WORDS on PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

A Doll’s House

BY HENRIK IBSEN
TRANSLATED FROM THE NORWEGIAN BY
PAUL WALSH
DIRECTED BY CAREY PERLOFF
GEARY THEATER
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CHARACTERS AND SYNOPSIS OF *A DOLL’S HOUSE*

The world premiere production of *A Doll’s House* opened at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen, Denmark, on December 21, 1879.

### CHARACTERS AND A.C.T. CAST

*Torvald Helmer, a lawyer*  
Stephen Caffrey

*Nora Helmer, his wife*  
René Augesen

*Kristine Linde*  
Joan Harris-Gelb

*Dr. Rank*  
James Carpenter

*Nils Krogstad*  
Gregory Wallace

*Ivar and Emmy Helmer, Torvald and Nora's children*  
Austin Greene and Tobi Jane Moore/Griffin and Louise Wurzelbacher

*Nanny*  
Joy Carlin

*A Maid*  
Zehra Berkman

### PLACE AND TIME

*A Doll’s House* takes place in the Helmers’ apartment, in a provincial town on the southeast coast of Norway, late in the 19th century.

### SYNOPSIS

**Act 1.** On Christmas Eve, Nora and Torvald celebrate Torvald’s recent promotion to the position of director of an important bank. After his promotion takes effect in the new year, the family will no longer have to worry about money. Nora is especially grateful, for she has been living with a terrible secret: Years before, she secretly forged her dying father’s signature to borrow money to finance a trip to Italy, where her husband, who was suffering from tuberculosis, could recover his health. The warm Mediterranean climate cured Torvald, but ever since their return to Norway, Nora has been scrimping, saving, and taking surreptitious odd jobs to repay Nils Krogstad, the holder of the loan. Krogstad, who works as a lowly clerk at the same bank as Torvald, is a social pariah because of his past illegal business dealings, and Krogstad fears that he will lose his job under Torvald’s new management. Krogstad has discovered that Nora forged her father’s signature and threatens to tell Torvald the truth if she doesn’t do something to make sure that Torvald allows him to keep his position at the bank. Torvald, however, who considers Krogstad “morally
exhausted,” has already given his job to Nora’s old friend, the impoverished widow Kristine Linde. (Mrs. Linde has shown up at the Helmers’ for an unexpected visit after an absence of ten years.) Torvald agrees to find a position at the bank for Mrs. Linde. He suggests that Krogstad’s corruption is the result of having had a “lying mother,” and Nora worries that her own deceit, however well intentioned, will somehow harm her children.

A ct ii. It is now Christmas Day. Torvald has given Mrs. Linde Krogstad’s old job. Nora, unable to prevent the termination of Krogstad’s employment, fears what her husband will do when he learns the truth about the loan and her forgery. She flirts with Dr. Rank, the family’s good friend, hoping that he will give her the money she needs to pay back her loan. Rank, who is dying of an inherited sexually transmitted disease, tells Nora that he is in love with her; she promptly decides that she can no longer in good conscience ask him for the money. Krogstad tells Nora that he will reveal her illicit dealings to her husband, in hopes that Torvald will reinstate him at the bank in order to avoid a scandal. Certain that her noble husband will take the brunt of the scandal himself to spare her, Nora contemplates suicide to protect him. Krogstad drops a blackmailing letter containing the details of Nora’s “crime” into the Helmers’ locked letterbox, to which only Torvald has the key. Mrs. Linde helps Nora repair a Neapolitan fisher girl costume, which Torvald brought back from Italy and wants her to wear when she dances the tarantella at the neighbors’ holiday party the following night. Nora enlists Torvald’s help in rehearsing the tarantella and dances for him with increasing wildness, as if her life depended on it. Feigning nervousness over her approaching dance performance, Nora convinces Torvald to rehearse with her right up until the performance and not to open the letterbox until after the party. Nora hopes that a “miracle” will occur, and that Torvald’s love for her will overcome his anger when he reads the letter and finds out about the loan and the forgery.

A ct iii. Mrs. Linde waits in the Helmers’ sitting room, listening to the dance music coming from the neighboring apartment. Krogstad arrives, responding to a note Mrs. Linde sent to his home. Krogstad and Mrs. Linde were once in love, but she chose someone else. She now suggests that they rekindle their romance. Filled with new hope, Krogstad vows to reverse the actions he has taken against the Helmers. He leaves and the Helmers return from the party. Mrs. Linde greets the couple and tries to convince Nora to tell her husband the truth; then Mrs. Linde leaves, as well. Torvald is drunk and amorous after seeing his beautiful wife dance her passionate tarantella, and he tries to hurry an unwilling Nora off to bed. Dr. Rank appears and asks for a cigar, then leaves. Torvald empties the letterbox, which includes a prearranged sign from Rank to Nora that his death is
near, and that he will not return. Torvald, in his grief at the loss of his friend, professes his love for Nora; reassured of his love and ready to face the truth, Nora insists that he read his mail. Torvald reads Krogstad's letter and flies into a rage, immediately disowning Nora and telling her that she will no longer be allowed to care for her children and will be his wife in name only. Another letter from Krogstad arrives, returning Nora's loan papers and apologizing for his actions. No longer worried about public disgrace, Torvald immediately forgives Nora. But Nora sees that Torvald did not love her unconditionally, and she sits down to talk seriously and frankly with her husband for the first time in their relationship. She tells him that they have never had a true partnership, that their marriage was based on Torvald's paternal control and her own doll-like behavior. Nora doubts her ability to be a good wife and mother, because she does not know who she really is, and she cannot love a man who does not love her. She decides to leave Torvald and her children, to go off and discover her true self. She makes no promise to return. As she leaves, the front door slams.
Welcome to A Doll’s House, our first production of 2004. We hope you had a wonderful holiday season and have come back refreshed and ready for a new year of thrilling and invigorating theater!

Now for the confession. I grew up obsessed with dolls. Lots of dolls. I had what my family despairingly called “the doll corner,” which spread like an amoeba from the corner beside my bed across the floor to the door. Rooms were added endlessly as the doll family grew in that strange way only doll families can: there were no parent dolls, indeed there were no adult dolls at all, just dozens of same-aged children in peculiar foreign dress making up some mysterious version of a family. My dolls were always my age, which meant they could re-enact in the afternoon whatever I had lived through at school that day. It was a highly convenient and deeply satisfying activity. Eventually, needless to say, I grew up, put the dolls in boxes, and tried to live an adult life. When I look back on it now, I wonder if my obsession with dolls was just in some way a prequel to my obsession with theater.

Ibsen’s landmark play is about a family in which everyone is still happily playing with dolls. Torvald has married a highly intelligent and energetic woman, whom he dresses up and toys with like his own private adult-sized plaything. Nora buys “dollies” for her tiny daughter, but in reality they are toys for her to play with, just as she plays with her doll-like children and infantilizes her hypersensitive husband. Her life is a series of “staged” events—when people walk into her little nest she arranges them in pleasing displays just as if they were overgrown toys. She hides her secrets, like her forbidden macaroons, well out of sight. Into this precious and beautiful world, reality is never supposed to enter. The harshness of the outside world is desperately kept at bay.

Although A Doll’s House was written in 1879, it is remarkable how much this kind of role-playing and infantilization is still part of our cultural experience. For all that women have been encouraged to seek independence and men have been encouraged to see themselves as more than tough breadwinners, many of us still fear the kind of freedom that comes from growing up and fall easily into conventional roles. It is so difficult to look squarely at the realities of the world that many of us avoid it at all costs if we possibly can. We insulate ourselves, we dress up, we buy gadgets and gizmos and adult games, we collect toy trains and talking dolls, and we play. And then every once in a while, reality comes crashing in the door. It can take any form: illness, poverty, desire, war, love. But it is
a wake-up call. One of the most startling moments in Ibsen's play is in Act iii when Nora sits across from her husband at the table and alerts him to the fact that never, in eight years of marriage, have they had a real conversation.

I chose to do this play because I wanted to see our remarkable core acting company member René Augezen play Nora, and because I wanted our equally remarkable resident dramaturg and Scandinavian theater expert Paul Walsh to create a new translation for us of this astonishing play. But as I have dug into its core, I have realized how many profound issues it touches upon that are still at the center of our lives, as men and women struggle to define and redefine themselves to each other and to themselves. In times of anxiety and uncertainty, people play games. The relationship of those games to what is really happening in our lives is fascinating.

We're thrilled to be exploring this material with you, and hope you find it as surprising and exciting as we have.
PLAYING WITH DOLLS
An Interview with Director Carey Perloff about A Doll’s House

BY ELIZABETH BRODERSEN

First produced in Copenhagen in December 1879, A Doll’s House was an immediate and sensational success—Henrik Ibsen’s first—and catapulted the Norwegian playwright onto the international theater scene. An uncompromising, unsentimental examination of the inequitable status of women in late-19th-century society, the play promptly triggered a controversy of monumental proportions that raged through the public press and private society of Europe’s great cities. In Stockholm, it was reported that A Doll’s House aroused such furious debate that social invitations requested that guests refrain from mentioning the play at parties; performances were often scheduled as special matinees designated “Not for Children,” to keep out long lines of mothers accompanied by impressionable young daughters. Early productions in Germany, England, and the United States sentimentally rewrote the ending to shield scandalized audiences—who had been raised on a steady diet of pseudo-Shakespearean costume spectacles and “well-made” French melodramas with consistently happy conclusions—from the traumatic and unprecedented sight of a woman slamming the door on the stiflingly domestic existence she had been raised to accept as a woman’s lot in life.

Revered by many and despised by some, Ibsen strove in all of his work to exceed the limitations of theatrical convention to address hard-hitting social issues, dramatizing with compassion and poetic insight the painful struggle of the individual for self-realization and thereby foreshadowing the existential questioning of 20th-century drama. As the groundbreaking actor/director/producer Eva le Gallienne wrote in 1957: “[To Ibsen], the theater was a place of truth, of ruthless analysis: a place where the minds and souls of human beings were revealed with an honesty that sometimes seems unbearably harsh; and with a perception that is uncannily clairvoyant.”

This production of A Doll’s House marks Ibsen’s first appearance since 1984 at A.C.T., which had become known for producing his work throughout the 1970s. Perloff’s production features a new translation commissioned from A.C.T. Resident Dramaturg Paul Walsh, an authority on Scandinavian languages and literature, who translated August Strindberg’s Creditors for Perloff in 1992. Walsh wrote his translation of A Doll’s House specifically for A.C.T. core acting company member and associate artist René Augesen, who has aspired for many years to play Ibsen’s most famous character, the doll wife Nora Helmer. Stephen Caffrey (who appeared in the 1990 film Longtime Companion and in Singer’s Boy at A.C.T. in 1997) returns to A.C.T. to portray her dashing, domineering husband, Torvald. Augesen and Caffrey
are joined by A.C.T. Associate Artist Gregory Wallace as the desperate social climber Nils Krogstad; Joan Harris-Gelb (Blithe Spirit) as Nora’s impoverished and loyal confidante Kristine Linde; James Carpenter (Glengarry Glen Ross) as the mysterious family friend Dr. Rank; and distinguished Bay Area actor/director Joy Carlin returns to A.C.T. as the Helmers’ nanny.

Perloff shared her views about the upcoming production shortly before beginning rehearsals at A.C.T.

YOU DIRECTED CREDITORS, ANOTHER PLAY ABOUT A PSYCHOLOGICALLY COMPLEX MARRIAGE AND THE POWER OF A WOMAN’S SECRETS, BY IBSEN’S FELLOW SCANDINAVIAN AND LITERARY RIVAL AUGUST STRINDBERG, AS YOUR FIRST PRODUCTION AT A.C.T. IN 1992, BUT YOU’VE NEVER DIRECTED IBSEN.

WHY IBSEN NOW?
That is an interesting question. I know the why not, which is that Ibsen had been a sort of “house playwright” at A.C.T. for so long under Allen Fletcher, that it seemed like it was time to look at other repertoire. But there was something about watching René [Augesen] play Masha [in The Three Sisters] last season, and realizing just how much range she has as an actor, that made me think about Nora. The challenge of this play is to make it believable that the kittenish woman at the beginning, who spends her life building little nests and performing for her husband, could be the same person as the woman who sits down across the table from him at the end of the play, says, “We need to have a conversation,” and draws the line in their relationship for the first time eight years of marriage. How do you portray that journey? You need somebody who can embrace that outrageous, flirtatious desire to please, but also has a tragic core. René has all of those qualities as an actor, and more!

You could really see that in her Masha. Masha is much more emotionally developed than the Nora of the beginning of A Doll’s House, but even in the first scene of this play, lurking beneath the game playing, is somebody who has been wounded, who knows that something is deeply wrong and is avoiding it. She’s very aware; the minute they talk about her father, for instance, she snaps, “He had a lot of qualities I would have liked to inherit,” and you realize that she knows she’s been appropriated.

ALTHOUGH SHE APPEARS TO BE SILLY AND SUBMISSIVE AT THE BEGINNING OF THE PLAY, NORA’S REALLY PLAYING A VERY DELIBERATE GAME, ISN’T SHE? Yes, all the time. For example, their entire house, and everything we’ve done with the set design, is about this woman—and I think millions of women still do this—who has set up her home as a series of staging areas for very strategically planned encounters. The little
area by the stove is for intimate conversation, the dolls are on the floor for playtime, and the daybed is for “seduction time,” when she’s with Dr. Rank. Her clothes match the house, the house matches the children, and the children match the dolls, and everybody “plays” together. So the question is, What happens when she stops performing?

**They also each have their own assigned spaces—he has his study, where she apparently never goes, and she has her room where she does all the copying when they think she’s making Christmas decorations.**

Exactly. [A.C.T. Resident Dramaturg and translator] Paul [Walsh] told me a wonderful thing; he said that the Norwegian word for “homey”—much like the German heimlich—is closely related to the word for “secret.” So the private space is the place for secrets. This house is filled with secrets. It starts with Nora hiding the macaroons, and you think, She’s like a closet alcoholic! She’s an addict. She has things hidden in every corner. So does he. The letterbox becomes the locus of secrets. You look can look through its glass and see that there are secrets in there. And the way she picks at that thing with her hairpin to try and get those secrets out—it’s outrageous. One of the themes of the play is what happens in a culture where so little is brought into the open. So everything about your past and your sexual desire and your own sense of yourself is buried and hidden. It is really Mrs. Linde, who has lost everything, who finally says to Nora, “You have to tell the truth now. Your husband has to read this letter.” Mrs. Linde plays a surprisingly important role in the story. She’s always played as a sort of mouse, but she’s not. She’s actually the catalyst for Nora’s transformation.

I hadn’t looked at her character that way before. She has already experienced loss, so she knows that you can lose everything and still survive, and that sometimes you have to take that risk.

That’s why I wanted to cast Jody Gelb, who’s very strong, as Mrs. Linde. For me, this play is about transformation. Change is so painful, and so scary, that most of us resist it. We would rather live in a kind of prison than deal with change, because freedom is so frightening. That’s also what this explores: what courage it takes to choose freedom. And why women in particular have such a hard time making that choice, even today.

**So you believe *A Doll’s House* is a feminist play?**

Of course it’s a feminist play.
WHY HAVE CRITICS BEEN SO DETERMINED TO PROVE THAT IT’S NOT?
I think people are nervous that the play will be viewed as a tendentious tract. But it isn’t political in that sense. It is about the kind of desperate action it takes for any human being to be true to themselves. It’s just that, because the roles women have played for thousands of years are so circumscribed, the attempt to break out of those roles is more difficult than it is for men.

I do think, however, that Torvald is equally trapped in the archetype of the bread-winning male who is never permitted to display vulnerability. He is actually a very fragile, hypersensitive human being. So he is absolutely lost when it comes to navigating a relationship with Nora that is different from the relationship of dominant husband and child-like doll wife they’ve established over the years. In that sense I understand why people resist labeling this a feminist play.

It’s too easy to make the door slam at the end of the play a victory. When we think of feminism, we think, Great—burn your bra, cut your hair, slam the door! But in fact, the end of this play is not a victory; it’s terribly painful. To walk out on your children is about the worst thing I think can ever happen, to any woman. You would have to be so close to suffocation, so sure that you were about to drown, that the only way to save yourself was to leave. So I think it is wrong to interpret this play as a celebration of Nora’s departure. She has to leave to save herself, and for her children, because otherwise, what kind of example does she set for them? She realizes she’s never really been a mother to her children, and can’t be, until she’s figured out who she is as an individual.

Which is why I feel so strongly about this play as the mother of a daughter, and why I’m in such despair at how little the culture has changed. We now have these articles on the front page of the New York Times Magazine [“The Opt-Out Revolution,” by Lisa Belkin, October 26, 2003], saying, “Why have women not made it to the top? Because they choose not to,” with pages about women who decide that what they really want to do is “opt out” of the professional world and retreat back into the nest. Well, everyone would like to go back into a nest where it’s warm and safe, but the fact is, when that happens not only are the women profoundly infantilized, but their daughters see that there is no public role for women to play in the world, that women are simply victims who can’t survive on the outside. When that happens, what possible aspiration could those children have?

THE PROBLEM IS, THAT IF BOTH PARENTS ARE DOING THAT, THEN WHO’S TAKING CARE OF THE CHILDREN? YOU WOULD HAVE TO HAVE UNLIMITED RESOURCES AND RESERVES OF ENERGY TO DO IT YOURSELF.
Then the solution for women is to fight for a culture in which child rearing is central to the culture. As Freud said, people survive on two things: love and work. It isn't enough, no matter what anyone says, to give up who you are to stay home. In the long run that’s not a viable solution. It’s not a solution for the culture, because most women can’t choose that.

WHAT’S INTERESTING TO ME ABOUT THE STATISTICS OF WOMEN WHO WORK OUTSIDE THE HOME IS THAT THE EMPLOYMENT STATISTICS FOR BLACK WOMEN ARE THE SAME AS FOR WHITE MEN. IT’S PRIMARILY WHITE WOMEN WHO HAVE THE PRIVILEGE OF BEING ABLE TO CHOOSE TO STAY HOME.

Of course. Most women don’t have the choice. And when privileged women, who lead the vanguard of social change, abdicate the responsibility for social change and instead say, Work is too stressful and I’m a parent, so I’m going to give it up, then the culture doesn’t have to change. What we really need is a culture in which flextime is permitted, family leave is supported, ways of re-entering the job market are really nurtured—all of those kinds of things—because men should also be taking charge of childcare.

I ALSO FOUND IT FASCINATING, HOW MANY WOMEN CEOS IN THE FORTUNE 50 HAVE STAY-AT-HOME HUSBANDS.

This notion—and this is another subject—that all men are only happy at work is nonsense, too, but most men feel that it’s what they have to do. The point of an evolved culture, it seems to me, which is what Ibsen wrote about, is to create an environment in which people can achieve the highest possible expression of their humanity. Not an environment in which they are forced to go back to the most limited roles available to them simply to survive, or to avoid rocking the boat. You want a culture in which the expanse of people’s humanity can be found. So here is Nora, who is clearly rife with possibilities, creatively and sexually, she’s very entrepreneurial, and she’s very clever about how she solves problems—you want that woman to be able to tap into a broader part of humanity than the narrow band of coquettishness that will allow her to survive in that marriage.

That is why I believe—although we’re essentially leaving the play in its period—A Doll’s House is so current. The most difficult thing we women have had to do in the 20th century is figure out how to reconceive our roles in the world. Of course motherhood is central to women’s existences, if that’s something we choose to do in our lives, but it’s not the only solution. Yet, somehow, we still haven’t managed to figure out the balancing act. Nor have we figured out how to create a culture in which potent, intelligent women are not a threat to men.
That’s another issue. I love the moment in the play when Nora dances the tarantella so passionately that Torvald is appalled by the “violence” of her dancing. He doesn’t want to see that inside his wife is a wild animal trying to get out. That is terrifying to him. That is why I want to explore the pleasurable sexual relationship between them, the potency of that, at the beginning of the play.

**I IMAGINE CASTING TORVALD WAS QUITE A CHALLENGE. HE’S USUALLY PORTRAYED AS A STODGY, OVERBEARING, EVEN CRUEL OLDER MAN TO JUSTIFY NORA’S DRASTIC ACTION AT THE END OF THE PLAY.**

The actor who plays Torvald needs to be a man who can convey enormous sexuality and charm, so you think, of course you’d want to come home to this man. And of course you’d do anything to keep him believing he’s in control. But at the same time, underneath it all, this is a man who’s profoundly vulnerable. He doesn’t come from money. He went to school, after all, with Krogstad and Rank. Why is he scared of Krogstad? Because Krogstad knew him as a boy. He calls him by his first name.

**THAT’S WHY THE FACT THAT KROGSTAD USES THE INFORMAL FORM OF ADDRESS WITH HIM IS SO DISTURBING TO TORVALD.**

Of course. One of the things you have to realize is that Torvald is as trapped in his role as Nora is in hers. He knows he doesn’t have the qualifications to be a bank manager—he’s a lawyer. He gets that promotion because he’s good-looking, he’s responsible, he knows how to work the system. But he’s absolutely terrified. Who else, in Norway, during that historical period, would work over the Christmas holiday? Most people would take the month off. But he’s obsessively in the office, collecting his paperwork, because he’s terrified that he won’t live up to expectations. So he has to put on the role of bank manager, which means that the people who knew him before, who might be on to him, have to be kept at bay. That’s Krogstad. There’s something very vulnerable and sad and slightly pathetic about someone who has to hold on to a false power role, because underneath it all he’s afraid he’s going to be exposed. I think Torvald is actually a deeply poignant character. And then at the end of the play, he just can’t understand what Nora means about hoping for a “miracle,” which is that she has believed all these years that, when push came to shove, he would take the burden of the scandal on himself, because he loves her that much. But she ultimately realizes he simply doesn’t have it in him, that he’s so much a smaller man than she ever thought he was. That is a source of incredible despair, for both of them. Because he knows he doesn’t have it in him.
IT'S SAD TO ME HOW MANY WOMEN I KNOW EXPERIENCE THE SAME THING IN THEIR OWN RELATIONSHIPS.
Which is why I wanted an actor we could really be drawn to, but who could also be cruel. I think that cruelty comes from his own fear.

I WANT TO GO BACK TO WHEN YOU SAID YOU KNEW THE REASONS WHY NOT TO DO IBSEN. WHAT HAVE YOU DISCOVERED IN WORKING ON THIS PLAY THAT CHANGED YOUR MIND?
I'm not so interested in schematic, well-made plays, as one can probably gather from the plays I choose. I think I like Strindberg's plays so much because they're so psychologically messy and fascinating, whereas I always felt about Ibsen's plays that they were a bit too schematic, that he knew before he'd plotted them out how they were going to fall out. I think I had some resistance to Ibsen in part because I can't read the plays in the original, and the translations I know are very Victorian and rather well behaved. One of the things that surprised me in reading Paul [Walsh]'s translation, is how sexual A Doll's House is, how uncomprising, and just how surprising these characters are. Ibsen refuses to make it easy in the end. He takes people who really love each other, and whom we come to love, and then shows us why it is impossible for them to stay together. I think that's a very courageous thing to write about, and very moving. I also thought it would be intriguing to explore this very well-known classic in a new translation, as if it were a new play. I love what Paul's done with the text: His translation is very vivid, it's very muscular, it's very witty, and it's very quick.

WAS THERE ANY ATTEMPT TO TONE DOWN TORVALD'S DEMEANING TREATMENT OF NORA AT THE BEGINNING OF THE PLAY? SOME PRODUCTIONS HAVE MADE THAT CHOICE, AFRAID THAT A MODERN AUDIENCE WOULD NO LONGER FIND IT BELIEVABLE THAT A WOMAN WOULD PUT UP WITH IT.
No. I think you have to see how sexual their interaction is. I know it's strange, but those kinds of games, for certain couples, are part of their eroticism. The secret of the macaroons is so sexual—"Little sweet tooth . . . have you deviated? Have you deviated? Are they hidden? Have you done it today? Have you done it?"—it's so illicit that it's erotic. I think that's the level on which they operate. It is demeaning, but she's complicit in it, because she wants to turn him on. That's the source of her power, and she's a real narcissist at the beginning of the play. Look at the way she talks to Mrs. Linde. Nora even says about herself to Mrs. Linde, "Oh, I'm so terrible, I haven't said I'm so sorry you're a widow now."
She’s wrapped up in herself. This play is really about Nora growing up, having to come of age and realize, Oh my God, I’ve chosen to live like a doll, like my papa’s little girl.

IN A SENSE, SHE HAS BUILT THE DOLL HOUSE HERSELF.
She has definitely built it—like so many women today, who want to be adorable, to be loved and cherished and taken care of. So we build our own cages, we feather our own nests, and we lock the door. And then we wonder why we feel imprisoned. But we choose to do that, because the alternative is difficult—for men as well as for women. To take responsibility for your own life is a very difficult thing. And it doesn’t get any easier. Every day you wake up and think, Now how do I do it? I think part of the fascination with “modernism” is the question, What is a person’s obligation to himself or herself? Particularly in a world without a dominant religion, how do we come into ourselves, particularly in relationship with others who depend on us? I believe that is the defining question of the 20th century, and the one at the center of Ibsen’s play, which is almost shockingly prescient. That is why this material is an amazing thing for actors to work on. Actors are great at role-playing and subterfuge, but in this play they have to drop all that and simply talk to each other.

ROLF FJELDE, IN THE INTRODUCTION TO HIS TRANSLATION OF A DOLL’S HOUSE, WRITES THAT ACTORS, ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO PLAY NORA AND TORVALD, HAVE TO HAVE “A RELISH FOR DETAIL.”
Yes, because it’s all sculpted. It’s all a performance. That is why designing this production was so interesting. We looked at [Marie-Edouard] Vuillard’s paintings, in which the patterns of the women’s dresses match the wallpaper, and the wallpaper matches the upholstery, and so on, so you end up thinking of yourself as part of the scenery. [Set designer] Annie Smart and I also wanted the set to be a sort of delicious tissue-paper box of secrets. When you buy something precious, like fine chocolates or a jewel, it often comes wrapped in layers of gorgeous tissue paper. That’s what the set looks like. It’s a little nugget of Nora’s secrets, surrounded by deeper and deeper layers of tissue-paper-colored pink and lavender and peach walls. Within this nest, in the beginning, everything should feel beautiful and secure and wonderful.

Everything about Nora’s world is very sculpted, very deliberate, and the music is part of that world. Of course, it all builds towards the tarantella. The entire play builds towards this dance of death, which Torvald thinks is the erotic acme of his marriage to her, that he can take his little Norwegian wife, dress her up as a Neapolitan fisher girl, put on that music, and help her dance the tarantella so he can then make love to her. And she just takes
it and goes as wild as she can—that's the moment everything cracks apart, when you see the animal inside of her, and what really wants to come out.

**AND TORVALD CAN'T TAKE IT.**
No, he can't take it. And she's terrified, too, because she's dancing for her life. It's interesting that that image has returned, a hundred years later in our postfeminist culture, the idea of “I'm dancing as fast as I can.”

We're working with a fantastic choreographer, Val Caniparoli, who is one of my favorite choreographers at San Francisco Ballet. He did this Richard Rodgers tango piece for them that was so sexy and so beautiful. He's also worked a lot with Sandra Woodall, our costume designer, because she designs for the ballet. Val's very excited about this production, because, he says, this is the chance for dance to turn the whole the story around.

**WILL THERE BE A LOT OF MUSIC IN THIS PRODUCTION?**
Yes. [Composer] Karl [Lundeberg] really understands the source material. He is Norwegian. He grew up on Grieg, and on Norwegian folk dances. He's read *A Doll's House* in the original, and knows all the original instrumentation, but he's a jazz musician. I thought that combination would make for a fascinating collaboration. That’s another interesting thing: every time I've seen this play, it's been staged in a Victorian setting, as if it were European. But one of the things that became clear to me in working on it is that it's actually not European. It's Norwegian, which was a very different thing at the time. If you look at, for instance, Carl Larsson's paintings, or the painting you showed me [Christian Krohg's *Oda and Per at the Window*], the homes are filled with painted wooden folk-style furniture. There was a kind of folk-craft Renaissance going on in Norway at that time, so the predominant style was not represented by mahogany, oriental rugs, and chandeliers. That’s what Nora thinks they should get when they finally have money. But when the play takes place, they are still like the young couple who goes to Ikea for their first furniture. This production is not Victorian and fusty. All of the designers have worked to pull it away from that.

There's also something very important about the fact that it's dark all day. The light in Norway, especially in midwinter, is so limited. There is one window downstage; Nora looks through it with longing and says, “Maybe one day I'll see the ocean again.” She comes from the fjords, a place where she could see the world, and now she lives in this dark town where she can't see anything out the window. She’s really a prisoner in her own house. Torvald never wants her to go out. So their home is both a haven and a trap.
We wanted that sense of a culture quite far from Europe, just beginning to find itself. Very cold, very bleak, very dark, very remote. Which in a sense gives the culture a better chance to start anew—which I think is why feminism took hold there. It is still true that the Norwegian parliament, like the Finnish parliament, includes a large percentage of women. Women have done very well in Scandinavia. Who knows why? It’s partly, I think, because Scandinavia developed aggressive social programming. Also, Ibsen was part of a group of very progressive thinkers, who were wrestling with questions about women and child rearing: How do women do both? What is it to be a free thinker and to overturn convention? I think there was greater sexual freedom in Norway, as well, than in the rest of Victorian-era Europe. That’s why our actors won’t be costumed in constricting Victorian costumes. They’ll have more casual, “user-friendly” clothes.

[Costume designer] Sandra [Woodall] is brilliant at clothing René. The costumes she designed for her to wear in The Dazzle were so beautiful, and I wanted to make sure that we allow René not to feel constricted in this play. And they’ll be quite colorful, so that when Nora puts on that traveling costume in Act III, and sits across from Torvald at night under the light from that lantern, and looks at him and says, “Do you notice anything different?” you suddenly realize, Oh my god, that is really true. He’s never really seen her before. Finally she doesn’t have to dress up and be beautiful for him.

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU WOULD WANT THE AUDIENCE TO BE AWARE OF IN WATCHING THIS PRODUCTION?

Well, the odd thing about this play is, it’s really very funny. That surprised me when we did the reading. There’s a real lightness at the beginning of the play, which later goes horribly wrong. These are witty, sexy, charming young marrieds who are loving and playful with each other. And I think any play in which there are secrets has the potential to be funny, because everybody’s hiding something from someone, even if it’s something as seemingly innocuous as Nora’s macaroons.

I also hope that people seeing this production will experience how shockingly new A Doll’s House still feels, as a play. It’s interesting to do this play again at this moment in history—particularly at this moment in history, when many women are so exhausted from trying to do everything, to be everything to everybody, that they are tempted to retreat right back into the nest. This is a play about what can happen in that nest, and that retreat is not the solution. No matter how beautiful and warm and cozy the nest might be, it can also be a prison.
THE DOOR SLAM AT THE END OF THIS PLAY IS PERHAPS ONE OF THE MOST
CONTRaversial MOMENTS IN DRAMATURGICAL HISTORY. HAVE YOU
DECIDED HOW YOU’RE GOING TO TREAT THE ENDING?
That door slam is so shattering, so shocking. But I don’t believe it is the end of the story; it’s
actually the beginning. I don’t know what it’s the beginning of, but I do believe you have to
have some degree of hope at the end.

Nora does love Torvald, and he her. Maybe they will find, as they come into themselves,
a way to come back together. Or maybe her daughter and her son will understand that she
went to save herself, for them. Maybe. Because otherwise, what does the son grow up to
believe—that his mother is a maid? That his mother is nothing more than a helpmate for
his father? This is what I always worry about with boys. That they grow up thinking, My
mother is there to serve me, to dance around my father, to subjugate herself, and to be
adorable. If the son sees the mother doing that, then he expects his wife to do that, and
how does that cycle ever break? So I don’t know. But I do feel there maybe is some hope
at the end.

In a larger sense, one does feel that one is walking bravely into a new century at the end
of the play. Nora’s life will definitely not be easy. Where is she going to go? How will she live?
And for Torvald, the questions are equally huge: How much can he change? Will he ever
understand what she’s done? We are still not comfortable with the revolution that started
with this play. But once Nora walks through the door into that brave new world, anything’s
possible.

ON THE SET DESIGN
SET DESIGNER ANNIE SMART: The work of [turn-of-the-20th-century Swedish artist]
Carl Larsson spoke Doll’s House to us very strongly. He’s extremely popular in Scandinavia,
a kind of Scandinavian Norman Rockwell. He was largely a graphic artist, but he also did
murals and some sculpture pieces. His domestic scenes are full of brightly painted color
furniture and crisp stripes, with simple lines and a cleaner, crisper, more modern look than
the heavy velvets and mahogany furniture of the Victorian look often associated with this
play.

The design also reflects the economics of the characters, because, if I’m right, the
Helmers are people who are about to be wealthy. They are about to find themselves fully
and safely in the middle class. We talked about their experience being much like the expe-
rience of young married people today—trying to find a place in the suburbs, trying to find
a nice house, nice furniture, the SUV, and all the rest. In a way, that is very much what this
play is about. It’s about that moment of realization that you are about to graduate into
financial security. I wanted the set to have that kind of look about it, that these are people who aspire. They may not be well off—yet—but we wanted to find a way of putting into the set the fact that Nora, as much as Torvald, has aspirations.

One detail I would mention is that we’re giving Torvald an invisible door: the kind of door that is built into the paneling, where if you don’t see the handle, you don’t really notice it’s there. We wanted to stress that this is Nora’s space. Torvald can come in and out of it, he has access to it, but it’s not his space. His own space is somewhere else, somewhere hidden, somewhere away. You have the feeling that Torvald’s world is never brought into the family, that when he walks through with his papers he’s walking straight to his office. He isn’t going to sit down at the dining table with those papers. He has a life very separate from Nora.

ON THE COSTUMES

COSTUME DESIGNER SANDRA WOODALL: We also referenced the Carl Larsson paintings a great deal. I was most interested in the way the two couples parallel each other. Nora and Torvald Helmer are primarily concerned with the surface and creating an image, while Mrs. Linde and Krogstad are somehow more real, softer. And Nora undergoes a transformation from one to the other. I just tried to follow that through with the clothes, as it’s written in the play. I also wanted little touches of fur on Mrs. Linde and on Krogstad and on Dr. Rank, because fur suggests a more primitive quality—primitive in the sense of knowing yourself, not being so masked.

CAREY PERLOFF: We moved the period slightly later [than the year the play was written], not for any political purpose, but because we liked the silhouette of the clothing better. It was sexier, and somewhat softer. We looked at 1875 and 1879, but there was something about the shape and the bustles that was driving us nuts. I think it’s a tricky thing to invite an audience to look at this play with fresh eyes, because we all come to it thinking we know what it is. We faced the same issue with Waiting for Godot. So not putting it in a distant, corseted, wound-up world seemed helpful. The more that people in the audience can see themselves in this play, the better, because it’s actually a very immediate, very attractive world.
HENRIK IBSEN: ON THE FAR REACHES OF MODERNITY

BY PAUL WALSH

In a Bloomsbury drawing room in 1886, members of London’s Socialist League offered an amateur performance of Ibsen’s A Doll’s House. In the title role was Eleanor Marx, the youngest daughter of Karl Marx, who had taught herself Norwegian in order to read Ibsen in his original language. Her common-law husband, Edward Aveling, played the role of Torvald Helmer. William Morris’s daughter May took the role of Mrs. Linde, and Nils Krogstad was played by a young Bernard Shaw. By all accounts the production was more earnest than artistic, but the fact that it took place at all suggests the extent to which Ibsen’s contemporaries saw his play as a harbinger of progressive political change.

In fact, from the day it was first published in 1879, A Doll’s House sparked impassioned debate, garnering a loyal following of progressives and radicals across Europe, who celebrated the play with the same moral insistence as respectable citizens condemned it. A Doll’s House seemed to challenge the sanctity of the home and the duty of women as wives and mothers, and it did so in a vocabulary that was surprisingly modern and startlingly real. People discussed Nora as if she were the woman down the street rather than a fictional construct. As the "Nora Question" became a cause célèbre that swept through the drawing rooms of Europe, so did the play’s dour Norwegian author, Henrik Ibsen.

By all accounts, Ibsen was less secure in his appointed role as social reformer than the Bloomsbury players supposed. While he relished controversy, he craved respect and respectability above all else. He preferred the frock coat and top hat of the ruling class to the red scarf of the street-corner revolutionary, and he demanded that his voice not be confused with that of any of his characters: “They endeavor to make me responsible for the opinions which certain of the personages of my drama express,” he wrote in 1882 after the publication of his play Ghosts. “And yet there is not in the whole book a single opinion which can be laid to the account of the author.”

It has been said that Ibsen’s last words were “on the other hand . . .,” and there is no doubt that, as a disciple of the German idealist dialectician G. W. F. Hegel, he embraced his contradictions as he embraced his contrariness. Perhaps this is why he was able to bring such complex subtlety to his dramatic explorations of middle-class life. Observing his own personal failings and shortcomings as the elaboration of an ideal in conflict, he was able to recognize the dramatic secrets of the middle-class drawing room.
Throughout the 19th century, the middle-class home, whether a townhouse apartment in a small provisional town or a row house in the capital, was “a social place in a curiously private way,” as Witold Rybczynski writes in his fascinating book *Home: A Short History of an Idea* (1986). Nowhere was this truer than in Scandinavia, where the home was envisioned as a safe haven, a nest of comfort and domesticity, a private universe, separate from though fed by the “getting-and-spending” world outside. The front door of the middle-class home was meant to keep the world at bay and protect the privacy of the family. Only invited visitors and old friends were welcome in the well-run middle-class home, and they were generally greeted with due ceremony. In fact, in Scandinavia, as in Germany, the word for “secret” (*heimlich* in German, *hemlig* in Swedish, *hemmelig* in Norwegian) is a close cognate of the word for “home” (*heim* in German, *hem* in Swedish, *hjem* in Norwegian), and it was the secrets of the middle-class home that fed the domestic dramas of Ibsen.

For Ibsen, the home was a battlefield of private desires and public constraints. Social pressure invaded the private domain through an insistence on duty (*pfligt*), bringing with it the insurmountable weight of conventions, traditions, and expectations. The past was the enemy of change; social expectations conspired against individual liberation. This was the “great new theme” that Ibsen brought to the stage: the emergence of a class of individuals who had gained social, economic, and political ascendancy throughout the 19th century were now clamoring for personal freedom in the private sphere.

**A SON OF THE MIDDLE CLASS**

Ibsen was himself a son of the middle class. Born in 1828 to a prominent merchant family in the shipping town of Skien, south of modern-day Oslo on the east coast of Norway, he was the eldest of five children. When he was eight, however, his father’s business failed and he was left to his own devices. At sixteen he became an apothecary’s apprentice and dreamed of going to university. While he never did attend university, he did start writing plays: nationalist romantic history plays in the grand style popular at the time.

In 1850 Ibsen moved to Christiania (now Oslo), where he met the famous violinist and nationalist Ole Bull, who brought him to the west coast city of Bergen to work in Bull’s Norwegian national theater as playwright-in-residence and stage manager. Ibsen owes his education in the craft of the theater to the years he spent working for Bull and later as artistic director of the Norwegian Theater in Christiania, a position he held from 1857 to 1862 with limited success. During these years he met, courted, and married the spirited Suzannah Thoresen, and enjoyed his first modest successes as a playwright.

In 1864, Ibsen left Norway for the European continent, where he stayed for 27 years, living in Germany and Italy. By all accounts, his life was pretty uneventful. He was a
private man who lived quietly with his family and kept to himself. He read little and almost never went to the theater. Instead he spent his time contemplating life. And every two years or so he sent a startling new play to his publisher in Norway.

From abroad, Ibsen focused on Norwegian provincial life, recreating his abandoned home in his mind, turning it over and examining it in all its stifling detail. Out of this obsession with a place on the far reaches of modernity, he created the modern drama. All but two of his plays are set in Norway, and they are an impressive collection: the philosophical verse drama *Brand* (1866), the picaresque *Peer Gynt* (1867), and the world historical drama *Emperor and Galilean* (1873) about Julian the Apostate, were followed by plays of contemporary life: *The League of Youth* (1869), *Pillars of Society* (1877), and the “problem plays” that incited such public outcry, including *A Doll’s House* (1879), *Ghosts* (1881), and *An Enemy of the People* (1882). As he was vilified in the press for attacking the sanctity of marriage and the family, Ibsen grew in stature and importance, becoming the most famous Scandinavian of his day.

Contemporary accounts give the impression of a man of meticulous temperament—elegant, finicky, and punctilious in his habits, with a surprising ability to empathize with strangers. It is this quality that suffuses his writing. Even as he saw the shortcomings and guessed at the hidden contradictions in the hearts of those he met on the street, he was able to feel their humanity and give expression to it. In doing so, Ibsen created a style that is direct, fresh, and surprisingly conversational even today. This was one of the most surprising discoveries waiting for me when I sat down to translate *A Doll’s House*: Ibsen’s characters sound like real people facing real problems. His language is dramatically supple and rich with emotional complexity and ambiguity. Behind a strikingly modern façade of bravado and game playing lurk subtle intimations of doubt and self-loathing. In Norwegian, Ibsen’s characters speak a language that is more conversational than literary. My task in translating *A Doll’s House* for the contemporary stage was to find the same freshness and emotional directness in English in order to allow Ibsen’s characters to once again give voice to contemporary issues without losing sight of the contradictions inherent in modern life.

By locating the great moral questions of his day square in the center of the middle-class drawing room and daring to delve into the individual psyche of moral creatures drowning in a morass of social lies and self-deceptions, Ibsen brought metaphysical profundity to the domestic drama. In this he fathered not only the new drama but also a new morality of individual freedom and desire. But even as these characters speak for change, they find themselves caught in a web of duties and obligations. This is what makes these plays dramatic rather than didactic. Speaking out can destroy as well as liberate; often the
rewards of self-discovery are less tangible than the suffering it causes. In plays like *The Wild Duck* (1884), *Rosmersholm* (1886), *The Lady from the Sea* (1888), and *Hedda Gabler* (1890), Ibsen dug deep into the troubled psyche of the modern world, uncovering its propensity for easy truths and deadly deceptions, diagnosing the crisis of individual faith, and staring unflinchingly at the despair of contemporary guilt.

In 1891 Ibsen returned to Norway after nearly three decades abroad. Here he wrote his final four plays—*The Master Builder* (1892), *Little Eyolf* (1894), *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896), and *When We Dead Awaken* (1899)—pushing beyond the limits of stage realism and the problems of social life into a dark and tormented realm of psychological anguish and isolation precipitated by the terror of his own failing creative energy. As a new century dawned, he fell ill and never really recovered. He died in 1906.
AN IBSEN TIMELINE

COMPiled BY CAROLYN JOY LENSKe

IBSEN'S LIFE AND WORKS

1828 Henrik Johan Ibsen, the first of five children, is born March 20 in Skien, a small coastal town in southeastern Norway, to Knud Ibsen, a wealthy merchant with a general store and a schnapps distillery, and Marichen Altenberg Ibsen, a theater enthusiast.

1834–35 Knud Ibsen loses his fortune, and the newly impoverished family is forced to sell their stately home in Skien and move to a small farmhouse in the rural community of Venstøp.

1844 Henrik Ibsen leaves for Grimstad, a tiny fishing port, to begin an apprenticeship to an apothecary. He remains for six years.

1846 Else Sofie Jensdatter, the apothecary’s servant, bears Ibsen a son. For the next 15 years, he contributes financial support to the child.

LITERARY AND WORLD EVENTS

1792 Mary Wollstonecraft, called a “hyena in petticoats” by her critics, writes the scandalous Vindication of the Rights of Women in Britain. Wollstonecraft calls marriage “legal prostitution” and says that women “may be convenient slaves, but slavery will have its constant effect, degrading the master and the abject dependent.” She argues that men’s and women’s rights are identical.

1814 Norway gains independence from Denmark but is immediately gifted by Britain and Russia to Sweden as compensation for Swedish aide in defeating Napoleon. Previously Norway and Denmark had been united as twin kingdoms, the government and cultural institutions of which had been controlled from the Danish capital, Copenhagen.

1835 Hans Christian Andersen publishes his first children’s stories.

1841 Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” is published.

1842 Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish moralist, writes Either/Or.

1848 Riots and revolutions erupt in western and central Europe. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels publish their Communist Manifesto.
1849 Ibsen writes his first play, *Catiline*, in verse, while he is supposed to be studying for his medical school entrance exams.

1850 Ibsen leaves Grimstad for Christiania (now Oslo) to study medicine at the university, but he fails the Greek and mathematics portions of the exam. His verse play *The Warrior’s Barrow* is staged in Christiania.

1851 Ibsen writes occasional poems and criticism for magazines. He is engaged as playwright-in-residence at the National Theatre in Bergen.

1852 Ibsen becomes the stage manager at the National Theatre.

1857 Ibsen is appointed artistic director of the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania.

1858 Ibsen marries Suzannah Thorensen. His play *The Vikings of Helgeland* is produced at the Norwegian Theatre.

1859 Suzannah bears a son, Sigurd, named after the hero of *The Vikings of Helgeland*. Ibsen and his friend, the writer and nationalist Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson, create The Norwegian Society to establish a Norwegian national identity through art and theater.

1862 The Norwegian Theatre goes bankrupt and is forced to close, leaving Ibsen without a steady income for two years. He takes a field trip to collect folklore in the Norwegian countryside, with the (never-realized) intention of publishing it.

1848 cont. The first Seneca Falls Convention is organized in New York State to discuss the “condition and rights of women.” The Married Women’s Property Act gives New York women the right to maintain independent assets.

1851 A Prussian law denies women, the mentally ill, schoolchildren, and apprentices the right to participate in political activities and discussions.

1854 Camilla Collett, “Norway’s first feminist,” writes *The District Governor’s Daughter*, which attacks marriage as loveless and dismissive of women’s feelings. (Ibsen admired Collett and stated that her ideas had a marked influence on his work.) Norwegian women gain the right to inherit property.

1859 Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, Charles Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities*, and John Stuart Mills’s *On Liberty* are published.

1864 Prussia and Austria declare war on Denmark over the Danish-controlled territories of Schleswig and Holstein. Despite promising support for their Scandinavian neighbor, Sweden and Norway refuse to enter the war, and the German states achieve an easy victory and annex Schleswig and Holstein. (Ibsen was appalled by Norway and Sweden’s passivity and isolationism in the face of German aggression against Denmark, and his great disillusionment with his countrymen played a part in his decision to move to Rome.)
1864 Ibsen leaves Norway for Rome on a government-issued artist’s stipend. Except for brief visits to his homeland, he will live abroad with his family in self-imposed exile for the next 27 years.

1865 Brand, a dramatic poem in verse, is Ibsen's first great success. Brand, according to Ibsen, explores the idea of drama meant to be read, rather than performed. Riding the wave of Brand’s popularity, the king of Norway grants Ibsen a modest annual stipend.

1867 Ibsen writes Peer Gynt, another play in verse.

1869 Ibsen moves from Rome to Dresden.

1872 Ibsen completes Emperor and Galilean, his first prose drama.

1874 When Ibsen returns to Norway for a brief visit, he is honored with a torchlight parade marking his new celebrity in his homeland.

1875 Ibsen moves to Munich and begins to write The Pillars of Society, the first of his 12 great social dramas.

1876 Leo Tolstoy writes Anna Karenina.

1878 Ibsen returns to Rome, where his son, Sigurd, enters university.

1873 In Bradwell v. Illinois, the u.s. Supreme Court decides that states may bar women from practicing any profession if “family harmony” and “the law of the Creator” are in danger. In response to a growing debate on coeducation, Professor Edward H. Clarke of Harvard Medical School declares in his book Sex in Education, or A Fair Chance for Our Girls, that education is responsible for female infertility because it produces women with “monstrous brains and puny bodies.” Dr. Clarke is acclaimed and quoted for years, and his book goes through 17 editions.

1875 John Stuart Mill is elected to British Parliament on a platform of women's suffrage, but his reforms are defeated.

1869 The territory of Wyoming grants women equal voting rights. Unmarried, property-holding British women are allowed to vote in local, but not national, elections because, it is argued, local elections concern “domestic” issues, such as education and charity work, to which women can relate.

1870 The Franco-Prussian War (1870–71) brings about the defeat of Napoleon iii, the unification of German states, and the founding of the German Empire. John Stuart Mill writes On the Subjection of Women. The territory of Utah gives women the vote, but the u.s. Congress repeals the law in 1887.
1879 Ibsen proposes to the Scandinavian Club in Rome that female members be allowed to hold the position of paid librarian, and that they be granted equal voting rights in club meetings. The former proposal passes, but the latter is narrowly rejected. Ibsen writes *A Doll’s House* in Rome and Amalfi and then returns to Dresden. When the play is published later in the year, all 8,000 copies sell out within two weeks. In the next three months, two more editions are published. *A Doll’s House* opens December 21 at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen.

1880 Ibsen returns to Italy for five more years. *A Doll’s House* is performed in Stockholm, Christiania, Bergen, and throughout Germany. Hedwig Niemann-Raabe, a leading German actress, refuses to play the part of Nora as written because, she says, “I would never leave my children!” With no copyright laws to prevent his script from being changed without his consent, Ibsen writes his own alternative ending to *A Doll’s House*, in which Nora sinks to the floor at the door to her children’s bedroom and cries. “Oh, this is a sin against myself, but I cannot leave them” as the curtain falls. Ibsen calls his own new ending a “barbaric outrage,” but he would rather commit the adulteration himself than leave it to “less tender and competent hands.” The German producers ignore Ibsen’s new ending, however, and a fourth act is added in which Nora returns to her husband after several months, carrying a “baby Helmer.”
1881 Ibsen writes *Ghosts*.

1883 *A Child Wife*, the first American adaptation of *A Doll’s House*, restyled with a happy ending, premieres in Milwaukee.

1884 Ibsen writes *The Wild Duck* in Rome and Gossensass, a resort town in the Italian Alps. In a barely recognizable English adaptation of *A Doll’s House*, called *Breaking a Butterfly*, Nora, now “Flora,” happily reconciles with her husband, “Humphrey Goddard.” The Norwegian Women’s Rights League is founded. Ibsen, Bjørnson, Jonas Lie, and Alexander L. Kielland write a letter to the Storting, Norway’s parliament, endorsing a proposed bill that would give married women separate property rights. (The bill passed four years later, in 1888.)

1886 After settling in Munich, Ibsen writes *Rosmersholm*. Eleanor Marx, Karl Marx’s daughter, organizes an amateur English reading of *A Doll’s House* (then called *Nora*) in London. George Bernard Shaw reads the part of Krogstad.

1888 *The Lady from the Sea* is published.

1882 Norwegian women gain the right to attend university.

1883 Friedrich Nietzsche writes *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. 
1889 Ibsen, now 61, falls in love with 18-year-old Emilie Bardach, an Austrian girl he meets in Gossensass. He maintains an avid, romantic correspondence with both Emilie and her friend Helene Raff, while remaining devoted to his wife. (According to biographer Michael Meyer, Ibsen seemed to draw energy and inspiration from his young female friends.) The first credible English performance of A Doll’s House appears at London’s Variety Theatre. Actress Beatrice Cameron performs a faithful translation of A Doll’s House—the first American production using Ibsen’s original ending—on tour in New York, Boston, and Chicago.

1890 Ibsen writes Hedda Gabler.

1891 Ibsen finally returns to Norway to live in Christiania.

1892 The Master Builder is published.

1894 Little Eyolf is published.

1896 John Gabriel Borkman is published.

1899 Ibsen writes When We Dead Awaken.

1900 Ibsen suffers his first stroke.

1901 Ibsen is partially paralyzed by a second stroke and cannot walk or write.

1906 Ibsen dies in Christiania at the age of 78. Twelve thousand mourners attend the funeral.

1891 George Bernard Shaw writes The Quintessence of Ibsenism.

1893 New Zealand becomes the first nation to give women voting rights in national elections.

1892 George Bernard Shaw writes Mrs. Warren’s Profession.

1895 Anton Chekhov writes The Seagull, and Oscar Wilde writes The Importance of Being Earnest.

1903 Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson wins the Nobel Prize for literature.

1906 Finland is the first European nation to allow women to vote in national elections.

1913 Norwegian women get the vote.

1918 British women are granted equal voting rights.

1920 American women are granted full voting rights by the 19th Amendment.

1923 The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) is proposed by American activist Alice Paul. It stipulates that the “Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.” It will be presented at every session of Congress until it passes in 1972. The ERA will never be ratified by the minimum of 38 states required to amend the Constitution, however, and its deadline for ratification will expire in 1982.
THE TROLL IN THE DRAWING ROOM

BY MICHAEL BILLINGTON

Shaw described Ibsen and Strindberg as “the giants of the theater of our time.” Even today we are haunted by their presence. . . . The two men were not exactly best buddies and still arouse fierce, partisan passions. Henrik Ibsen actually kept a portrait of his arch enemy, August Strindberg, in his study after 1895; he dubbed it “Madness incipient.” For his part, Strindberg attacked the “swinery” of A Doll’s House and claimed in 1892 that his 10-year war against Ibsen “cost me my wife, children, fortune, and career.”

It is tempting to see the two men as inherently antithetical. On the one hand, Ibsen: sane, progressive, rational, formal. On the other, Strindberg: neurotic, reactionary, religious, fragmented. Michael Meyer, translator and biographer of both, wrote: “Ibsen’s characters think and speak logically and consecutively: Strindberg’s dart backwards and forwards. They do not think, or speak, abcde but aqbzc.”

I see the two men as violent, necessary opposites, who between them laid the foundations of modern drama. From Ibsen we learned about the interaction of private and public, the beauty of structure and the idea of the dramatist as spokesperson: “What he lives through,” Ibsen once said, “all of his countrymen live through together with him.” From Strindberg we learned about sexual madness, fluidity of form, and the power of dreams. Far more than Chekhov, whose symphonic realism is impossible not to admire but fatal to emulate, the two playwrights have shaped our drama: Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, John Osborne and Harold Pinter, Caryl Churchill and Sarah Kane are all hugely indebted to them, even when apparently rejecting their influence.

Although by taste and temperament I prefer Ibsen, he seems the harder figure to grasp. That may be partly because of a fatal 1891 photograph that shows a quasi-biblical patriarch glaring out at us from behind mutton-chop whiskers. But it is also partly because of a caricature idea of the plays all too accurately summed up by Tyrone Guthrie in A Life in the Theatre: “High thinking takes place in a world of dark-crimson serge tablecloths with chenille hobbles, black horsehair sofas, wall brackets, and huge intellectual women in raincoats and rubbers.”

But that image reflects bad, old Ibsen stagings; today a whole host of directors have freed us from the tyranny of furniture and shown us that Ibsen can be spare, ironic, witty, and sexy. What also perennially strikes me about Ibsen is his raging modernity. As long as human beings—and not just women—are trapped by an imprisoning domesticity, A Doll’s House will arouse shivers of recognition. His rarely seen play Pillars of Society demonstrates
the dangers of sacrificing public safety to private profit. And watching Tony Blair
dismissing his critics on “Newsnight” recently, I was reminded of Dr. Stockmann in An
Enemy of the People, and his unshakable belief that “the minority is always right.”

Ibsen is still our contemporary. But I suspect we talk too much about his themes and
not enough about the immaculate nature of his form: because the “well-made play” is now
a dirty word, we tend to think of Ibsen as locked into a dated, 19th-century formula. In
reality, Ibsen reminds us that structure is meaning and that there is a moral and aesthetic
thrill in the moment of revelation.

For a classic example, take Brand [Ibsen’s 1865 epic poem]. The hero is a fanatically
uncompromising preacher who flames “like the sword of God.” But at the play’s exact mid-
point he is faced with an agonizing choice: unless he leaves his mountain fastness and flies
south, his child will die. His first instinct is to flee. At which point the local doctor says:
“So merciless towards your flock, so lenient towards yourself.” That one line, rich in mul-
tilayered irony since the doctor actually approves Brand’s double standard, becomes the
pivot on which the whole play turns.

The standard argument against Ibsen is that, compared with Strindberg, he is dry, sex-
less and lacks fantasy. But the more Ibsen I see, the more ridiculous the charge looks.
Indeed, it is precisely because he fights against his own buttoned-up nature and the puri-
tanical constraints of his time that the sexuality in Ibsen is so strong. There is a moment
in A Doll’s House when Nora brandishes a silk stocking in front of the adoring Dr. Rank
that is electrifyingly erotic. And, far from being prosaically naturalistic, Ibsen’s plays reveal
a constant, unresolved tension between realism and symbolism. If Pinter writes about “the
weasel under the cocktail cabinet,” Ibsen constantly reveals the troll lurking in the draw-
ing room, as when Nora dances the wild tarantella that releases her sexual demons.

Even if for me Ibsen is second only to Shakespeare, I concede that Strindberg takes us
into areas that the sage of Skien does not easily penetrate. You only have to read the
preface to Miss Julie to see that Strindberg envisioned the kind of theater we all now rec-
ognize: one that banished needless intervals, removed painted props and scenery, simplifed
masklike make-up, and was based on a collaborative intimacy. If we could have, he wrote,
“first and foremost a small stage and a small auditorium, then perhaps a new drama might
emerge and the theater might once again become a place for educated people.”

Strindberg also wrote about sex with absolute realism, dramatizing the compound of
love, hate, fury, and desire that characterizes random couplings and permanent relation-
ships. If Ibsen caught the tensions of the night before, Strindberg revealed the acrid taste
of the morning after. Miss Julie is always seen as a play about class in which a servant’s rise
is accompanied by a mistress’s fall. But the really radical thing about this 1888 tragedy is
that Strindberg puts on stage something never heard before: the ugly sound of post-coital recrimination. After their midsummer night’s fling, Miss Julie and her valet both dream of romantic flight but turn on each other like tigers. “So what shall we do?” asks Jean. “Go away,” says Miss Julie. “To torment each other to death?” he instinctively enquires.

The idea of sex as a battleground and marriage as a lifelong torment is partly what makes Strindberg seem so modern: there is a straight line connecting plays like *The Dance of Death* and *The Father* with Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* and Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* But, in his late plays, Strindberg also captures the phantasmagoric nature of existence far more explicitly than Ibsen. In *A Dream Play*, the daughter of the god Indra acquires earthly form in order to understand the reasons for humanity’s misery. In *Storm*, a dying old man sees fragments of his past life in subliminal lightning flashes.

My own sense of Strindberg’s modernity was enhanced a few years back when I directed his play *The Stranger* in tandem with Pinter’s *The Lover*. In *The Stranger*, a married woman confronts a female friend in a café; slowly it dawns on the prattling wife that the latter’s conspicuous silence means that she was her husband’s lover. With economic mastery, Strindberg leaves you questioning whether it is the implacably lonely mistress or the nervously surviving wife who is the stronger of the two. This seemed to me then, and still does, to connect directly to Pinter, who poses exactly the same questions: whether power is an integral part of sex and whether infidelity, real or imagined, is the best way of sustaining marriage.

Even though we still ignore large swathes of their work, Ibsen and Strindberg are the two indispensable props of modern drama. As Eric Bentley once wrote, Strindberg “lived out all the phases of modern militancy and modern defeatism” and seemed to embrace everything from juvenile radicalism to a final mystical mix of science and occultism. But if I had to seize on any one quality that made him seem our contemporary, it would be his astonishing sexual candor. Ibsen seems more cloaked and guarded, yet his plays address issues that still obsess us today: the conflict between reality and illusion, heredity and environment, individual self-fulfilment and society, the life and the work. I can’t imagine modern drama without either of the Scandinavian masters.
IBSEN AND A DOLL’S HOUSE
Observations by and about the Playwright and His Play

COMPiled By CAROLYN Joy LENSKE

Every thing that I have written has had the closest possible relation to what I have experienced inwardly, even if I have not actually lived through it outwardly. In every new play or poem I have aimed at my own spiritual liberation and catharsis, for every man shares the guilt and responsibility of the society to which he belongs.

Henrik Ibsen

The glory of Ibsen is that he refused to make certain fatal separations. He refused to separate the individual from the collective, the personal from the social.

Eric Bentley, In Search of Theatre

The problem of Being, the nature of the self, with the question of what an individual means when he uses the pronoun I. How can the self be defined? Can one even speak of a consistent entity corresponding to an individual’s self? This, it seems to me, is the fundamental and underlying subject matter of Ibsen’s oeuvre which was masked, for his contemporaries, by its surface preoccupation with social and political questions.

Martin Esslin, Ibsen and Modern Drama (1980)

A crucial element of Ibsen’s relationship to feminism is the role played by actual feminists in his life and work. Their influence began within his own family, with his wife, Suzannah Thoresen Ibsen, and her stepmother and former governess, Magdalene Thoresen. Magdalene Thoresen, Danish writer of novels and dramas, translator of the French plays the young Ibsen staged at the Norwegian National Theatre in Bergen, and “probably the first ‘New Woman’ he had ever met,” was a key role model for Suzannah, an independent woman whose favorite author was George Sand.

Gail Finney, “Ibsen and Feminism,” The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen

The following is an excerpt from a speech delivered by Ibsen to the Scandinavian Club of Rome on February 27, 1879, proposing that women be allowed to hold the post of paid librarian, and that they also be allowed to vote in club matters. The first of his proposals was accepted, but the second failed, by a single vote, to get the two-thirds majority required. Ibsen was furious, and refused to speak to anyone who had voted against him. He attended a ball at the club several days
later and passionately announced his disappointment to the entire party. He was especially furious at the women in his circle for not being more supportive.

Is there anyone in this gathering who dares assert that our ladies are inferior to us in culture, or intelligence, or knowledge, or artistic talent? I don't think many men would dare suggest that. Then what is it men fear? I hear there is a tradition here that women are cunning intriguers, and that therefore we don’t want them. Well, I have encountered a good deal of male intrigue in my time, not least recently. . . . I fear women, youth, and inexperience as little as I fear the true artist. What I do fear is . . . men with little ambitions and little thoughts, little scruples and little fears, those men who direct all their thoughts and actions toward achieving certain little advantages for their own little and subservient selves. Should the affairs of this club fall into such hands, I should greatly fear for its survival, at any rate as a society of artists. And that is why I wish to have the ladies included at our annual general meeting, so that they, together with the young, may see to it that power is placed into true, and truly artistic, hands.

Henrik Ibsen, quoted in *Ibsen: A Biography*, by Michael Meyer

When liberal-minded men want to bring about some improvement in the position of women in society, they first inquire whether public opinion—men—will approve. It is the same as asking wolves whether they favor new measures for the protection of sheep. . . . Women artists and business women try to conceal their sex. On their pictures, their nameplates, etc., they put only the initial of their first name so that people will think they are men.


These women of the modern age, mistreated as daughters, as sisters, as wives, not educated in accordance with their talents, debarred from following their real mission, deprived of their inheritance, embittered in mind—these are the ones who supply the mothers for the next generation. What will result from this?

Henrik Ibsen, *Notes on Ghosts* (1890s), quoted in James McFarlane’s introduction to *Four Major Plays*

Ibsen's message to you is—if you are a member of society, defy it; if you have a duty, violate it; if you have a sacred tie, break it; if you have a religion, stand on it instead of crouching under it; if you have bound yourself by a promise or an oath, cast them to the winds; if the lust of self-sacrifice seizes you, wrestle with it as with the devil; and if, in spite of all, you cannot resist the temptation to be virtuous, go drown yourself before you have
time to waste the lives of all about you with the infection of that fell disease. Here at last is a call to arms with some hope in it!

George Bernard Shaw, “Fabian Society Lecture on Ibsen” (1890), which he later turned into the influential study *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*

Ibsen] underlined that women’s will in particular tends to remain undeveloped; we dream and wait for something unknown that will give our lives meaning. As a result of this women’s emotional lives are unhealthy, and they fall victims to disappointment.

Emilie Bardach, a young woman with whom Ibsen had a romantic and emotional, if not sexual, affair, describing a meeting with Ibsen in her diary; quoted in *Ibsen: A Biography*, by Michael Meyer

Ibsen presented the following speech before a banquet, at which he was the guest of honor, of the Norwegian League for Women’s Rights, in Christiania (Oslo) on May 26, 1898. Some critics, including Ibsen biographer Michael Meyer, have used these remarks to argue that the playwright was not a supporter specifically of women’s rights, but strove in his plays to shed light on universal issues of individual freedom. Other critics, including Joan Templeton, believe that Ibsen did indeed care deeply about women’s rights and believe that this speech simply demonstrates Ibsen’s unease with organized social movements.

I am not a member of the Women’s Rights League. Whatever I have written has been without any conscious thought of making propaganda. I have been more the poet and less the social philosopher than people generally seem inclined to believe. I thank you for the toast, but must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for the women’s rights movement. I am not even quite clear as to just what this women’s rights movement really is. To me it has seemed a problem of humankind in general. And if you read my books carefully you will understand this. True enough, it is desirable to solve the woman problem, along with all the others; but that has not been the whole purpose. My task has been the *description of humanity*. To be sure, whenever such a description is felt to be reasonably true, the reader will read his own feelings and sentiments into the work of the poet. These are then attributed to the poet; but incorrectly so. Every reader remolds the work beautifully and neatly, each according to his own personality. Not only those who write but also those who read are poets. They are collaborators. They are often more poetical than the poet himself.

With these reservations, let me thank you for the toast you have given me. I do indeed recognize that women have an important task to perform in the particular directions this
club is working along. I will express my thanks by proposing a toast to the League for Women's Rights, wishing it progress and success.

The task always before my mind has been to advance our country and to give our people a higher standard. To achieve this, two factors are important. It is for the mothers, by strenuous and sustained labor, to awaken a conscious feeling of culture and discipline. It is the women who shall solve the human problem. As mothers they shall solve it. And only in that capacity can they solve it. Here lies a great task for woman. My thanks! And success to the League for Women's Rights!

Henrik Ibsen, quoted in *Ibsen: Letters and Speeches*, edited by Evert Sprinchorn

Ibsen's knowledge of humanity is nowhere more obvious than in his portrayal of women. He amazes one by his painful introspection; he seems to know them better than they know themselves. Indeed, if one may say so of an eminently virile man, there is a curious admixture of the woman in his nature.

James Joyce (1900)

To ask is my vocation, not to answer.

Henrik Ibsen

**ON WRITING A DOLL'S HOUSE**

A Doll's House is reportedly based on actual events. Ibsen met Laura Petersen in Dresden. She was a fan, and had written a sequel to Ibsen's dramatic poem Brand, which she called Brand's Daughters. Over the years, Ibsen mentored her, encouraged her writing, and called her his "skylark." Laura married a Danish schoolteacher named Victor Kieler, who contracted tuberculosis. She was informed that a rest in a warmer climate was her husband's only hope for survival. Lacking the necessary funds and afraid to ask her frail and excitable husband for advice, Laura in 1876 secretly took out a loan and traveled with her husband to Italy, where he fully recovered. Two years later, however, her creditors demanded repayment of the loan. Still afraid to tell her husband the truth, Petersen wrote a novel and sent the manuscript to Ibsen in hopes that he would recommend it to his publisher, Frederik Hegel, and she would receive an advance that would enable her to repay her debt. Ibsen thought the novel was poorly written and refused to recommend it. He was appalled by Petersen's dilemma and by her reluctance to share the details with her husband, and wrote to her:

In a family where the husband is alive, it can never be necessary for the wife to sacrifice her heart's blood as you have done. I am amazed that he should permit you to do so. There must be something which you don't tell me and which colors the whole situation. It is
unthinkable that your husband knows everything; so you must tell him; he must take on his shoulders the sorrows and problems which now torment you. . . . Hegel would never have accepted your manuscript even if I had recommended it. . . . Confide all your troubles to your husband. He is the one who should bear them.

When Laura received Ibsen's letter, she forged a check in desperation. Her crime was discovered by the bank, and Laura had no choice but to tell her husband everything. He was furious, treated her as a criminal, and separated her from her children, ignoring the fact that Laura's misdeeds had been committed for his sake. Laura suffered a nervous breakdown, and her husband admitted her to a public mental asylum. When she was released a month later, she begged her husband to let her return home to care for the children. He did so grudgingly. When Ibsen learned of Laura's tragedy, he was inspired to write his next play, and took the following notes:

“Notes for A Modern Tragedy,” Rome, October 19, 1878

There are two kinds of moral laws, two kinds of conscience, one for men and one, quite different, for women. They don't understand each other; but in practical life, woman is judged by masculine law, as though she weren't a woman but a man.

The wife in the play ends by having no idea what is right and what is wrong; natural feelings on the one hand and belief in authority on the other have altogether bewildered her.

A woman cannot be herself in modern society. It is an exclusively male society, with laws made by men and with a judicial system that judges feminine conduct from a masculine point of view.

She has committed forgery, and is proud of it; for she has done it out of love for her husband, to save his life. But this husband of hers takes his standpoint, conventionally honorable, on the side of the law, and sees the situation with male eyes.

Moral conflict. Weighed down and confused by her trust in authority, she loses faith in her own morality, and in her fitness to bring up her children. Bitterness. A mother in modern society, like certain insects, retires and dies once she has done her duty by propagating the race. Love of life, of home, of husband and children and family. Now and then, as women do, she shrugs off her thoughts. Suddenly anguish and fear return. Everything must be borne alone. The catastrophe approaches, mercilessly, inevitably. Despair, conflict, and defeat.

Unfortunately for Laura Kieler, her disgrace had been quite public in Copenhagen. When A Doll’s House was published and produced there in 1879, she was widely recognized as Ibsen’s inspiration, which further complicated her precarious marital situation.

Paraphrased from Ibsen: A Biography, by Michael Meyer
“Now I’ve seen Nora. She came right up to me and put her hand on my shoulder.”
“What was she wearing?” Suzannah asked.
“A blue woolen dress.”

Ibsen’s wife Suzannah, recalling a conversation with her husband about his central character as he was writing *A Doll’s House*

The moment she leaves her home is the moment her life is to begin. . . . In this play there is a big, grown-up child, Nora, who has to go out into life to discover herself.

With the view of her marriage which Nora has formed this night it would be immoral of her to continue living together with Helmer; This she cannot do and therefore she leaves.

Ibsen writing about Nora (January 1880), quoted in *The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen*, edited by James McFarlane

A year after *A Doll’s House* appeared, a Scandinavian woman came to Rome, where the Ibsens were living. She had left her husband and small daughter to run away with her lover. The Norwegian exile community considered this unnatural and asked Ibsen what he thought. “It is not unnatural, only it is unusual,” was Ibsen’s opinion. The woman made it a point to speak to Ibsen, but to her surprise he treated her offhandedly. “Well, I did the same thing your Nora did,” she said, offended. Ibsen replied quietly: “My Nora went alone.”

Joan Templeton, *Ibsen’s Women*

**CRITIQUE OF A DOLL’S HOUSE**

I ask you directly: is there one mother among thousands of mothers, one wife among thousands of wives, who could behave as Nora behaves, who would desert husband, children, and home merely in order to become “a human being”? I answer with conviction: no and again no!

Critic and theater manager m. w. Brun (December 21, 1879)

[I have] never sat out a play more dreary or illogical as a whole, or in its details more feeble or commonplace. It is as though someone had dramatized the cooking of a Sunday dinner.

Theater review in the *Sporting and Dramatic News*, London (1889)
Just as Nora appears in the final scene, free and unfettered by any bond, divine or human, without commitment or obligation to the man whom she has given her promise or to the children she has brought into this world—likewise we will find the wife in the modern marriage, from beginning to end. . . . The emancipated woman has taken her place at the door, always ready to depart, with her suitcase in her hand. The suitcase—and not, as before, the ring of fidelity—will be the symbol of her role in marriage.

Sermon cautioning parishioners about the dangers of the “emancipated woman,”

by Rev. M. J. Faerden (1884)

She to whom love is everything, above the letter of the law, public opinion, even religion, of which she knows as little as most things learned by rote, discovers that his love is a convenience, not a commitment of the self. Thus her love for him is destroyed. . . .

Can we even today maintain that there no longer exist among us, and in considerable numbers, our Noras and husbands very much like hers? And are there none left who do not somehow resent the play?

Harold Clurman, *Ibsen* (1977)

Critics still sometimes write about *A Doll’s House* as though it were a play about women’s rights, despite Ibsen’s repeated protests to the contrary. Its theme, [Ibsen] stressed, is the need of every human being, whether man or woman, to find out who he or she is and to strive to become that person. . . . *A Doll’s House* is no more about women’s rights than Shakespeare’s *Richard II* is about the divine right of kings, or *Ghosts* is about syphilis, or *An Enemy of the People* about public hygiene. Its theme is the need of every individual to find out the kind of person he or she really is and to strive to become that person.

Michael Meyer, *Ibsen: A Biography*

Right up to the final showdown Nora has clung to the notion of “the miraculous,” to the dream that Helmer will take upon himself the complete and full responsibility for her actions and thereby courageously defy the threat of society’s condemnation of her. Her illusory picture of the husband is valid only for some romantic-patriarchal dream world. The real Helmer is in his mental make-up much less liberated than Nora herself; he reveals himself as being a pitiable and egotistic slave of the male society of which he is so conspicuous a defender. It is not the human being in him which speaks to Nora at their final confrontation; it is society, its institutions and authorities, which speak through him.

“ARE WE EQUAL YET?”

Although I am not one of those who attach any high degree of importance to the possession of great intellectual endowments in woman, because I believe such natural gifts to have proved much more frequently her bane, than her blessing, and because they are not the qualifications of female character which conduce most to her own happiness, or the happiness of those around her; yet if there be any case in which a woman might be forgiven for entertaining an honest pride in the superiority of her own talent, it would be where she regarded it only as a means of doing higher homage to her husband, and bringing greater ability to bear upon the advancement of his intellectual and moral good.

Indeed, what is the possession of talent to a woman, when considered in her own character, separately, and alone?—The possession of a dangerous heritage—a jewel which cannot with propriety be worn—a mine of wealth, which has no legitimate channel for the expenditure of its vast resources. . . .

In the case of a highly gifted woman, even where there is an equal or superior degree of talent possessed by her husband, nothing can be more injudicious, or more fatal to her happiness, than an exhibition even of the least disposition to presume upon such gifts. Let her husband be once subjected to a feeling of jealousy of her importance, which, without the strictest watchfulness, will be liable to arise, and her peace of mind and her free agency are alike destroyed for the remainder of her life; or at any rate, until she can convince him afresh, by a long continuance of the most scrupulous conduct, that the injury committed against him was purely accidental, and foreign alike to her feelings and her inclinations.

The Wives of England, an instructional handbook for English brides, by Mrs. Ellis (1843)

In the 1890s one jested about the revolt of the daughters, and of the wives who slammed the front door like Nora. At present the revolt has become so general that even the feeblest and oldest after-dinner jesters dare no longer keep Votes for Women on their list of stale pleasantries about mothers-in-law, rational dress, and mixed bathing. Men are waking up to the perception that in killing women’s souls they have killed their own. . . .

[I]t is only two days since an eminent bacteriologist filled three columns of the Times with a wild Strindbergian letter in which he declared that women must be politically and professionally secluded and indeed excluded, because their presence and influence inflict on men an obsession so disabling and dangerous that men and women can work together or legislate together only on the same conditions as horses and mares: that is, but the surgical destruction of the male’s sex. The Times and the Pall Mall Gazette gravely accept this outburst as “scientific,” and heartily endorse it. . . .
The domestic career is no more natural to all women than the military career is natural to all men; and although in a population emergency it might become necessary to every able-bodied woman to risk her life in childbirth just as it might become necessary in a military emergency for every man to risk his life in the battlefield, yet even then it would by no means follow that the childbearing would endow the mother with domestic aptitudes and capacities as it would endow her with milk. It is of course quite true that the majority of women are kind to children and prefer their own to other people’s. But exactly the same thing is true of the majority of men, who nevertheless do not consider that their proper sphere is the nursery.

The sum of the matter is that unless Woman repudiates her womanliness, her duty to her husband, to her children, to society, to the law, and to everyone but herself, she cannot emancipate herself. . . . In that repudiation lies her freedom; for it is false to say that Woman is now directly the slave of Man: she is the immediate slave of duty; and as man’s path to freedom is strewn with the wreckage of the duties and ideals he has trampled on, so much hers be.

George Bernard Shaw, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891)

Are we equal yet? Are we dead yet? Have the frontlash and the backlash met, grappled, and twisted themselves together like a pair of mating snakes? More than 150 years after the Seneca Falls Convention, when American women first met to demand full legal, political, and social equality, including the right to vote, the position of women continues to provoke furious argument. . . . Some of the same ambivalence marks even the attempt to evaluate how powerful women are. On the one hand, we read constantly that women aren’t interested in feminism, that it doesn’t work, can’t work, even our genes are against it: Men are programmed to dominate and spread seed widely among the young and fertile, women to nest and preen and cuddle up to wealth and power. . . . Feminists have rewritten the age-old contract between the sexes—she gives sex in return for support—and in the process have revamped law, politics, religion, education, and the literary canon. Why women have been able to fly in the face of nature is never explained, much less why they would even have the desire to do so or, most mysterious of all, why men have cooperated with this mad plan. After all, men are still firmly in charge of all the institutions accused of excessive kowtowing to feminists—the courts, the legislatures, the corporations, the schools and universities and publishing houses and seminaries.

Katha Pollit, introduction to *Subject to Debate* (2001)
ON PLAYING NORA

I received a letter from a man, who had seen *A Doll’s House*, a beautiful letter, that I prize very highly for it shows what an influence the drama can have on people. He thanked me for having taught him a salutary lesson which would, he thought, be the saving of his married life. He realized that he, too, had been living in a doll’s house, that he had treated his wife as a child and a plaything, and he said that he was going to change it all and make a real home and his wife a real wife. I wrote to him that I was glad if I had helped him. But I do not know, after all, that I did help him. Can a man reform his doll’s house? Does it not have to be done by the woman herself? Is not that the whole lesson of the play? The husband may spoil his wife but he cannot make her into an independent woman, an individual standing upon her own feet and knowing herself.

*Alla Nazimova (1907)*

I’m so naïve—when they said they were going to do the play, I thought they were going to do the play. I got to Norway and I found they had chosen an alcoholic misogynist English playwright to do some rewriting. All the men involved decided that what Ibsen said about women didn’t apply anymore. I discovered that the male characters, who are somewhat shadowy, had been built up and the women were shaved down . . . except Nora—if you tie Nora’s tubes, you’ve got nothing left. There was I, another woman, and Delphine Seying, and we were being called dykes, a gaggle of bitches.

They were supposed to give us two weeks of rehearsal, which they didn’t. So there we were, and it was like the house was burning, what could you salvage. You grab your socks. We tried to get at least the most important things back in. It wasn’t that we sat around bitching. Actually, most of the men were drunk all the time. And of course they interpreted anything we did as simply wanting more lines to say. They painted it as a conspiracy of dykes ganging up on us poor men! Everyday there would be some inscription on the camera about Women’s Lib. The strangest thing happened. I found I had to become Nora with Losey [the director], bat my eyelashes, and make it seem as though it was his idea. Every day I realized how valid the play was, as Ibsen’s whole thesis was being acted out.

*Jane Fonda (1974)*

“No one will sacrifice his honor for love,” says Helmer, and Nora replies: “Millions of women have.”
I ask Sam Waterston, who is playing Helmer, if he would be willing to give up his profession for a woman if for some reason doing this were essential for continued relationship. Sam doesn’t think so, and asks if I could.

“Yes, I could.” I think about it. “I believe many women do, because we have such belief that love is important.”

“But don’t you value yourself more?” Sam asks.

“That is what we do. We can give up our profession because we value what we are.”

Liv Ullmann (1977)

THE CHALLENGES OF TRANSLATION

According to Ibsen biographer Michael Meyer, the first documented attempt at an English translation of A Doll’s House was made by a Danish teacher named T. Weber in 1880. Below are excerpts from his translation, followed by the equivalent passages as translated by A.C.T. Dramaturg Paul Walsh:

Weber

nora: Don’t utter such stupid shuffles . . . Doff the shawl . . . From this moment it depends no longer on felicity; it depends only on saving the rests, remnants, and the appearance.

Walsh

nora: Don’t come here with idiotic alibis . . . Take that shawl off . . . Now it’s no longer a question of happiness, only a question of saving some scraps, some pieces, some fragments—

Weber

helmer: You are first of all a wife and mother.

nora: . . . I believe that I am first of all a man, I as well as you—or at all events, that I am to try to become a man.

Walsh

helmer: You are first and foremost a wife and mother.

nora: I believe that I am first and foremost a human being. Just like you. Or in any case, I should try to be one.

Weber

nora: As I am now, I am no wife for you.

helmer: I have the power to grow another.
Walsh

NORA: As I am now, I'm no wife for you.
HELMER: I have the strength to become someone else.

Weber

HELMER: Change yourself in such a manner that—
NORA: —that cohabitation between you and me might become a matrimony. Goodbye.

Walsh

HELMER: We'll need to change—so that—?
NORA: So that our life together would be a marriage. Goodbye.

IBSEN TO THE RESCUE

London's West End, theater's most hallowed ground, has of late been long on celebrity and short on serious theater. . . . Who'd have guessed that it would take a long-dead Norwegian playwright to save the West End? To the relief of lovers of serious theater, no fewer than four plays by Henrik Ibsen [The Master Builder, Brand, The Lady from the Sea, and Ghosts] have opened in London this summer. Granted, the lead performers have some Hollywood movies on their cvs, but they also have serious theater cred—Ralph Fiennes, Natasha Richardson, and Patrick Stewart know their way around the boards—and they're drawing rapturous reviews and full-house crowds. Industry-bible Variety magazine declared: “London stages a big comeback—a moribund theater climate has turned itself around.” . . .

None of these plays is easy for performer or audience, especially the rarely done Brand and The Lady From the Sea. But their success doesn't surprise the Almeida's artistic director, Michael Attenborough. “People have an image of Ibsen as elderly, stern, and white-whiskered,” he says, “But he was mischievous, always pushing political and theatrical boundaries. That's why his characters still challenge us.”

Ibsen's characters are usually required to make difficult choices, a theme Attenborough says mirrors society's struggle between its anarchic and restrictive instincts. . . . For [Brand director Adrian] Noble, Ibsen's characters, conceived in the 19th century, are eerily modern. “Brand is about fundamentalism, about people who believe that life on Earth is not of ultimate value,” he says. “Reading about suicide bombings in Israel, that speaks to me.” Stewart, whose sexagenarian Master Builder lusts for a teenage girl, reports that, during a tour of some of the more prudish British towns, audience members walked out in protest. “It felt as shocking as it was in the 1890s. I rather enjoyed that!”

ONE WOMAN'S CONSCIOUSNESS

BY JOAN TEMPLETON

As strange as it may seem to the uninitiated, it is standard procedure in Ibsen criticism to save the author of *A Doll's House* from the contamination of feminism. It is customary to cite a statement the dramatist made on May 26, 1898, at a 70th-birthday banquet given in his honor by the Norwegian Women's Rights League: “I thank you for the toast, but must disclaim the honor of having consciously worked for the women’s rights movement. . . . True enough, it is desirable to solve the woman problem, along with all the others; but that has not been the whole purpose. My task has been the description of humanity.” Ibsen specialists like to take this disavowal as a precise reference to the dramatist’s purpose in writing *A Doll's House* 20 years earlier, his “original intention,” in Maurice Valency’s phrase. Meyer urges all reviewers of *Doll's House* revivals to learn Ibsen’s speech by heart. James McFarlane, the editor of *The Oxford Ibsen*, the standard English edition of Ibsen’s complete works, excludes the subject of feminism from the historical and critical material on *A Doll’s House*, but includes Ibsen’s speech.

Whatever propaganda feminists may have made of *A Doll's House*, Ibsen, it is argued, never meant to write a play about the topical subject of women’s rights; Nora’s conflict represents something other than, or something more than, woman’s . . .

Critics who deny that *A Doll’s House* is a feminist play often present their work as part of a corrective effort to rescue Ibsen from an erroneous reputation as a writer of thesis plays, a wrongheaded notion usually blamed on Shaw, who, it is claimed, mistakenly saw Ibsen as the 19th century’s greatest iconoclast and offered that misreading to the public as *The Quintessence of Ibsensim*. Ibsen, it is now fashionable to explain, did not stoop to “issues.” He was a poet of the truth of the human soul. That Nora’s doll house and exit from it have long been principal international symbols for women’s issues is irrelevant to the essential meaning of *A Doll’s House*, a play, in Richard Gilman’s phrase, “pitched beyond sexual difference.” . . . Like angels, Nora has no sex. Ibsen meant her to be Everyman.

The a priori dismissal of women’s oppression as the subject of *A Doll’s House* insists that in Ibsen’s timeless world of Everyman, questions of gender can only be tedious intrusions. But for over a hundred years, in another kind of backlash entirely, Nora has been under siege as exhibiting the most peridious characteristics of her sex; the original outcry of the 1880s is swollen now to a mighty chorus of blame. Ibsen’s protagonist is denounced as an irrational and frivolous narcissist; an “abnormal” woman, a “hysteric”; a vain egotist who abandons her own children. The proponents of the last view treat Nora as a kind of bour-
geois Medea, whose cruelty Ibsen tailored down to fit the framed, domestic world of realist drama . . .

Universalist readers of *A Doll’s House* make the familiar claim that the work in question can be no more about women than men because the interests of both are the same “human” ones; sex is irrelevant, and thus gender nonexistent, in the literary search for the self, which transcends and obliterates mere sexual and social determinations. Faced with a drama whose protagonist rejects the nonself she defines as a “doll” and describes as the plaything of her father and husband, we must be cautious not to let feminism, the proper concern of pamphlets, or thesis plays, perhaps, get in the way of art. Nora’s drama can be poetry only if it goes “beyond” feminism.

The first point to make here is that this argument is an example of begging the question: the overwhelmingly deductive reasoning, while never laid out, is that since true art is not polemical and thus cannot be feminist, and since *A Doll’s House* is true art, then *A Doll’s House* cannot be feminist. The conclusion rests on the assumption that women’s struggles for equality, along with, one must suppose, all other struggles for human rights in which biological or social identity figures prominently, is too limited to be the stuff of literature. Feminism is suitable to flat characters in flat-heeled shoes who spring fully armed with pamphlets from their creators’ heads in works as predictable as propaganda. Women’s equality with men is a subject that lies outside the realm of art, which treats universal, non-polemical issues of human life, whose nature is complex and evolutionary.

Secondly, implicit in the argument that would rescue *A Doll’s House* from feminist ideology is an emphatically sex-linked ideology whose base is tautological. Women’s struggle for equal rights, it is claimed, is not a fit subject for tragedy or poetry because it is insufficiently representative to be generally and thus literarily human. Now if this is so, it can only be because those human beings who are not women, i.e., men, already possess the rights that women seek, and are thus excluded in the other sex’s struggle, which is, precisely, a struggle for equality with them. In other words, woman’s desire to be equal cannot be representative because she is unequal. The non-sense of the tautology is doubled when its reasoning is applied to a literary text; for if the lives of Nora Helmer and other female protagonists are worthy of our critical and moral attention only insofar as they are unrelated to the women’s inferior status, and if the works themselves are art to the extent that what their protagonists are seeking transcends their sexual identity, then what happens to them is significant literature only to the extent that it can happen to men as well. This means that Nora Helmer, and, to choose among other famous female protagonists of drama—Shakespeare’s Cleopatra, Racine’s Phaedra, Strindberg’s Julie, Shaw’s Candida—could just as well be men—except for their sex, of course . . .
However, to say that Nora Helmer stands for the individual in search of his or her self, besides being an unhelpful and rather platitudinous generalization, is wrong, if not absurd. For it means that Nora’s conflict has essentially nothing to do with her identity as a 19th-century married woman, a married woman, or a woman. Yet both Nora and *A Doll’s House* are unimaginable otherwise. . . .

The claim that Nora cannot be a feminist heroine because she is flawed is an example of question-begging similar to the argument that *A Doll’s House* is not a feminist play because feminism is ipso facto an unworthy subject of art. Nora’s detractors use unnamed, “self-evident” criteria for a feminist heroine that Nora does not meet, among which would seem to be one, some, or all of the following: an ever-present serious-mindedness; a calm, unexcitable temperament; an unshakeable conviction to obey the letter of the law, even if it means the death of a husband; perfect sincerity and honesty; and a thoroughgoing selflessness. For *A Doll’s House* to be feminist, it would, apparently, have to be a kind of fourth-wall morality play with a saintly Everyfeminist as heroine, and not this ignorant, excitable, confused—in short, human—Nora Helmer.

But while Nora’s flaws keep her from representing women, the argument stops short and the case is curiously altered in the claim that she represents human beings. Nora’s humanity disallows her from representing women, but not, magically, from representing people, i.e., men, and women to the extent that what happens to them can happen to men as well, surely as fabulous an example of critical reasoning as we can imagine. . . .

*A Doll’s House* is the greatest literary argument against the notion of the “two spheres,” the neat, centuries-old division of the world into his and hers that the 19th century made a doctrine for living. The home, the woman’s place, is a make-believe world fit for dolls; the chivalric ideal, the old credo of male noblesse oblige the bourgeois century resurrected to justify the cloistering of the female, proves, when put to the test, pure humbug: “But there’s no one who gives up honor for love” the outraged husband explains to the stunned wife, who has expected him to shield her from infamy. And she, who has secretly saved his life and paid for it through years of hard work, all the while playing the silly dolly to his wise man, recognizes the enormous significance of her folly born from love: “Millions of women have done just that.” The power of *A Doll’s House* lies not “beyond” but within its feminism. . . . No other work illustrates as powerfully the truth rediscovered by recent feminist scholarship that the conception of the two spheres reflected neither “natural” competencies nor the reality of men’s and women’s lives, but was an ideological construct that masked inequality and forced segregation on the basis of sex; no other work insists so explicitly on the hypocrisy, waste, and sheer foolishness of isolating women from the work of the world. . . .
To argue that A Doll's House is not a feminist play because it lacks banners and a blue-stocking is to deny the very source of its power: its dramatization of the flowering of one woman's consciousness. Ibsen understood, both in the play and in the world, for Nora and for her audience, that what we live through individually creates our principles and forms our allegiances.

Those who dismiss A Doll's House as dated would do well to reexamine what Nora left behind her. To shut the door on a husband was insufficiently audacious; Ibsen gave Nora three young children as well. . . . Torvald's plea is always that Nora consider her duties to her “husband and children” as though the three words were a compound noun. Ibsen does not separate Nora as mother from Nora as wife because he is identifying the whole source of her oppression, the belief in a “female nature,” an immutable thing in itself whose proper sphere is domestic wifehood and whose essence is maternity. Nora's leaving is, in her husband's words, “outrageous” and “insane” because it denies the purpose of her existence, a reproductive and servicing one. . . . Ibsen demythologizes motherhood by separating it from childbearing. . . . Limiting women to domesticity yet simultaneously holding them responsible for raising children is absurd.
IS MARRIAGE LIKE A BRAN MUFFIN?

BY KATHA POLLIT

Why did you get married? Was it to boost your savings rate? Lengthen your life span? Protect yourself against risky behaviors like driving too fast and getting into fist-fights? If you're like me, you probably can't give a coherent account of your decision to marry. You may even be paying a therapist large sums of money, thus lowering your saving rate rather drastically, to explain yourself to you. But now, thanks to Linda J. Waite, professor of sociology at the University of Chicago, you can put that checkbook away. “Does Marriage Matter?” her paper at the Population Association of America’s annual conference, sets out the benefits of wedlock with such enthusiasm that it won’t be her fault—or that of the media, which have trumpeted her findings coast to coast—if the nation’s aisles aren't trampled beneath the stampeding hooves of brides and grooms.

Marriage, Professor Waite has discovered, is good for you. Married people have more money, more sex, more satisfaction, and, as previously noted, longer lives than singles or cohabitants (actually, her tables show cohabitants have the most sex, but her text elides this inconvenient datum). Married people live in safer neighborhoods, “experience an orderly lifestyle” and have children who are less likely to drop out of school.

None of this is exactly news. After all, if marriage didn't hold out powerful advantages, why would anyone wed? Certainly we don’t need sociology to tell us that two people pooling their resources and facing life together can reap benefits closed to those who are single or who live together but keep their resources separate. This would probably be true in any society, but is particularly the case in America, where for millions of people, marriage is the only social-welfare system: It is how they obtain health insurance and pensions, get help with the kids and keep a roof over their heads. From the legal system to Thanksgiving at Grandma’s Americans shower approval on marriage. As any advocate of gay marriage could tell you, Waite’s big revelation is actually a buried tautology: Marriage confers upon John and Jane the advantages society accords to married people.

Everyone understands this. That’s why, despite oceans of social change, the rate of white women who’ve never married has hardly budged from around 20 percent since 1950—a fact Waite obscures by stressing the rising proportion of never-married black women, a tiny percentage of the adult female population, whose never-married status is largely a function of declining numbers of marriageable black men. So who, exactly, does Professor Waite think needs to be sold on marriage in the same urgent spirit in which doctors campaign for exercise and against smoking?
She writes as if the nation were teeming with antimarriage zealots, women (naturally) who "see the traditional family, balanced on the monogamous couple, as fundamentally incompatible with women's well-being." But in fact, the people fleeing marriage are the people who've tried it. And it's a funny thing, Waite's own statistics suggest there's something in that feminist critique: The benefits of marriage are notably skewed. Men report greater physical satisfaction in sex within marriage; for women, marital status makes no difference. Unmarried and divorced men are the ones with the noticeably increased risks of heavy drinking, and it is men who derive an income "premium" from marriage or cohabitation. For women, the negative health effects of nonmarriage are fairly trivial, and marriage, which boosts men's earnings, lowers theirs (unless, interestingly, they're black).

The downside of the "specialization" of roles Waite calls a plus to the married couple is the wife's second shift: housework, child care, husband-mothering.

The truth is, social science is not much help to the individual trying to chart a course through life. The categories are too crude, the numbers too big, the causal connections too suspect. You might indeed be healthier, wealthier, and wiser if you married—but what if your suitor was O. J. Simpson or Al D'Amato? Instead of touting marriage's practical advantages, Professor Waite might more usefully have asked why nearly half of all married people nonetheless forgo them in favor of studio apartments and an early grave. Waite lists the usual reasons for the "decline" of marriage—women working, changing attitudes toward nonmarital sex, and so on—but these explain only why divorce and cohabitation are possible, not why people embrace them. Could it be that the prospect of spending the rest of your life with someone you don't love, maybe don't even like, is so painful that plump investments and balanced meals pale by comparison?

The troubadours, who argued that love and marriage were incompatible, since marriage was an economic and social arrangement and love was adoration and passion, would have had no problem understanding the marital instability Professor Waite finds so perplexing. To her Ben Franklinish case for marriage as a matter of prudence, prosperity, health, and convenience, they would reply, The world is ablaze with possibility and—mon Dieu!—you speak of savings rates? Of someone to nag you about your smoking? I don't know about you, but I'm with Bernart de Ventadorn.

THE OPT-OUT REVOLUTION

BY LISA BELKIN

The scene in this cozy Atlanta living room would—at first glance—warm an early feminist’s heart. Gathered by the fireplace one recent evening, sipping wine and nibbling cheese, are the members of a book club, each of them a beneficiary of all that feminists of 30-odd years ago held dear.

The eight women in the room have each earned a degree from Princeton, which was a citadel of everything male until the first co-educated class entered in 1969. And after Princeton, the women of this book club went on to do other things that women once were not expected to do. They received law degrees from Harvard and Columbia. They chose husbands who could keep up with them, not simply support them. They waited to have children because work was too exciting. They put on power suits and marched off to take on the world.

Yes, if an early feminist could peer into this scene, she would feel triumphant about the future. Until, of course, any one of these polished and purposeful women opened her mouth.

“I don’t want to be on the fast track leading to a partnership at a prestigious law firm,” says Katherine Brokaw, who left that track in order to stay home with her three children. “Some people define that as success. I don’t.”

“I don’t want to be famous; I don’t want to conquer the world; I don’t want that kind of life,” says Sarah McArthur Amsbary, who was a theater artist and teacher and earned her master’s degree in English, then stepped out of the work force when her daughter was born. “Maternity provides an escape hatch that paternity does not. Having a baby provides a graceful and convenient exit.”

Wander into any Starbucks in any Starbucks kind of neighborhood in the hours after the commuters are gone. See all those mothers drinking coffee and watching over toddlers at play? If you look past the Lycra gym clothes and the Internet-access cellphones, the scene could be the ’50s, but for the fact that the coffee is more expensive and the mothers have M.B.A.s.

We’ve gotten so used to the sight that we’ve lost track of the fact that this was not the way it was supposed to be. Women—specifically, educated professional women—were supposed to achieve like men. Once the barriers came down, once the playing field was leveled, they were supposed to march toward the future and take rightful ownership of the universe, or at the very least, ownership of their half. The women’s movement was largely
about grabbing a fair share of power—making equal money, standing at the helm in the macho realms of business and government and law. It was about running the world.

“We thought there would be a woman president by now,” says Marie Wilson, director of the Ms. Foundation for Women and president of the White House Project, who has been fighting to increase the representation of women in work and politics since 1975. “We expected that women would be leading half the companies in this country, that there would be parity on boards.” Instead, Wilson has just finished a book that includes an examination, in her words, of “how far we haven’t come,” titled Closing the Leadership Gap: Why Women Can and Must Help Run the World.

Arguably, the barriers of 40 years ago are down. Fifty percent of the undergraduate class of 2003 at Yale was female; this year’s graduating class at Berkeley Law School was 63 percent women; Harvard was 46 percent; Columbia was 51. Nearly 47 percent of medical students are women, as are 50 percent of undergraduate business majors (though, interestingly, about 30 percent of M.B.A. candidates). They are recruited by top firms in all fields. They start strong out of the gate.

And then, suddenly, they stop. Despite all those women graduating from law school, they comprise only 16 percent of partners in law firms. Although men and women enter corporate training programs in equal numbers, just 16 percent of corporate officers are women, and only eight companies in the Fortune 500 have female CEOs. Of 435 members of the House of Representatives, 62 are women; there are 14 women in the 100-member Senate.

Measured against the way things once were, this is certainly progress. But measured against the way things were expected to be, this is a revolution stalled. During the ’90s, the talk was about the glass ceiling, about women who were turned away at the threshold of power simply because they were women. The talk of this new decade is less about the obstacles faced by women than it is about the obstacles faced by mothers. As Joan C. Williams, director of the Program on WorkLife Law at American University, wrote in the Harvard Women’s Law Journal last spring, “Many women never get near” that glass ceiling, because “they are stopped long before by the maternal wall.”

Look, for example, at the Stanford class of ’81. Fifty-seven percent of mothers in that class spent at least a year at home caring for their infant children in the first decade after graduation. One out of four have stayed home three or more years. Look at Harvard Business School. A survey of women from the classes of 1981, 1985, and 1991 found that only 38 percent were working full time. Look at professional women in surveys across the board. Between one-quarter and one-third are out of the work force, depending on the study and the profession. Look at the United States Census, which shows that the number of
children being cared for by stay-at-home moms has increased nearly 13 percent in less than a decade. At the same time, the percentage of new mothers who go back to work fell from 59 percent in 1998 to 55 percent in 2000.

Look, too, at the mothers who have not left completely but have scaled down or redefined their roles in the crucial career-building years (25 to 44). Two-thirds of those mothers work fewer than 40 hours a week—in other words, part time. Only 5 percent work 50 or more hours weekly. Women leave the workplace to strike out on their own at equally telling rates; the number of businesses owned or co-owned by women jumped 11 percent since 1997, nearly twice the rate of businesses in general.

Look at how all these numbers compare with those of men. Of white men with MBAs, 95 percent are working full time, but for white women with MBAs, that number drops to 67 percent. (Interestingly, the numbers for African-American women are closer to those for white men than to those for white women.)

And look at the women of this Atlanta book club. A roomful of Princeton women each trained as well as any man. Of the ten members, half are not working at all; one is in business with her husband; one works part time; two freelance; and the only one with a full-time job has no children.

Social scientists—most of them women—have made a specialty in recent years of studying why all this is so. Joan Williams (Unbending Gender), Sylvia Ann Hewlett (Creating a Life), Arlie Russell Hochschild (who coined the phrase “the second shift”) and Felice N. Schwartz (who made popular the phrase “the mommy track”), to name just a few, have done important work about how the workplace has failed women.

But to talk to the women of the book club—or to the women of a San Francisco mothers’ group with whom I also spent time, or the dozens of other women I interviewed, or the countless women I have come to know during the four years I have reported on the intersection of life and work—is to sense that something more is happening here. It’s not just that the workplace has failed women. It is also that women are rejecting the workplace.

I say this with the full understanding that there are ambitious, achieving women out there who are the emotional and professional equals of any man, and that there are also women who stayed the course, climbed the work ladder without pause and were thwarted by lingering double standards and chauvinism. I also say this knowing that to suggest that women work differently than men—that they leave more easily and find other parts of life more fulfilling—is a dangerous and loaded statement.

And lastly, I am very aware that, for the moment, this is true mostly of elite, successful women who can afford real choice—who have partners with substantial salaries and health insurance—making it easy to dismiss them as exceptions. To that I would argue that these
are the very women who were supposed to be the professional equals of men right now, so the fact that so many are choosing otherwise is explosive.

As these women look up at the “top,” they are increasingly deciding that they don’t want to do what it takes to get there. Women today have the equal right to make the same bargain that men have made for centuries—to take time from their family in pursuit of success. Instead, women are redefining success. And in doing so, they are redefining work.

Time was when a woman’s definition of success was said to be her apple-pie recipe. Or her husband’s promotion. Or her well-turned-out children. Next, being successful required becoming a man. Remember those awful padded-shoulder suits and floppy ties? Success was about the male definition of money and power.

There is nothing wrong with money or power. But they come at a high price. And lately when women talk about success they use words like satisfaction, balance, and sanity.

That’s why a recent survey by the research firm Catalyst found that 26 percent of women at the cusp of the most senior levels of management don’t want the promotion. And it’s why Fortune magazine found that of the 108 women who have appeared on its list of the top 50 most powerful women over the years, at least 20 have chosen to leave their high-powered jobs, most voluntarily, for lives that are less intense and more fulfilling.

It’s why President Bush’s adviser Karen Hughes left the White House, saying her family was homesick and wanted to go back to Austin. It’s why Brenda C. Barnes, who was the president and ceo of Pepsi-Cola North America, left that job to move back to Illinois with her family. And it’s why Wendy Chamberlin, who was ambassador to Pakistan, resigned, because security concerns meant she never saw her two young daughters.

Why don’t women run the world?
Maybe it’s because they don’t want to.

[N]o doubt, a ’70s feminist peering in the window would be confused at best and depressed at worst. But unmapped roads are not, de facto, dead ends. Is this a movement that failed, or one reborn? What does this evolving spectrum of demands and choices tell us about women? And what does it mean for the future?

Sarah Amsbary also raises the question of biology. “It’s all in the MRI,” she says, of studies that show the brains of men and women “light up” differently when they think or feel. And those different brains, she argues, inevitably make different choices. Amsbary graduated with a degree in English, not science, in 1988, and while at Princeton she was one of the first women in the University Cottage Club, which, when I was there, was still
an all-male eating club known for attracting preppy good ol’ boys. I can only imagine that being the first woman in such a place was its own kind of Darwinian experience.

When I talk to Jeannie Tarkenton, another member of the book club, biology comes up yet again. “I think some of us are swinging to a place where we enjoy, and can admit we enjoy, the stereotypical role of female/mother/caregiver,” Tarkenton says. “I think we were born with those feelings.”

Tarkenton graduated in 1992 and worked first in publishing and then on the start-up of the Atlanta Girls’ School, until she had her first child in 2000. She went back and worked three days a week, until her second child was born last year. “I didn’t want to work that hard,” she says of her decision to quit completely. “Women today, if we think about feminism at all, we see it as a battle fought for ‘the choice.’ For us, the freedom to choose work if we want to work is the feminist strain in our lives.”

When these women blame biology, they do so apologetically, and I find the tone as interesting as the words. Any parent can tell you that children are hard-wired from birth: this one is shy, this one is outgoing; this one is laid-back; this one is intense. They were born that way. And any student of the animal kingdom will tell you that males and females of a species act differently. Male baboons leave their mothers; female baboons stay close for life. The female kangaroo is oblivious to her young; the male seahorse carries fertilized eggs to term. Susan Allport, a naturalist, writes in her book *A Natural History of Parenting*, “Males provide direct childcare in less than 5 percent of mammalian species, but in over 90 percent of bird species both male and female tend to their young.”

In other words, we accept that humans are born with certain traits, and we accept that other species have innate differences between the sexes. What we are loath to do is extend that acceptance to humans. Partly that’s because absolute scientific evidence one way or the other is impossible to collect. But mostly it is because so much of recent history (the civil rights movement, the women’s movement) is an attempt to prove that biology is not destiny. To suggest otherwise is to resurrect an argument that can be—and has been—dangerously misused.

“I am so conflicted on this,” says Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, an anthropologist and author of *Mother Nature: A History of Mothers, Infants, and Natural Selection*. Female primates, she says, are “competitive” in that they seek status within their social order. So it would follow that women strive for status too.

But there is an important qualifier. When primates compete, they do so in ways that increase the survival chances of their offspring. In other words, they do it for their children. “At this moment in Western civilization,” Hrdy says, “seeking clout in a male world does not correlate with child well-being. Today, striving for status usually means
leaving your children with an au pair who’s just there for a year, or in inadequate day care. So it’s not that women aren’t competitive; it’s just that they don’t want to compete along the lines that are not compatible with their other goals.

“I’m very interested in my family and my environment and my work, not in forging ahead and climbing a power structure,” Hrdy explains by way of personal illustration. “That is one of the inherent differences between the sexes.” Then she warns, “But to turn that into dogma—women are caring, men are not, or men should have power, women should not—that’s dangerous and false.”

... Talk to any professional woman who made this choice [to “opt out” of professional work while her children are very young], and this is what she will say. She is not her mother or her grandmother. She has made a temporary decision for just a few years, not a permanent decision for the rest of her life. She has not lost her skills, just put them on hold.

“I’m calling this my ‘maternity leave,’” Sears says. “As long as I have the chit on the table that says ‘This is not forever,’ then I feel ok about it.”

Brokaw agrees, protesting, “Don’t make me look like some 1950s Stepford wife.” In the years since she left her law firm, she has helped found the Atlanta Girls’ School (the same place where Tarkenton once worked) and also raised a successful challenge to a bridge that was to have spilled its traffic into her residential neighborhood. “I use my legal skills every day.”

Don’t look at her as something out of The Bell Jar either. She is not trapped. This is a choice. And don’t worry for her that she will have no resources should something happen to her spouse, his career, or their marriage, she insists. “My degree is my insurance policy.”

But is it enough insurance? Not only in the event that she needs to go back to work, but also when the time comes, that she wants to. Because at the moment, it is unclear what women like these will be able to go back to. This is the hot button of the work-life debate at the moment, a question on which the future of women and work might well hinge. For all the change happening in the office, the challenge of returning workers—those who opted out completely, and those who ratcheted back—is barely even starting to be addressed.

If that workplace can reabsorb those who left into a career they find fulfilling, then stepping out may in fact be the answer to the frustrations of this generation. If not, then their ability to balance life and work will be no different than their mothers’, after all.

On the one hand, there are examples out there of successful women whose careers were not linear. Shirley Tilghman, president of Princeton and the first woman to run the university, spent years deflecting administrative jobs—exactly the sort of jobs that tradition-
ally lead to becoming university president. And Ann Fudge, now chairman and ceo of Young & Rubicam, left the fast track for two years to travel the world with her husband and help start a tutoring program for African-American children.

There are also trends working in these women’s favor. One legacy of the dot-com era is that nonlinear career tracks are more accepted and employers are less put off by a résumé with gaps and zigzags. Second, a labor shortage is looming in the coming decade, just as this cohort of women may well be planning to re-enter the work force.

On the other hand, the current economy is hardly welcoming to re-entrants, and the traditional workplace structure does not include a Welcome Back mat. “As a society we have become very good at building offramps,” says Sylvia Ann Hewlett, who caused a stir last year with her book, Creating a Life, which postulated that the more successful the woman the less likely she was to marry or have children. “But we are seriously lacking onramps.”

Hewlett has recently founded the Center for Work-Life Policy and, along with Cornel West, a Princeton professor, and Carolyn Buck Luce, a senior partner at Ernst & Young, has created a task force to study what she calls the “hidden brain drain” of women and minorities from the work force. (I have been invited to join that group.) Task-force members include representatives from a wide range of power bases—large law firms, accounting firms, investment banks, and universities—who are coming to recognize that it is not enough to promote and retain talent. You have to acknowledge that talented workers will leave, and you have to find a way to help them come back.

The task force begins its work this winter. But Hewlett’s preliminary research makes her pessimistic about what today’s women will face when they want to return to work. At any given time, she says, “two-thirds of all women who quit their career to raise children” are “seeking to re-enter professional life and finding it exceedingly difficult. These women may think they can get back in,” she said, when I told her of what I had been hearing in San Francisco and Atlanta and on my own suburban street, where half the women with children at home are not working and where the jobs they quit include law partner and investment banker. “But my data show that it’s harder than they anticipate. Are they going to live to the age of 83 and realize that they opted out of a career?”

If so, they say they are braced for the trade-off: “I don’t know how you just step out for three to five years until your kids are in kindergarten and then announce to the world that you’re ready to pull out your résumé and take on the challenging, fulfilling job that you deserve,” Kresse says. “If and when I go back, it may never be full time. So given that I’m going to be a part-time person, is it also a given that my male colleagues are going to get
ahead of me? Or is it going to be a meritocracy where talent really does matter most? I can't know that now."

...  
For the moment . . . the future is a question mark. “I assume my daughter will work,” Jeannie Tarkenton says, “and I want to give her some example of working women as she grows up. I plan for this example to come from me, somehow. Maybe it will be part-time work, maybe full time, or maybe just through stories about the ten years I worked before she arrived.”

There is a powerful institution run largely by women: Princeton University. Shirley Tilghman is a molecular biologist who took the top job more than two years ago. Her provost, Amy Gutmann, is a professor of politics and was dean of the faculty before being appointed to the post by Tilghman.

Of the five academic deans who report to Gutmann, three are women: Nancy Weiss Malkiel, a historian, is dean of the college; Maria M. Klawe is dean of the school of engineering; Anne-Marie Slaughter, a lawyer, is dean of the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. On top of that, Janet Lavin Rapelye is the new dean of admissions.

This has not gone unnoticed. One member of the class of '41 wrote to the *Princeton Alumni Weekly* magazine that since “we now have a lady president and a lady second in command, to save time I recommend that the trustees promptly convert Princeton to a single-sex female university and be done with it.” Another wrote to suggest that the name of the school be changed to “Princesstonia.”

Tilghman says she was not really surprised by this old-guard crankiness. These were the same alums, she says, who objected to coeducation in the first place, arguing that women would not donate large amounts to their alma mater after they graduated. Meg Whitman, class of 1977 and president and CEO of eBay Inc. seems to have silenced that objection with her recent $30 million gift.

What did surprise Tilghman, though, was the reaction—or lack of reaction—from current female students. Last spring, after one of these new deans was appointed, the *Daily Princetonian* ran an editorial suggesting that the president was practicing “gender-based affirmative action.” Tilghman waited for the women on campus to “rise up in protest” at the implication that “the only way you can possibly justify appointing a woman is in the interest of affirmative action, because, after all, it couldn’t possibly be because they were the best person for the job.”
But nothing of the sort happened. “Have these young women internalized the idea that women really do not lead?” she asks sadly. “There was a time when that kind of thinking would have inspired outrage.”

One such time was in 1968, when Tilghman graduated from Queens University in Kingston, Ontario. “I am very much a child of that revolution,” she says of the early years of the women’s movement. “I came of age at the time when Betty Friedan set things in motion, and it had a tremendous impact on my life. It opened doors for me,” as a woman in the sciences, “beyond a shadow of a doubt.”

Now Tilghman finds herself presiding over a new generation, one that is, arguably, more accomplished and more qualified than any that has come before, but one that is not at all sure what to do with all that talent. She raised her son and daughter on her own (she was divorced when her children were young), and she is more than aware of the compromises made both at work and at home. She sees the effect those compromises have had, particularly on her daughter, a 2003 Princeton graduate.

“A life in science, combined with motherhood, meant leaving undone a lot of things I might have wanted to do,” she says. “There were books I wished I had read, courses I wished I had taken, community service I wished I had done, places I wished I had seen, friends I wished I had made—but time constraints made this impossible.” Her daughter, she says, “is not as ambitious as I was. I think she saw the trade-offs that I made as ones she might not be prepared to make herself. She is looking for more balance in her life.”

Other members of that generation seem to feel the same way, Tilghman says. She and I had dinner one night in a dining room of Prospect House, where university presidents, including Woodrow Wilson, used to live. We were joined there by Gutmann and Slaughter. Pointing at them, Tilghman said, “I think that for every one person who looks at an Amy or an Ann-Marie and says, ‘I want to be like her,’ there are three who say, ‘I want to be anything but her.’”

Tilghman is now a leader. In that role she wonders how to educate women to enter this shades-of-gray world and how to create an environment for her own staff that encourages a balanced life. But Tilghman is also a scientist, and she suspects that policies and committees, while crucially important, cannot change everything. And she wonders whether evolution has done both men and women a disservice.

“My fantasy is a world where there are two kinds of people—ones who like to stay home and care for children and ones who like to go out and have a career,” she says. “In this fantasy, one of these kinds can only marry the other.” But the way it seems to work now is that ambitious women seem to be attracted to ambitious men. Then when they have
children together, “someone has to become less ambitious.” And right now, it tends to be the woman who makes that choice.

Sarah McArthur Amsbary of the Atlanta group leads a much-examined life. Back in college, she says, she gave no thought to melding life and work, but now, “I think about it almost constantly.”

And what she has concluded, after all this thinking, is that the exodus of professional women from the workplace isn’t really about motherhood at all. It is really about work. “There’s a misconception that it’s mostly a pull toward motherhood and her precious baby that drives a woman to quit her job, or apparently, her entire career,” she says. “Not that the precious baby doesn’t magnetize many of us. Mine certainly did. As often as not, though, a woman would have loved to maintain some version of a career, but that job wasn’t cutting it anymore. Among women I know, quitting is driven as much from the job-dissatisfaction side as from the pull-to-motherhood side.”

She compares all this to a romance gone sour. “Timing one’s quitting to coincide with a baby is like timing a breakup to coincide with graduation,” she says. “It’s just a whole lot easier than breaking up in the middle of senior year.”

That is the gift biology gives women, she says. It provides pauses, in the form of pregnancy and childbirth, that men do not have. And as the workplace becomes more stressful and all-consuming, the exit door is more attractive. “Women get to look around every few years and say, ‘Is this still what I want to be doing?”’ she says. “Maybe they have higher standards for job satisfaction because there is always the option of being their child’s primary caregiver. When a man gets that dissatisfied with his job, he has to stick it out.”

This, I would argue, is why the workplace needs women. Not just because they are 50 percent of the talent pool, but for the very fact that they are more willing to leave than men. That, in turn, makes employers work harder to keep them. It is why the accounting firm Deloitte & Touche has more than doubled the number of employees on flexible work schedules over the past decade and more than quintupled the number of female partners and directors (to 567, from 97) in the same period. It is why IBM employees can request up to 156 weeks of job-protected family time off. It is why Hamot Medical Center in Erie, Pennsylvania, hired a husband and wife to fill one neonatology job, with a shared salary and shared health insurance, then let them decide who stays home and who comes to the hospital on any given day. It is why, everywhere you look, workers are doing their work in untraditional ways.
Women started this conversation about life and work—a conversation that is slowly coming to include men. Sanity, balance, and a new definition of success, it seems, just might be contagious. And instead of women being forced to act like men, men are being freed to act like women. Because women are willing to leave, men are more willing to leave, too—the number of married men who are full-time caregivers to their children has increased 18 percent. Because women are willing to leave, 46 percent of the employees taking parental leave at Ernst & Young last year were men.

Looked at that way, this is not the failure of a revolution, but the start of a new one. It is about a door opened but a crack by women that could usher in a new environment for us all.

Why don’t women run the world?

“In a way,” Amsbary says, “we really do.”

To get to the highest levels of power, of course, something’s gotta give. And that something is often children. (In a recent interview, Fortune asked u.s. Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao whether she could handle that job if she had kids. After a long pause, she answered, “It would be awfully difficult.”) Or what gives is the spouse’s job. As we reported last year, more than one-third of the women on the Fortune 50 have stay-at-home husbands—as do several of this year’s newcomers, such as Gail Berman, Pepsi Cola North American president Dawn Hudson (No. 50), and Ursula Burns (No. 44), who is Anne Mulcahy’s right hand at Xerox. Mulcahy (No. 4) has a stay-at-home spouse, too.

“Power: Do Women Really Want It?” by Patricia Sellers, Fortune (September 29, 2003)
POWER FANTASY

BY CAROLYN JOY LENSKE

When *A Doll’s House* was first seen by audiences in 1879, the play’s ending came as a terrible shock to the conservative sensibilities of middle-class theatergoers. How could a woman abandon her helpless children and honorable husband to dabble in individualism? Didn’t this selfish and obviously hysterical wife and mother understand that her identity was defined by her position at home with her family? An impassioned debate ensued in which two camps emerged: those who hailed Nora Helmer as heralding a new age in art and society, characterized by individual self-determination and advanced women’s rights, and those who thought her a demonic, “unnatural” woman with no sense of her place and responsibility to her family and culture.

There was a third point of view, however, which also appeared in critical discussions of the time. These commentators agreed that *A Doll’s House* had noble and progressive pretensions, but they dismissed the play as having a limited shelf life. Ibsen’s work, they argued, protested social problems that society had already conquered. The English critic Frederic Wedmore wrote in the scholarly journal *Academy* in June 1889 (the year *A Doll’s House* arrived on the London stage): “*The Doll’s House* is a drama written partly to show that in a life of civilization a woman must not be considered as man’s creature alone—a ministrant or a toy. I should have thought, I confess, that, in 1889, intelligent England, and yet more assuredly intelligent America, had got beyond the need of any such teaching.” Similarly, the groundbreaking actor, producer, and director Eva le Gallienne wrote in the *New York Times Magazine* in 1928 that the social injustices that compelled Ibsen to write had been so satisfactorily resolved that they had become “precisely the things which are now accepted without question.”

If *A Doll’s House* was already outdated in 1889 and 1928, and we have conquered the gender claustrophobia that compels a twittering Nora to grow up and leave her husband and children to discover the world and herself; then the play must certainly be past its expiration date in the progressive environment of 2004. Why is the play still one of the most frequently produced dramas in the classical canon? Haven’t we fully realized George Bernard Shaw’s suggestion of 1891, in his celebrated book *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*, that “men are waking up to the perception that in killing women’s souls they have killed their own”?

Western society has indeed changed radically since 1879. Women have greater roles in the public sphere, and new laws and evolved attitudes allow women to vote, hold office,
attend college, own property, act as ministers (in some religious organizations), and lead businesses. Economics require that most women work outside the home, while divorcing, being single, and having children out of wedlock no longer necessarily result in social death sentences. Many men, not to be left out, are expanding the cultural definition of masculinity by taking on greater domestic roles.

But the larger social system, within which women have achieved significant rights, is in many ways the same system on which Nora slammed the door in 1879: Society, particularly in the public sphere, is still dominated by men and very traditional views on gender, particularly when it comes to marriage, motherhood, and the workplace. It is typically men who continue to set the fast pace and long hours at the office, a routine established by businessmen with wives at home to take care of their domestic affairs. And, while an ambitious young woman may be well educated and talented, she is often still a suspect employee, liable to run off, have a baby, and then quit or demand shorter hours and decreased responsibility at work. Meanwhile back at the ranch, writes Arlie Hochschild in her 1989 book *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home*, married women still carry greater responsibility than their husbands for child care and domestic chores. Those women privileged enough to hire nannies and housekeepers run the risk of being labelled “bad” mothers, even today, for leaving the care of their children and home to others.

Nora Helmer struggles with a similar conflict between public and private life in *A Doll’s House*. As much as it pains her to leave her children, she believes she cannot be a good wife and mother until she has “found herself” out in the world. One hundred twenty-five years after Ibsen wrote his most famous play, we still ask: What does it mean to be a good wife and mother, when the imposed ideals of those roles, such as compromise, self-sacrifice, humility, and domesticity, haven’t really changed? How can a woman create a feminine, yet multifaceted and mature identity beyond what is defined by male standards? Today’s popular women’s magazines showcase this confusion. They encourage women to be “powerful” and have successful careers, while simultaneously offering “10 Hot Tips to Please Your Man” and dating and beauty advice on catching and keeping eligible husband material, reinforcing traditional feminine stereotypes beneath a mask of sexual liberation.

American women’s love-hate relationship with Martha Stewart, the ultimate spokesmodel for traditional homemaking, who also happens to run an enormous business empire, also demonstrates women’s identity confusion. Stewart is the classic “superwoman,” seemingly capable of negotiating the public and private spheres without a hitch (her current legal problems aside). Her popularity, fueled by the success of her lifestyle magazine and the faithful viewership of her television programs, demonstrates that millions of women still search for accomplishment and recognition in traditionally feminine, domestic pur-
suits. Yet the prodigious and obsessive scope of her domesticity has become a national joke, and she is the object of raging jealousy and disparagement from women who simply do not have the time or inclination to bake cookies or arrange flowers. This negative attitude toward Stewart may often be gratuitously mean-spirited, but it has valid origins in women’s feelings of inadequacy in failing to live up to Stewart’s projection of the domestic feminine ideal while simultaneously pursuing their recently won career opportunities. Women may not have the time or even desire to fully embody the image Stewart sells, but, deep down, many feel that they should. Conversely, should a woman exercise her choice to engage in such traditionally feminine domestic pursuits as full-time mothering and homemaking, she may be accused, like Stewart, of “setting women back” by reinforcing conventional stereotypes. Many women today are thus caught in a trap, arguably as constricting as the societally imposed roles that bound their foremothers.

Faced with the daunting challenge of the pursuit of public as well as private success, what are women to do? There is a plethora of books, articles, workshops, support groups, and chatrooms for and by women struggling to balance their home and work lives. Many professional women are apparently deciding to “opt-out” of the work force. Despite their considerable investment in their own education and excellent qualifications, which bode well for professional success, these women aren’t willing to compete in a work world that expects them to forget their home life when they walk in the office door. Women who can’t or don’t want to quit their jobs often struggle in a state of divided interests between being a “good” mother or family member and a dedicated worker, not to mention the exhaustion of trying to perform two, three, or four jobs as an employee in the work force and a housekeeper, chef, and mother at home.

In a recent British *Vogue* article (“It’s a Small World”), writer Hannah Shuckburgh interviews adult women who collect and play with doll’s houses. When asked why they enjoy this girlish pastime, one woman responded without hesitation: “With a doll’s house you’re in control, aren’t you? You’re god-like. You can make the ideal family within your house, exactly how you want it.” Doll’s houses, for these women, are the ultimate feminine power fantasy, fueled by a compulsion to achieve influence and satisfaction by excelling at the domestic arts. Similarly, Nora transforms her home into an oversized doll’s house, taking delight in playing the perfect wife, cajoling Torvald and her children to play the perfect husband and children, arranging her domestic space to maintain the image of the ideal wife and homemaker. She succeeds at maintaining the image until she realizes that life within her doll’s house is empty of real love and self-knowledge.

Many modern women, despite significant societal changes and greater opportunities in the public sphere, still play at achieving the stereotyped ideal of femininity because they
believe it is essential to their identities. “I’m a messy person,” admits one doll’s house aficionado, “but I find enormous satisfaction in lining up the saucepans in the tiny kitchen and making everything perfect,” she says. “You can go away, and when you come back, everything is exactly how you left it.” Shuckburgh adds, “[T]hings can be mayhem outside in the real world, but inside a doll’s house there’s always order and calm. It’s like paradise on a tiny scale—the beds are made, there are cream cakes on the table.” These women are able to control their imaginary worlds down to the last teacup, while keeping the harsh light of reality from exposing the fact that they will never be perfect wives and mothers, and thus in society’s eyes, never perfect women.

Nora, faced with a similar conflict of interests, makes the incredibly painful choice to reject the traditional and familiar trappings of feminine identity for a terrifying unknown. More than a century later, as the public world opens up to women’s ambition, the walls of the conventional home seem as difficult to climb as ever. We continue to ask ourselves the question that Ibsen’s A Doll’s House put forth but cannot answer: How can women create their own identities in an age that refuses to let go of old-fashioned ideals?

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**GRANDMA, IT’S JUST A DOLL**

Think you’re lonely? A $65 doll that complains, catches cold, and demands Christmas presents has a fanatic following in Japan—among grownups. Primo Puel, the computerized toy, develops a “personality” based on how it’s treated, bleating out 285 phrases in the voice of a five-year-old boy. Japanese toy giant Bandai first marketed the doll to children. Instead, says a spokeswoman, 70 percent of the 800,000 sold have gone to women ages 40 and older—“grandparents, childless couples, single-child families.”

Etsuko Kashiwagi, 47, has 16 of them. She buys the dolls clothing and toys, and she and her husband take them on trips, posting on their Web site pictures of the dolls at the Eiffel Tower and Mount Fuji. “We’re not crazy people,” she insists. With their son in college, “we just find comfort in these dolls, as others might in their pets.” Like-minded Primo owners take their “kids” on field trips and play dates; there’s even a Primo hospital for adorable ailments like “hemorrhoids” (busted batteries). Yearning for the companionship of a robotic noodge? Too bad. Bandai recently launched the dolls in France and South Korea but has no plans yet to bring them to the United States.

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“Grandma, It’s Just a Doll,” by Lisa Takeuchi Cullen, with reporting by Toko Sekiguchi, Time (November 24, 2003), © 2003 Time Inc.
1. The literal English translation of the play’s Norwegian title, *Et Dukkehjem*, is “a doll house.” In English, the play has been titled *A Doll’s House*, *A Doll House*, *The Doll’s House*, and even *Nora*. Do these subtle differences in title suggest different meanings or relationships? Why do you think Paul Walsh, the translator of the text used in A.C.T.’s production, chose to call his version *A Doll’s House*?

2. How does the set design reflect the image of a doll’s house? Whose “doll house” is it: Nora’s or Torvald’s? Why?

3. When *A Doll’s House* first appeared in 1879, the play generated a great deal of controversy and debate. At the time, Norwegian women did not have separate property rights or the ability to vote, and many viewers/readers of Ibsen’s play thought that Nora’s rejection of her marriage and family were “unnatural” and “selfish.”

   What do you think has changed in society and in gender relations—in the United States and Europe, as well as in the rest of the world—in the 125 years since Ibsen wrote *A Doll’s House*? What do you think remains the same? Do we view Nora and her actions differently now than audiences did then? Do you think the play is outdated, or does it still seem relevant to you? Why do you think the play continues to be so popular?

4. What are the themes of *A Doll’s House*? Are these themes universal? Do they apply to anyone, anywhere, in any historical period, or are they specific to a particular group and/or historical period? Does the play have a specific message or moral? How would you express it? Do you agree with it?

5. Do you think *A Doll’s House* is a feminist play? Why or why not?

6. How are secrets and truth telling important in *A Doll’s House*? What is the significance of Nora’s hidden macaroons?

7. Why does Nora conceal the debt from her husband? What is she afraid of? What is Torvald afraid of?

8. At the end of the play, Nora tells Torvald that she doesn’t love him anymore. Do you believe her? If her love has ended, what caused it to die? Did she ever love him? Did Torvald ever love Nora? How does each of them define love?

   In many productions of *A Doll’s House*, Torvald is played by an actor much older than the actor who plays Nora. How do you think it affects your experience of the play, and their relationship, that Nora and Torvald appear to be closer in age in this production?
9. How does Ibsen present the conflict between written law and moral law? Is this struggle different for men than it is for women, as represented in the play? If so, how? Is it different in real life? How?

10. When Ibsen first started work on *A Doll’s House*, he wrote, “A woman cannot be herself in modern society, which is exclusively a masculine society, with laws written by men, and with accusers and judges who judge feminine conduct from the masculine standpoint.” Do you agree? Do you think that this has changed since 1879? If so, how?

11. How does Nora change over the course of the play? What does she learn? Why does she leave at the end of the play? What other options does she have? Where do you think she will go, and how will she survive? Some critics suggest that Nora leaves her husband and returns to her childhood home to seek “independence.” Do you agree? Is independence an attainable goal for Nora? Do you think she will return?

12. How do you compare the marriage between Nora and Torvald and the future marriage of Kristine Linde and Nils Krogstad? Will they be happy? What does their relationship tell us about Ibsen’s views on marriage? What is an “ideal” marriage? Do you think it was possible at the time the play was written? Do you think Ibsen believed it was possible? Do you think it is possible now? What would be necessary to maintain it: For Nora and Torvald? For anyone?

13. Is Krogstad a villain? Why or why not?

14. What does Kristine Linde believe in? How is she different from Nora? How are they similar? Is Mrs. Linde a feminist? What purpose does her character serve in the narrative of the play?

15. What purpose does the character of Dr. Rank serve in the narrative of the play? What is Nora’s relationship with him? What is Torvald’s? Why does Nora decide she can not accept money from him?

16. Consider Nora’s relationship with her children throughout the play. How does it change? Is she a “good” mother? What criteria do you use to define a “good” mother?

17. What role do sex and sexuality play in *A Doll’s House*?

18. During the play, Nora waits for a “miracle” to save her from Krogstad’s blackmail and her husband’s anger when he discovers it. What is the miracle she is waiting for? Torvald’s last line of the play is “A miracle?” just before Nora slams the door. What kind of miracle is Torvald hoping for?
19. Why do you think Ibsen set *A Doll's House* at Christmastime?

20. The tarantella is lively southern Italian folk dance performed at a frenetic pace. The urge to perform the tarantella was legendarily spurred by the poisonous bite of a tarantula spider, and the dance was also thought to be the bite's only cure. Why does Torvald insist that his wife perform the tarantella at the neighbors' Christmas party? Does Nora want to perform it? Why does she dance so passionately? What does Torvald's reaction to Nora's dance tell us about how he views his wife?

21. Some Marxist critics believe the play's struggles and themes—and the power struggle between Torvald and Nora—center around money. Do you agree? Would the play have the same outcome if Nora had committed a crime that did not involve money—for example, if she had killed someone to save Torvald's life? What does money mean to Nora? What does it mean to Torvald?

22. What is the significance of the final door slam?
FOR FURTHER INFORMATION . . .


Tufts, Carol Strongin. “Recasting *A Doll House*: Narcissism as Character Motivation in Ibsen’s Play.” *Comparative Drama* 20, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 140–159.

**WEBSITES OF INTEREST**

www.ibsen.net


library.trinity.wa.edu.au/subjects/english/drama/ibsen.htm

**VIDEOS AND DVDS**

