

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

# HENRIK IBSEN'S A DOLL'S HOUSE

Directed by Fred Sullivan, Jr.



sandra feinstein-

**GAM**  
**GAM**  
t h e a t r e

## STUDY GUIDE

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# Table of Contents

<b>Prologue:</b>		3
	Note from Education Director, Steve Kidd Using This Study Guide in Your Classroom Benefits of Core Prep visits	
<b>Act I:</b>	Theatre Audience Etiquette	5
<b>Act II:</b>	Henrik Ibsen <i>Act II, Scene i.</i> Henrik Ibsen Biography <i>Act II, Scene ii</i> Dramaturgical essay by Jennifer Madden	
<b>Act III:</b>	Our Production. From the Director Fred Sullivan, Jr.	8
<b>Act V:</b>	Questions for Discussion	9
<b>Epilogue:</b>	Thank you! How to learn more through The Gamm	10

*This study guide was prepared by  
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# PROLOGUE

Dear Educator,

The Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre is pleased to offer you this study guide to share with your students designed to prepare them for our production of *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen.

and *now* let us talk about what you will find in this study guide.

This Study Guide is broken into four acts.

In the first act, you will find reminders for you and your students about the nature of performance and what is expected of all audience members attending the theatre.

In the second act,

In act three,

Finally, we will close our Study Guide with act four, some questions for consideration and discussion and information on how to learn more about The Gamm's Educational offerings.

As part of our Core Prep program, I would like to offer a workshop with your classroom/school before your visit and help prepare your students for the play. In these workshops, I will not only discuss the play and our production concept(s), but we will also get students out of their seats and up on their feet engaging in the themes, motifs and the language of the play. This type of kinesthetic engagement with language and literature ensures students deep comprehension and the sort of text-to-self connection that encourages students to invest in reading and literacy-learning.

Much of this work was discovered, developed and inspired by the ArtsLiteracy Project at Brown University. I had the good fortune to work with "ArtsLit" and the strategies and models for learning developed by the organization continue to serve as a foundational pedagogical tool for all Gamm Education programming. Some benefits of ArtsLiteracy learning include.

- **Community Building in Your Classroom** (Applied Learning New Standards: A1; A2; A5)
- **Inspiration and Background on the Artist** (English Language Arts New Standards: E1; E2; E3; E5; E6; Applied Learning New Standards: A2; A3; A5)
- **Entering and Comprehending Text** (English Language Arts Standards: E1; E2; E3; E5)
- **Creating Text for Performance** (English Language Arts Standards: E1; E2; E3; E5)
- **Performing in Your Class** (Applied Learning Standards: A1; A2; A3; A4; A5)
- **Reflecting on Your Performance** (E2; E3; A1; A2; A5)

Moreover, the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP) has developed GSE's (Grade Span Expectations) and GLE's (Grade Level Expectations) to help "capture the "big ideas" of reading that can be assessed."

We believe that all of our Literacy through Performance work helps to develop the following literacy skills.

## WRITING

- W-2: Writing in Response to Literary Text (showing understanding of ideas in a text). A "text" covers not only books and plays, but film and other kinds of media.
- W-3: Making Analytical judgments about text (how good was it? What stuck out?)
- W-4: Creating a Storyline

- W-5: Applying Narrative Strategies (how did they tell the story?)
- W-14: Reflective Essay

### **ORAL COMMUNICATION**

- OC-1: Interactive Listening (how well students listen; how much information they pick up hearing something once – asking a student to write a comprehensive account of a play certainly works)
- OC-2: Making Presentations (each senior in Rhode Island will be asked to put on a senior exhibition, capstone project or portfolio that includes a public demonstration on a particular subject. Learning about public performance is an obvious tie-in).

### **READING**

- R-4: Initial Understanding of Literary Texts (where is the climax in a story? How would you set this play in contemporary society?)
- R-5: Analysis and Interpretation of Literary Text/Citing Evidence
- R-11: Reading Fluency and Accuracy (part of the benefits of reading a script out over and over in rehearsal is an increase in reading fluency and accuracy)

Please see more exercise and strategies for ArtsLiteracy learning at [www.artslit.org](http://www.artslit.org). We would love to hear from you about your experiences using this study guide. It is a great help to us as we build on our education program from year to year.

Steve Kidd  
Education Director  
The Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre

# Act I: Theatre Audience Etiquette

What is so exciting about attending the theatre - especially in a smaller space such as the Gamm - is that it is live! Live theatre is different from other forms of entertainment; unlike film and television you are encouraged to pay close attention and actively engage your imagination.

You are mere feet (and sometimes inches!) away from the actors. Thus, you the audience, play an active role in the experience. The actors can see and hear you and any distracting behavior (talking, text messaging, unwrapping candy, the ringing of cell phones, etc) can affect the actor's concentration, disrupt the performance, and ruin the experience for other audience members. So we ask that you refrain from talking or making any noise during a performance. Thank you!

## **The Nature of Performance**

Controversial British playwright Sarah Kane once observed: "There's always going to be a relationship between the material and that audience that you don't really get with a film... People can walk out or change channels or whatever, it doesn't make any difference to the performance... It's a completely reciprocal relationship between the play and the audience."

The performance you see will never be precisely the same, for it will never have the same audience; every performance is unique. Theatre scholar Robert Cohen observed the essential paradox of live performance:

- It is unique to the moment, yet it is repeatable.
- It is spontaneous, yet it is rehearsed.
- It is participatory, yet it is presented.
- It is real, yet it is simulated.
- The actors are themselves, yet they are characters.
- The audience is involved, yet it remains apart.

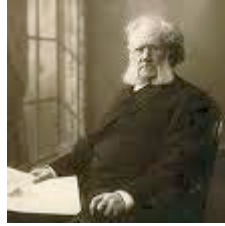
(From Robert Cohen's *Theatre: Brief Version*)

"Theatre is not just another genre, one among many. It is the only genre in which, today and every day, now and always, living human beings address and speak to other human beings... It is a place for human encounter, a space for authentic human existence..."

Vaclav Havel, president of the Czech Republic and Playwright

Discuss with your students the particular demands and benefits of attending a live performance. Perhaps have them brainstorm how theatre is different from film, television and sporting events.

## Act II: Henrik Ibsen and *A Doll's House*



Henrik Ibsen, often referred to as “the father” of modern theater was born March 20, 1828 in a small port town called Skien in Norway. He was born into a relatively well to-do-merchant family and was a descendant of some of the most distinguished and oldest families of Norway. Shortly after his birth however, his family’s fortunes took a turn for the worse. His father, Knud began to suffer from depression and his mother, Marichen turned to religion for solace. It was the conditions of his family’s financial difficulties as well as the moral conflicts involved that greatly influenced Ibsen’s work. His plays were often considered scandalous in his era because he had a gift at examining the reality of conditions of life and issues of morality. He is ranked as one of the great playwrights in European tradition and considered by many to be one of the greatest playwrights since Shakespeare.

At age 15, Ibsen was forced to leave school and moved to the town of Grimstad, where he became an apprentice pharmacist. This is also when he began writing his first plays. He fathered an illegitimate child with a servant at the age of 18 and although he paid for the child’s upbringing, he was never allowed to see him.

He later went to Oslo, to matriculate at the university, but he did not pass all of his entrance exams so he instead committed himself to his writing. He published his first play at age 20 under the pseudonym, Brynjolf Bjarme. The play, *Catiline*, was not performed. His first staged play, *The Burial Mound*, was written in 1850 but received little attention. Ibsen wrote numerous plays in the following years but remained unsuccessful. He was determined to be a playwright however and spent the next several years of his life employed at Det norske Theater. He did not publish any new plays of his own during this time, but he was involved in the production of more than 145 plays at the theater, gaining a great deal of practical experience.

In 1858 he married and became creative director of the Christiania Theatre in Christiania. His wife Suzannah gave birth to their only child, Sigurd in December of 1859. They lived in very poor financial circumstances and in 1864 he left Norway and moved to Sorrento Italy in self imposed exile.

In 1865, his play, ***Brand***, finally brought him critical acclaim and some financial success. Ibsen’s next series of plays were considered his Golden Age as he became more confident in his writing and began to add more of his own beliefs into his dramas.

Ibsen moved to Germany in the late 1860’s and published, ***A Doll’s House*** in 1879. It was one of the first of Ibsen’s plays to create a sensation. It follows the formula of a well made play up until the final act. It breaks convention by not ending with an unraveling, but instead a discussion. It is an important work of the naturalist movement and is often called the first true feminist play.

*Ghosts*, *An Enemy of the People*, and *The Wild Duck*, known perhaps as his finest work, were to follow as well as many others. Henrik Ibsen completely re-wrote the rules of drama with a realism that was adopted by Chekhov and other works that we see in the theater to this day.

Henrik Ibsen returned to Norway in 1891 and passed away in 1906 after many strokes.

### ***Scene ii: Dramaturgical Insight from Jennifer Madden***

#### Barbaric Acts of Violence: A Brief History of *A Doll's House*.

It was the door slam heard round the world: Nora Helmer's abandonment of her family caused a firestorm of controversy upon its initial performance. Written in 1879, *A Doll's House* is Henrik Ibsen's most famous and incendiary work. A story told simply and well is often taken for granted by contemporary audiences and it is easy to forget that realism was both revelatory and profoundly disturbing for 19th-century audiences. Realism as a dramatic form was a revolutionary response to Victorian hypocrisy, the explosive writings of Darwin, Marx, and Freud, as well as to the stultifying conservatism of melodrama, the dominant artistic genre of the 19th century. Melodrama trafficked in heaving emotions, exhilarating spectacle, and two-dimensional characters. Audiences expected tidy endings, villainy punished, and virtue rewarded. While melodramatic writers did focus on social ills such as poverty in *The Poor of New York* and the evils of alcohol in *Ten Nights in a Barroom*, their viewpoints upheld the status quo and forwarded a conservative agenda. Many found Ibsen's ending of *A Doll's House* troubling as it offers an unsettling resolution at odds with the established well-made play structure.

As an additional departure from the melodramatic tradition, Ibsen includes no villain in the piece for he was uninterested in two-dimensional characterization. Though Torvald's condescension and infantilizing of Nora might rankle, he is simply a man of his time who adores his wife; and to be fair Nora encourages Torvald's paternalistic behavior. Nora's nemesis, Nils Krogstad, doesn't actively wish for the destruction of the Helmers but merely fights for his threatened livelihood. Krogstad has paid for his past indiscretions but society will not forget, insisting that he remain a pariah. Thus society itself is the antagonist: its blindness, its hypocrisy, its insistence on strict adherence to prescribed gender roles. Additionally, the notion of a woman seeking self-actualization was unthinkable, for women had no identity outside the home and Nora's rejection of the "cult of domesticity" was frightening. Audiences were variously enraged, thrilled, and bewildered. Producers of the initial German production of *A Doll's House* in 1880 demanded that Ibsen rewrite the ending, and the actress Hedwig Niemann-Raabe refused to perform Nora as written, professing that leaving one's children was immoral. This production ended with a contrite Nora brought to her knees by the sight of her children. Ibsen referred to this as a "barbaric act of violence" and was so angered that he retaliated by writing *Hedda Gabler* (1880) and *Ghosts* (1881) to illustrate the repercussions of remaining in an unhappy marriage: suicide, death, and disease.

The impact of *A Doll's House* was global. The play resonated profoundly in China and in 1935 there were so many Chinese productions of *A Doll's House* that it was dubbed the "Year of Nora." The most famous Chinese Nora was Jiang Qing, the notorious Madame Mao, Gang of Four member and one of the architects of the Cultural Revolution. Other playwrights weighed in, writing their own sequels and parodies including *Nora's Return*, *How Nora*

*Returned Home Again: An Epilogue, A Doll's House Repaired, and Breaking a Butterfly.*

In most versions Nora either repents, remaining in the marriage, or is duly punished for abandoning her family. In *The Doll's House—and After*, Torvald becomes an alcoholic and their children eventually succumb to criminality and suicide due to Nora's abandonment. Ultimately these rewrites, revisions, and parodies fell out of fashion but Ibsen's masterpiece remains as timeless as ever.



## Act III: Our Production

### From the Director...



“When do you find the time?” I get asked this question in the public library, at Eastside Marketplace and at every opening night. “You’re playing George Bailey 8 to 9 times a week in *It’s a Wonderful Life* and rehearsing Governor Danforth in *The Crucible* at Trinity. You’re directing RISD students in three one-acts this winter session and *A Doll’s House* at The Gamm. When do you sleep?”

Granted my sleep can be disturbed by fever dreams of images, too close-to-the-bone relationships and haunting themes of the plays I’m working on. But most of the time I sleep “the sleep of the just” after a full, productive day working in an art form I passionately adore. The reasons to direct *A Doll’s House*? Jeanine Kane. Henrik Ibsen. Tony Estrella. Gamm. Maybe not in that order. Well, maybe in that order. Tony and I were discussing my workload after I had the honor of directing *Much Ado about Nothing* and *The Glass Menagerie* for Gamm’s 25th season. I knew I’d open by directing *Glengarry Glen Ross* but was looking for another challenge. As soon as Tony said “I picked *A Doll’s House* for Jeanine” I said, “Sign me up.” Jeanine is at the top of the list of actresses I would work with anytime, anywhere. I’ve been fortunate to direct her many times at The Gamm starting with Cordelia in *King Lear*, then as Maggie the Cat, Elomire in *La Bete*, Elizabeth Proctor, and Shakespeare’s Beatrice (twice!). She also made a radiant Mrs. Cratchit for me in *A Christmas Carol* at Trinity. She is a compelling, gracious, fun, generous, always inspiring and challenging presence and watching her find and build her Nora every day has been an enormous gratifying pleasure. I am a big, big fan.

Before there was O’Neill, before there was Odets, before there was Miller, there was Ibsen. *A Doll’s House* has shocked me with its immediacy, accessibility and bravery. Ibsen understands that marriage is hard, happiness difficult if not impossible; friendships are complex and our responsibilities to our selves and each other demand daily, perilous negotiation. Plus, unlike his contemporary August Strindberg, he makes me laugh.

The characters are rivetingly human. Torvald, Nora’s husband, is incredibly complex: scary, likable and flawed. Dr. Rank, the best friend, is heart-breaking and hilarious; while Kristine, a blast from Nora’s past, is mysterious, practical and damaged. Helen, the maid and surrogate mother, mostly flits around behind the scenes but has a powerful story that Nora needs to hear. Even Krogstad, the “villain” turns out to be much more. Like many of us, he is trying to make good on mistakes of the past, desperately searching for respect and a better life for his children.

We read and studied at least six translations—all great—but not quite fitting exactly the brassy idea we had to drop *A Doll's House* down into Christmas 1959. Many of the translations seemed far too dense, arch and *veddy* British. We needed an American sound. Tony Estrella has been a dream adapter and collaborator. This process has been startling, even unique, in these many years at The Gamm. Rehearsals have been on fire. Shaping, carving, questioning each word has resulted in a powerful and fresh reinvention of a masterpiece. A play I feared would be bogged down by drawing room conversations has proved as passionate, complicated and as riveting as those other great family plays Odets' *Awake and Sing!* and Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* that we at The Gamm have served so proudly.

Trinity Rep and Commonwealth Shakespeare have both nurtured my acting talent in inestimable ways, but The Gamm has always valued my directing—a job I hold precious and sacred. The Gamm casts I've directed are tireless, selfless, dedicated and approach each rehearsal with open hearts. I am a lucky, lucky (ok, if a bit overtired) man.

—Fred Sullivan

## **Act IV: Questions for Discussion**

1. How does Nora's character change throughout the play?
2. Who is the tragic hero? What is the tragic hero's fatal flaw?
3. Would you describe the ending of the play as happy or unhappy?
4. What does Torvald's fascination with beauty and appearances imply about his personality? Do his attitudes change over the course of the play?
5. Compare Torvald's and Nora's attitudes towards money

## **Epilogue**

Thank you for joining us for A Doll's House and for working with this Study Guide to ensure the best most comprehensive theatrical and educational experience. We hope you will join us for more student matinees at the Gamm. Our education program also provides classes for students in junior high and high school and our GSI Pawtucket is the thing to do for summer time theatre fun. To learn more, find us on the web at [www.gammtheatre.org](http://www.gammtheatre.org) or reach Steve Kidd at 401 723 4266 ext. 17.