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Steve Kidd and Jeanine Kane in The Gamm production of 'A Doll's House.' (Photo by Peter Goldberg)

Gamm updates 'House'

BY SUSAN McDONALD

CORRESPONDENT

PAWTUCKET - With some stories, the more things change, the more they stay the same; and, in the case of the latest show on stage at The Gamm Theatre, that's a very, very good thing.

In the first show of 2011, the Gamm's creative crew has taken great liberties with Henrik Ibsen's classic "A Doll's House." The result - a change in the century and much of the language - does not unravel the moral of the story or diminish what has been called one of the most famous climaxes of the 19th century.

"A Doll's House" is Ibsen's most famous work, and for good reason. The story - a tightly woven tale of deception, blackmail and emotional abuse that unravels a Stepford-like family - is universal and can transcend barriers of time, economic situations and culture. It focuses on Nora Helmer, a housewife and mother who finds herself spinning a web of lies to help a husband whose need to control her thoughts and movements are thinly masked by his desire to have the perfect family and life.

"What will people think?" he wonders during the emotionally draining climax of the play, deep into the second act, as his life begins to spin out of control.

Emotional fragility is a common theme in "A Doll's House." The husband, Torvald, had an emotional breakdown as he climbed the corporate ladder. Nora has an epiphany, yearning for meaning in her life.

"I have a lump inside of my secret thoughts," she said. "I've performed like a well-trained dog. I'm barely here."

The couple have played house for 12 years, with two children and a maid. Ibsen's motley crew of characters includes Christine, Nora's best friend from childhood who resurfaces mysteriously on Christmas Eve; Nils Krogstad, a disgruntled employee of Torvald's who begins blackmailing Nora when he is abruptly fired; and the family friend, Dr. Rank, who stewes in his own private misery, masked by a jovial exterior.

The story is incredibly realistic in its phoniness. Dr. Rank's physical deterioration and loneliness, Torvald's feelings of inadequacy, Kristine's frigidity, and the shady nature of Nils Krogstad provide the real fuel for the plot. Watching each character struggle to conceal the negative, painful parts of their psyche and life is enthralling and telling. The staging of the show, adapted by Gamm Artistic Director Tony Estrella and directed by Fred Sullivan Jr., is almost perfect. (This reviewer attended a preview performance last weekend.)

Sullivan coordinates a wonderful scene at the end of the production in which Kristine and Nils speak about their previous romantic involvement in shadows. The effect is wonderfully metaphorical. Other moments, however, are amateurish. Early in the show, when Kristine arrives at Nora's home unannounced, the two women circle the stage with dizzying speed. The scene lacks focus with such constant motion.

The cast itself is almost perfect as well. Gamm regulars like Estrella as Nils and Tom Gleadow as Dr. Rank provide solid backing to leads Jeanine Kane as Nora and Steve Kidd as Torvald. Kane and Kidd are a match made in heaven artistically. They have an energy that is raw and so draining emotionally that they come to the curtain call visibly tapped.

In comparison, Gamm newcomer Rebecca Gibel, who plays Kristine, is disappointing. In the first act, she was stiff and stilted in voice and mannerisms. By the second act, she visibly relaxed a bit but her performance was lackluster.

Nothing, however, can take the sheen off of "A Doll's House." The Gamm truly shines with this production.

"A Doll's House" is being staged through Feb. 20 at The Gamm Theatre, 172 Exchange St., Pawtucket. For tickets call 401-723-4266 or visit www.gammtheatre.org.



Gamm updates 'House'

Company shines with staging of Ibsen classic in Pawtucket



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Tip ▶