

Plays in Performance

Hedda Gabler. By Henrik Ibsen. Milwaukee Repertory Theater, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. February 27-April 5, 1987.

"I want to describe people, and I am completely indifferent to the likes or dislikes of fanatical feminists." So stated Henrik Ibsen when his play *Hedda Gabler* was claimed by feminists as a social protest drama in favor of women's rights. But despite Ibsen's disavowal, *Hedda Gabler* seems at the very least to be a symptom of feminism, concerning itself with a frustrated and dissatisfied woman cut off from any opportunity or personal advancement, except through marriage. The Milwaukee Repertory Theater production, with some modest revisions of William Archer's English translation by director Maria Irene Fornes, especially emphasizes the outrage Hedda Gabler feels at being trapped in a prosaic middle-class marriage to the pedantic scholar, Jorgens Tesman.

Fornes, the celebrated playwright (*Fefu and Her Friends*, *The Danube*, *Mud*, *Sarita*, *Promenade*), directs the play with particular emphasis on Hedda's boredom with her routine life and her desire for the opportunity to "mold a human destiny." Script changes are slight, but aid Fornes in keeping the audience's attention on Hedda's manipulations.

Hedda's misguided, and ultimately tragic, attempts at control are focused on her former suitor, the wildly romantic Eilert Lovborg. Her determined destructiveness includes the burning of Lovborg's precious manuscript, a significant work that threatens Tesman's chances at a much desired, and financially necessary, professorship. Fornes' direction stresses Hedda's destruction of Lovborg's manuscript as a metaphorical infanticide, acknowledging that procreation was repellent to Hedda. Hedda's crime is heightened in the production by the burning of the manuscript in an enclosed fireplace from which Hedda can be heard viciously tearing pages as smoke eerily seeps through the cracks of the fireplace doors. This mystical "sacrifice" foreshadows the coming deaths of Lovborg and Hedda herself.

As Hedda, Marie Mathay avoids the obvious neurotic and fidgety

reactions and gestures often associated with the role, emphasizing instead the demanding and intentionally destructive side of Hedda. Mathay speaks and moves with a directness and a cold, premeditation that is chilling, making it difficult to sympathize with Hedda, even in her final tragic moments. As a result, most of the other characters in the play emerge as victims, ultimately liberated by Hedda's suicide. The most obvious victim of Hedda's scheming is Eilert Lovborg. Overweight, puffy and desperate, Richard Riehle's Lovborg is quite unlike the traditional interpretation of romantic recklessness usually seen, but it is a superbly realized performance, suggesting that Lovborg is already a lost cause, finished off by his compulsive debauchery and completely spent by the nearly impossible effort of completing his masterpiece, the "child" of his relationship with Mrs. Elvsted, played with a touchingly pathetic and single-minded vulnerability by Rose Pickering.

Equally effective performances are given by James Pickering as the drab Tesman, who cannot begin to comprehend Hedda's profound aimlessness; Kenneth Albers, who makes Judge Brack a charmingly manipulative vulture; Tamu Gray as Tesman's prim aunt; and Adele Borouchoff as the bustling Berte.

Fornes' staging makes effective use of Donald Eastman's abstract white setting (decorated with a few pieces of black furniture), which serves as a fluid playing space and visually suggests Hedda's cold and sterile emptiness. Anne Militello's evocative lighting contributes to the chilled environment and Gabriel Berry's stylish costumes serve as the only visual reminder of the play's time period. Fornes has wisely employed the haunting piano music of Alexander Scriabin, using several selections as themes connecting scenes.

While Fornes and her cast have stressed Hedda's need to control, resulting from society's demand that she live within the controlled male world of Tesman and Brack, Ibsen's complex characters emerge and rise above any overt political or social statement and the simplicity of his own plot. "My task has been the description of humanity," Ibsen once said, and in *Hedda Gabler* his description remains shocking and instructive.

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