds up through constant interruptions until Nora takes over with a longer line that rephrases itself and goads Torvald even further through ironic epanorthosis. In the Broadway production directed by Sam Gold, the exact timing of the lines of this exchange was heightened by the contrast between Chris Cooper’s composed rage¹⁵ and Laurie Metcalf’s self-assured stamina, “exquisitely poised between high comedy and visceral angst” (Brantley), along with her mocking gestures as she mimed holding

¹⁵ In fact, Hilton Als somewhat faults the reserve of Cooper’s interpretation when he writes: “Cooper’s passive-aggressive energy, sublime on film, gets swallowed up by the powerful actresses around him. (He’s the only man in the piece).” This is in contrast to Als’s suggestion that, in “a play written, in a sense, by two male playwrights,” Nora, embodied “by the fierce Metcalf,” gives the impression of “writing her own story, by making Hnath’s text her own” (Als).

binoculars to caricature the position of an onlooker. The passage garnered many laughs, but that sense of comedy should not be mistaken for parody or flippancy. In fact, Charles McNulty makes a subtle point when he states that the Broadway production emphasized laughter in a way that was both “energizing” and “a touch diminishing,” obscuring some of the work’s dramatic strength (McNulty b). Hnath’s play invites laughter which stems from our surprise at how modernly honest characters borrowed from a classic play are being, without distracting us from the serious issues it broaches in a context where each individual fight turns out to be “bigger than itself” (176). It is therefore no surprise that *A Doll’s House, Part 2* turned out to be the most produced play of the 2017-18 season (Libbey): by combining earnest gender-roles debates, ingenious laughter and an approach to character that places towering European figures within the frame of American acting traditions, it instantly captured the attention of the theatrical community in the US.

Yet psychological realism, even when placed in a context devoid of any naturalism of setting, is not necessarily an unproblematic conduit for the discussion of gender questions, as feminist performance scholars have long been discussing. In fact, as Kim Solga puts it: “feminist resistance to both realist dramaturgy and emotional realist performance practice became itself a kind of ‘normal’ through the end of the twentieth century” (42). Elin Diamond, for instance, has famously analyzed the relationship between the “prodigious authority” of dramatic realism and its obsessive representation of female hysteria, starting with Ibsenism and the way it guarantees its legitimacy by “deciphering the hysteric’s enigma” (Diamond xiv; 4). Realism tends to present a male point of view—dramatic and clinical—as universal. Diamond’s alternative offer consists in looking for ways to destabilize realism’s claims to truth through a feminist use of Brechtian *gestus* that allows room for the female spectator and fractures “the scopic regime of the perspectival stage” (Diamond 53). It is possible to read a few of Nora’s lines from *A Doll’s House, Part 2* in light of this added critical distance, as when Emmy suggests a forgery of public records to settle the divorce question, to which her mother answers: “I do have some experience with this kind of thing, and you’d be surprised by how these kinds of things can just sorta come to light, at the worst possible—” (147). This allusion to the central dramatic knot of “Part 1”—Nora’s forgery, which her daughter was about to repeat—places the dialogue in a double temporality that enables Nora, consciously and ironically, to historicize the oppression

of women by legal systems and the dangerous extremes they may be driven to. The euphemistic and colloquial tone of her line, which comically sums up the great dramatic event of Ibsen's play in a generic, unfinished turn of phrase, can be read as a way to "encode historical resistance" in the character, with contemporary hindsight (Diamond 39).

It would be wrong, however, to extrapolate from such examples and state that *A Doll's House, Part 2* makes any attempt at deconstructing realism or its gender biases for feminist purposes. That is neither the intention nor the effect of Hnath's play, which reframes the debate for twenty-first century audiences but does not seek to question the foundations of Ibsen's mimesis. Hnath's defense of Nora's feminist choices consists not in elements of form, but in elements of plot that run purposefully counter to pessimistic expectations: instead of being ruined and repentant, Nora is successful and satisfied; instead of being damaged by her absent mother, Emmy is self-assured and happily in love. This does not mean, however, that their views on domesticity are in any way aligned; a conflict of opinions which Alison Walls analyzes as an expression of latent cultural anxieties about motherhood, stating that Hnath's sequel "implicitly realizes the persistent—though in the twenty-first century, partially sublimated—fear that female empowerment and motherhood are, in fact, incompatible" (71). Simultaneously, significant space is devoted to Torvald's justification of himself and his arguments in favor of commitment and "toughing it out together" in a marriage (Hnath 91), prompting Blackwell-Pal to wonder where the weight of authority lies in a play about the most famous emancipated woman of dramatic literature "written by another male writer" and which "invites significant compassion for Torvald and scrutiny for Nora" (5). Realism is not a neutral form when it comes to gender, and since the 1970s it has come under the close scrutiny of feminist artists and scholars, leading first to its rejection and then to its partial reclaiming as "embed[ding] a series of internal contradictions that feminist performance can and should exploit" (Solga 44). The form of *A Doll's House, Part 2* does not, in fact, seek to engage with this debate, which is partly why Hnath's play, while featuring an authoritative, charismatic feminist protagonist, cannot be termed feminist theater. Rather, it explores all the leeway irony, abstraction and temporal distance can afford while staying within the bounds of realistic forms of dialogue and psychology, effectively transposing Ibsen's

protagonists into a streamlined, contemporary instance of Ibsen’s own legacy.

CONCLUSION

In his review for *The New York Times*, Ben Brantley writes: “Mr. Hnath hasn’t written a feminist play. Or an anti-feminist play. He has written instead an endlessly open debate” (Brantley). This is reminiscent of Eco’s discussion of “the infinity of the text,” a concept encouraged by our craze for seriality (Eco 179). By re-opening Ibsen’s play for continuation and innovation, Hnath invites our enjoyment at the potentially infinite variations not only of the characters’ evolutions, but also of American theater’s reflexive stance on its dramatic heritage. Among the myriad answers to Ibsen’s play, *A Doll’s House, Part 2* holds an interesting place precisely because it is not an answer; it provides neither ending, nor contradiction, nor complete vindication. It offers, instead, a prism through which to look at the original play with fresh eyes as to its contemporariness, and a layered twenty-first century expression and discussion of its polemical core. One of its more original passages, just before Nora professes herself “ready to do this again—walk out that door” (197), recounts her painful introspective journey after she left for the first time, living in isolation in the North:

And so, as long as that continued,
I’d decided that I’d live in silence,
not speaking and
avoiding the speaking of others—

and I’d live like this until
I couldn’t remember what other people sounded like—
until I no longer heard a voice in my head
other than my voice
or what I was certain had to be my voice.

That was almost two years,

two years of silence. (“Nora & Torvald,” 195)

Here again, the verticality of the text, which creates enjambments in the prose, gives a plastic indication of the lengthy process and difficult gaps through which Nora’s identity is able to crystallize and gain strength, in what sounds a little like Nora’s feminist version of *Walden*

(1854). This poetic monologue allows the play to root Nora's ever-militant views in independence and self-reliance, lending credence to her belief in making women's voices heard and the utopian hope for a fairer future she expresses even as the curtain descends. The fact that Torvald, though appeased, "can't imagine" (198) such a future is one more oscillation, one final way to keep the conversation going, with Hnath suggesting that what was considered a tragic ending in 1870 is now open debate, hovering between humor and seriousness, autopsy and homage, conflict and question.

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