

Hedda Gabler: *Revisiting Style and Substance*

Rhonda Blair

This is the 'real' in Ibsen's realism for me, for he was, after all, as much a mystic as a realist. Which is simply to say that while there are mysteries in life which no amount of analyzing will reduce to reason, it is perfectly realistic to admit that . . . hiatus as a truth. But the problem is not to make complex what is essentially explainable; it is to make understandable what is complex without distorting and oversimplifying what cannot be explained. —Arthur Miller¹

The general narrative framework, the dramatic events, the symbols and metaphors that link Ibsen to Novalis and Goethe are so inescapable that one is inclined to accept . . . a Teutonic variant of Ibsen the Romantic. —Erroll Durbach²

I first directed *Hedda Gabler* in 1986. At the time, I was struck by the relationship between social and psychological repression and the thing being repressed in the script. We emphasized a materialist feminist analysis of the play—foregrounding the ways that women were constrained by society—and recontextualized the script by having the actors read brief, pertinent sections from Ibsen's notebooks about the play and then by enacting Hedda's suicide in full view of the audience before starting the play proper. From the beginning we were saying, "This play is not about the suspense of what will happen to the characters—it is about what society's oppressive treatment of women can lead to; see how it happens step-by-step to this particular woman." In terms of performance style, we remained firmly within a conventional realistic mode.

I directed *Hedda* again in 2000. I believe, as I did in 1986, that Ibsen's script makes solid psychological sense, but it seems more subtle and complex to me now. Ibsen's final word on his deathbed was "*Tvertimod!*" ("On the contrary!"), and I think I was inhabited by a contrarian spirit as I worked on this play which reiterates "People don't do such things!" as they outrageously proceed to do them. There is more to *Hedda* than can be accommodated adequately by a materialist, psychoanalytic, or binary reading (e.g., Hedda vs. society; she does "this" because of "that"). It is not just that it can be difficult to articulate the "because" or the "why" of the action, or that we can fall back easily on prior, received readings, but I now believe that Hedda's ultimate act, suicide, lies beyond language. Hedda's

dilemma and actions are rightfully to some degree unnamable, just as actions in life are; we can find language that approximates, but that does not duplicate the experience. A feminist materialist analysis of the script, grounded in research about Ibsen and the conditions and time in which he worked, is necessary to produce this play responsibly, but it is only a starting point. Our reading of *Hedda* is incomplete if we try to fit it into a neat, rational cause-and-effect explanation of behavior, or a sociological or psychological paradigm that doesn't encompass the full dimensions of the work. We miss the dark core of the play.

The sociological issues of *Hedda Gabler* remain with us more than a century after the play's appearance. Middle- and upper middle-class women are still constrained in terms of gender roles, economics, and social strictures. Women still deal with economic and paternalistic subjugation, externalized and internalized misogyny, sexual repression, and lack of agency. *Hedda Gabler* presents a domestic situation in which an overly intelligent, if impulsive and not always particularly nice, woman is constrained by the limitations of her upbringing and socioeconomic environment (a father and a culture that haven't allowed her productive agency or a sense of purpose) and by her biology (her pregnancy and oncoming motherhood signal a further closing off of the possibility of autonomy and equality). We still have not solved the problems presented in the play, in terms of many women being able to maintain an identity and autonomy only with great effort, and in terms of human beings being able to maintain fulfilling, equitable relationships, substantially free of social or economic coercion.

Artistic and emotional reasons for doing *Hedda* remain equally important. The play presents one of the great challenges and pleasures in the Western canon. It has a complex and difficult central character and a taut narrative. At its core is the doomed struggle of a woman for sheer survival in an inhospitable world. More than one critic has said that *Hedda* would make a better novel than a play, because a novel could contain sections that could explain Hedda's thought processes, her inner life, much as Flaubert did with *Madame Bovary*. But further psychoanalytic or realistic "clarification" would diminish the tragic dimensions of the play, which lie in its compression, its sometimes inchoate passion, and the inevitability of its action from the moments the lights come up.

Ibsen's plays beginning with *Pillars of Society* in 1877 were typically socially revolutionary, incendiary in their effect as they challenged hypocrisies and inequities in private and public life. But *Hedda Gabler*, written in 1889, occupies a transitional position. Though it has elements of earlier, more conventionally realistic domestic plays such as *A Doll's House* (1879) and *Ghosts* (1881), it marks a move toward the mystical and symbolist plays of Ibsen's final phase, embodied in works such as *The Master Builder* (1892) and *When We Dead Awaken* (1899). This "more-than-social-realism" view is supported by Ibsen's letters about *Hedda*:

It was not really my desire to deal . . . with so-called problems. What I principally wanted to do was to depict human beings, human emotions, and human *destinies*, upon a groundwork of certain of the social conditions and principles of the present day.³

Working more poetically is demanded by dramaturgical elements and objects in the play that vibrate with import beyond the “realistic,” most obviously, the General’s portrait, his pistols, and Hedda’s dream for “vineleaves” in Eilert Lovborg’s hair. Working intuitively is also validated, if one understands the character of Hedda as being an extension of Ibsen; as Michael Meyer, Ibsen’s quintessential biographer, has written,

Hedda Gabler might be subtitled: Portrait of the Dramatist as a Young Woman. Hedda has many of Ibsen’s personal traits: the longing for sex and fear of it, social snobbery, the dread of scandal.⁴

“Hedda” becomes a figure through which Ibsen, consciously or otherwise, works on his fundamental anxieties and fears—about sex, scandal, and status. This idea is liberating, for it frees one from having to create a neat package of “answers” based in cause-and-effect psychological realism. It gave me permission to tell the actors, “In their deepest sense, some of the actions in this play lie beyond the realm of conventional articulation. Find an emotional movement that works most powerfully for you. This will sometimes lie below the level of language or conscious reason. Work with images and impulses.”

It is in fact character psychophysiology that drives the play: There is size, mystery, and irony to Hedda’s anguish. It culminates in the most mysterious, most tragic, most absurd, and most real of human acts—suicide—, which in Hedda’s case is determined by an intense sense of being simultaneously trapped and completely isolated. She is paradoxically absolutely alone and completely smothered by her new bourgeois family and the Judge’s blackmail, and she is betrayed by her pregnancy. She is out of control of her external and her internal environment. In “Suicide and Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler* (the seen and the unseen, sight and site, in the theater of the mind),” Mary Kay Norseng describes an approach to suicidality in the play which emphasizes the role of pain in Hedda’s condition:

[A.] Alvarez . . . wrote of [Sylvia Plath’s] final moments of pain:

I suspect that finding herself alone again now, whatever her pretense of indifference, all the anguish she had experienced at her father’s death was reactivated:

despite herself, she felt abandoned, injured, enraged and bereaved as purely and defencelessly as she had as a child . . . As a result, the pain that had built up steadily inside her all that time came flooding out.

Is it not possible to posit a similar flood of dammed-up pain beneath the actions of a Hedda Gabler? . . . the first time Hedda finds herself alone in the room, she could be seen as enacting the breakdown, the rending of the veil, that will come in the end, as she . . . “rais(es) her arms and clench(es) her fists as if in a frenzy.” (Norseng 14)

Noting that for him “the pain is most closely connected to drowning or suffocation—but even these are off the mark,” [William Styron] went on to characterize the brain under the full siege of depression as variously “a brainstorm,” “a boiling cauldron,” “a burning up,” “a veritable howling tempest in the brain.” (Norseng 15)

Foregrounding psychic and spiritual pain as the root of Hedda’s impulsive and destructive actions feels critically and theatrically on the mark, for it acknowledges the black anguish which leads to suicide and describes it in a metaphorically powerful way. Our goal was to embody the howling tempest, the boiling cauldron contained in Hedda’s head and masked by her proper bourgeois world.

Hedda moves ahead largely through the mechanisms of the well-made play (as do many of Ibsen’s works), but it does so in an intensely compressed, telescopic manner that involves life-and-death stakes. Its plot occurs over barely thirty-six hours, from the morning of one day to evening of the next—an even more compressed time than *A Doll’s House* (which doesn’t involve a physical death). I was inspired by Michael Goldman’s *Ibsen: The Dramaturgy of Fear* and found in it an overall framework for guiding the work on our production. His book begins,

Ibsen’s characters are killers. Even in their staid northern parlors, they maneuver with a cruel and resourceful ferocity. . . . Active, passive, oblique, direct, with an “involuntary” phrase or a frontal assault, even from beyond the grave they do their damage brilliantly.⁵

Referring to “compact thrusts to the jugular” and the primacy of a play as a “sensuous object” (2-3), Goldman discusses at length the centrality of concepts

such as *angstens alvor* (anguish of the soul). He notes the different kinds of horror, fear, and dread, linked to the repetition of existential “I can’t bear it” in the plays, which grow out of “a destructive energy inseparable from buried impulses, from unexpressed or unconscious desires” (10-13):

Especially in passages of great intensity, Ibsen’s characters are propelled by emotions that rise from oblique or hidden sources, sources remote from their clear understanding and articulation. . . . these drives are always in some sense alienated from the character, either not fully available to the person who is driven by them or not fully possessed. . . . Both the drives and their sources [in traumatic past events] must remain to some extent buried, removed, unpossessed, oblique to the text—though they may finally break through in geyserlike eruptions like Hedda’s burning of Lovborg’s manuscript. . . . Ibsen’s innovations have implications well beyond Stanislavskian naturalism. Indeed the fundamental situation of a buried or hidden layer of reality from which the character is in some sense alienated, and of a performance style in which the actor gains authenticity by leaping the alienating gap, applies not only to naturalistic acting but to the two other dominant styles of twentieth-century performance, the Brechtian and Artaudian systems, as well. Ibsen is thus in an important sense the inventor of modern acting in general. (19-21)

Now, the objectives one encounters at almost any point in Ibsen’s realistic plays are ones of intense, if not always fully conscious will, of propulsive, emphatic purposiveness. They are distinguished by fierce concentration on the superobjective. (22)

Goldman goes on to cite characteristics of acting Ibsen such as aggression, acting out forbidden desires, and loss of poise-creating mechanisms (27-28), and the “heightened psychological velocity” of the plays (38). This grows out of an unbroken “flow of *contacts* between performers” (45), the pressures and connections the actor-characters inflict on each other, which are in fact the play’s tightly-knit action:

[Ibsen’s dramaturgy] communicates an accelerating pressure, a succession of constraints that compel contact and encourage the intensities of a certain kind of acting. Pushed forward by this emerging system of constraints and contacts, the drama achieves

its power . . . not only through the increasing pressure of the situation but through what might be called formal or histrionic pressure on the actors, the escalating artistic demands for responsiveness their exchanges call for. (63)

Without a continuous *sharp* pressure of buried interaction—it may properly be called “cruel” in the Artaudian sense—Ibsen production fails. (64, emphasis in original)

As we worked on the play, I felt increasingly confirmed in viewing *Hedda* as being an almost expressionistic action poem, rather than a realistic play. For her final act to make sense, we must feel the unbearable pressure on Hedda and in the house from the beginning. It starts with events unfolding from a father’s death, anything but a neutral place (much like *Oedipus the King* or *Hamlet*), piled on with Hedda’s past with Lovborg, her marriage, her pregnancy. We wanted to approximate for the audience the ferocity of Hedda’s final 36 hours: the loss of control she feels which gains inexorably in momentum; the trauma of returning to a house she hates after six months abroad with a boring “specialist” to whom she is bound for life; the growing horror of her pregnancy, which the controlling, manipulative Aunt Julie immediately figures out; the return of Eilert Lovborg, and its rekindling of a desire she can’t act upon, psychologically or socially; her realization that Thea has been able to do “inspirationally” and sexually what she has lacked the courage to do; Rina’s death, which brings Aunt Julie even more suffocatingly close; Lovborg’s public alcoholic fall and loss of the manuscript; Hedda’s attempt to control Lovborg by giving him the gun so he can kill himself “beautifully,” and then burning the manuscript, Thea’s “child”; Tesman’s fury at her for having burned the manuscript, threatening her desperately-needed source of social and economic security; the failure of her staging of Lovborg’s death; Thea’s saving of Lovborg’s notes, and using them to draw Tesman to her, as she did Lovborg. The coup de grace is Brack’s sexual and social blackmailing of Hedda for her implication in Lovborg’s messy death in Diana’s bordello. This imprisons her utterly.

This is preeminently a play about action, decision, impulse—about anxiety, pressure, and contact.

When critics talk about the absence of explicit motive in the play and the failure of Ibsen’s script to be sufficiently emotionally accessible, I believe they are really describing their own discomfort with characters with whom it may be challenging to identify and whose behavior doesn’t fit into neat dramatic categories. We tend to have a desire for narrative closure, to understand motives, to know who is right and who wrong, to know whom we should like or dislike. Early on, two people recognized the truth about *Hedda*: G. B. Shaw complimented Elizabeth

Robins on her performance, praising it for being “sympathetically unsympathetic,”⁶ and a socialite told Robins, “Hedda is all of us.”⁷ The text in fact provides clear motives and points of identification for each character. And how necessary is it that we identify in a conventional way with any of them? Given Ibsen’s statement that he wanted to depict human destinies in a groundwork of particular social conditions of the day, how are we to proceed? The pleasures of *Hedda Gabler* are not comfortable ones of habituated identification, but ones demanding emotional and intellectual attention—a passionate engagement with overly civilized people behaving badly because they feel trapped or threatened (as each of us might do), leading to mortal destruction by the play’s end. But how do we embody the alienated action Goldman describes, or Miller’s deeper “unknowability” or mystery of motive? How does an actor embody a brilliant, impulsive manic-depressive and perform the seemingly impulsive suicide in a way that allows us to take it in? How do the other actors create characters and energies which fit in this high-pressure world? If Hedda’s demons aren’t immediately ours, how do we make them so for ourselves and the audience? We need to embody the psycho-poetic and environmental truths of Hedda as a character and of the situation which Ibsen depicts. Our challenge was to capture the right mix of pleasure, pain, horror, and insight.

Some of the problem with *Hedda Gabler*’s “accessibility” or “understandability” has to do with limitations in translations. Available translations are often more wordy and stilted than the original. My reading of scholars who work with the original Norwegian is that the play’s language is neither florid nor measured, but more poetic, compressed, responsive, and idiosyncratic. Errol Durbach describes the specifically Scandinavian allusiveness and connotativeness, the “otherness” and “alienness” of Ibsen’s prose.⁸ Inga-Stina Ewbank notes, “English may be the more helpful medium for the intricacies of human relationships; the genius of the Scandinavian languages tends toward the larger-featured, more blatant rendering of extreme states of mind,” and describes how in Ibsen’s plays, “Plot steps become hammer-blows, and language becomes the verbal signs of the hammer-blows which the characters strike.”⁹ The script which we developed was based on a literal translation, and was done without cutting. Since English tends to be more monosyllabic than Norwegian and, as others have pointed out, most of the speeches in *Hedda* are one line or less in length (the longest are never more than three or four lines long), we found many sections of the play to feel rather like Pinter or even Mamet. Sections of the dialogue are actually stychomythic, often telegraphic. It felt very modern, leading us even to telescope lines where more than one character was responding to the same “stimulus,” e.g., the news that Lovborg has shot himself. This led to some interestingly chaotic moments. Language became very much a tool for accomplishing goals, for getting other characters to do something—or not to do something. The language—which we

translated as accurately and directly as possible—was rarely primarily about expressing a condition or a feeling.

We tried to reframe our approach to avoid the pitfalls of realism as a style and of stereotypes of psychological representation. We focused on physical conditions and driving action, rather than on characters' ruminations about feelings. Besides being inspired by Goldman's book, I was also deeply inspired by the London production of *A Doll's House* brought to New York a few years ago; Janet McTeer's no-holds-barred portrayal of Nora showed how one might find the bloody, beating heart held in by the careful corsetting of Ibsen's plays. Finally, I didn't want to bore an audience with one more predictable university production of Ibsen; I wanted them and the students involved to "get" the outrageous, passionate struggle in the play.

We took our cues off the following: We tried to adopt a sensibility that was Darwinian or Greek, rather than Freudian—one about action and survival, rather than "psycho-analysis"; a sensibility of the hungry, suffering body rather than the psychiatric couch, of the bloody heart, not the corset constraining it. We viewed the play as the struggle of a small cluster of people engaged in a life and death battle with each other, each fighting for a kind of survival and control: Tesman, Julie, and Brack all want to control Hedda; Thea wants to control Lovborg and then Tesman; Lovborg just wants to control himself; Hedda wants to control Brack, Lovborg, and Tesman, and get Julie off her back, and she wants to have more control over her body and find a way out of the damnable pregnancy. We tried always to hold in mind the idea that the play occurs in a threshold moment—a moment of key arrivals and key choices that drastically affect an onrushing outcome.

We looked for the shadow in all of the characters—what is each afraid of? what is each protecting? craving? what makes each of them ruthless? what would they kill or die for? That is, we tried to make the pressure the characters put on each other as palpable as possible. They operate in relationship to each other as well as to the past; they're deeply dependent on each other for survival, in one way or another—emotionally, socially, economically, sexually. This particularly affected our approaches to Thea and Aunt Julie, whom we played as having selfish as well as altruistic motives.

We resisted naturalistic pauses (i.e., ones that helped the actors and/or audience "feel" a "meaning" or a "motivation") and strove to "take the air out" by embracing rather than resisting the telegraphic and compressed nature of the language. This presented the actors with the challenge of "compressing" their performances—literally condensing the time which their thinking and feeling took, and not engaging in as many transitional pauses or "breaths" as might typically occur. To some degree this took away the actors' ability to be comfortably in control of each moment of their performance. The work felt different because they truly had to throw themselves into engaging with each others' psyches, not just their own. (This also

meant our running time, including intermission, was just minutes over two hours.)

Interestingly, some of the work ended up feeling heightened in the sense of movies from the 1930s—everything out on the surface, acting “codes” (i.e., character motives) which could be easily read. Rather than eliciting an audience response of “What are these characters doing?”, we more often elicited one of “I can’t believe these characters are actually doing these outrageous things” (e.g., Hedda being rude about Julie’s hat, Lovborg abusing Thea, Brack being such an obvious roue). Our goal was not “realism” or staying within the audience’s comfort zone of stylistic and pseudo-psychological familiarity, but something emotionally truthful, writ boldly.

This expressionistic approach was carried over into the physical environment, which we viewed as an extension of Hedda’s inner life. Though the furniture and properties were realistically period, their arrangement in the space and the treatment of walls and floor were not. We performed in a black-box theatre which seats 125. Two “walls” of soft, burgundy red fabric with many layers and swags—like the interior of a body—started at a right-angle up-center, with a portrait of the father (based on a portrait of Ibsen in his later years—the “playwright as controlling father” for those who recognized the reference), and wrapped around the sides of the audience, who were seated in flanks to form the other two walls. The audience entry aisle also served as the entrance to the “living room,” so characters were in direct line with the portrait and the set’s vanishing point as they entered. A myriad of oriental rugs overlapped and spilled over the floor, covering almost all of it. Upstage of the main playing area (with chaise longue, pouf, writing table, miscellaneous chairs, and stove) was a 6”-high platform with a curved, “organic” edge with a second sitting area (for the brandy and cigar scene, among others). Resting on this was another 6” curvilinear platform for the upper room, housing piano and portrait, with more red, swagged curtains to be dropped to hide it in Act IV. The furniture was ornate (some of it gilt and nouveau), and there were a myriad of flowers and large green plants distributed around the set. Beautiful, but suffocating, like the inside of a body, crammed with dark blood and matter. During the design process we made jokes about fabrics that might look like organic tissue and thick Victorian fringe that might look like sausages. I was told that a local director walked into the space shortly before we opened to take a peek, and he immediately remarked, “Oh, a womb with a view.” The lighting generally stayed within the realm of theatrical realism, though there were selected heightened moments which functioned expressionistically; perhaps the most obvious example of this was Hedda’s burning of the manuscript, in which the area lighting pulled in on the actress at the stove, a flickering light on her face from inside the stove, as deep red lighting came up on the walls, setting the whole space “on fire.”

We remained period with the sound score, using only piano pieces by Grieg, and with the costumes. Characters were dressed in clothing circa 1900 (one decade

after the play's writing), to allow a more elegant line and to slide us into a slightly more modern feeling. We followed what is a relatively familiar "score" for Hedda's clothing in terms of color: for Act I, an ivory silk robe with subtle block printing, a la Klimt, spilling over it; a cardinal red brocade dress with lace for Acts II and III; a bodice with black lace over red fabric and a black rep skirt for Act IV. There was décolletage—usually lace-covered—in all three dresses. We wanted to convey the sense of a woman who could use sexuality up to a point but never act on it, a woman with sexual energy that was repressed, but that was trying to burst out of her clothing. Thea had a single light brown, modest traveling suit, worn with a dark bodice for I, jacket off and a high-necked, long-sleeved feminine off-white blouse for II and III; and the jacket back on for IV, with her hair in disarray. We wanted to emphasize a delicate, understated femininity, her "practical" clothing in contrast to Hedda's "plumage" (cf. Aunt Julie's description of Hedda with plumes in her hat). Tesman was in an "academic" brown suit in Act I, as was Lovborg in Acts II & III. Brack was always formally dressed in black, as was Tesman in Acts II through IV. Much of the repression in the production was embodied by the costumes, so it didn't need to be "performed" by the actors.

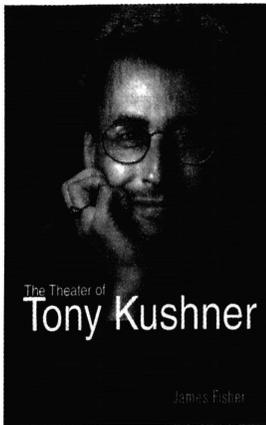
People tended to have complex responses to the production. They enjoyed its energy and the beauty of the design, the boldness and all-out commitment of the actors, but more than one person commented, "I didn't like any of them." That was fine with me. I don't believe the characters are likable, or that it was Ibsen's concern that the characters in *Hedda Gabler* be likable. He was not teaching us a lesson or making a moral statement about a social condition. He wanted to show us "human beings, human emotions, and human destinies, upon a groundwork of certain of the social conditions and principles of the present day." In that mix of conditions and principles are Darwinism, socialism, symbolism, and increasingly rapid changes in technology. All of these contextualize the psychological, sexual, and spiritual violence of the play.

It may not be new to say that, in *Hedda Gabler*, a realistic surface masks a more tragic, mythic, or expressionistic core, but it is important to revisit this script to look at precisely how its explosive questions about desire, sex, money, and gender play out for a new generation. Ultimately, I believe we were right in taking to heart the following lines from Ibsen's poem, "To My Friend, the Revolutionary Orator," written in 1869:

I won't play at moving chessmen.
 Knock over the board; then I'm with you.
 You furnish the deluge for the world.
 I'll gladly torpedo the Ark. (Quoted in Goldman 2)

Notes

1. Arthur Miller, "Introduction," *Arthur Miller's Collected Plays*, reprinted in *Discussions of Henrik Ibsen*, ed. J. W. McFarlane (Boston, 1962) 105.
2. Erroll Durbach, *Ibsen the Romantic* (Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1982) 5.
3. Henrik Ibsen, *Letters of Henrik Ibsen*, trans. John Nilsen Laurvik and Mary Morison (NY: Duffield and Co., 1908) 435. Italics mine.
4. Michael Meyer, "Ibsen: A Biographical Approach," in Errol Durbach, *Ibsen and the Theatre: The Dramatist in Production* (NY: New York UP, 1980) 25.
5. Michael Goldman, *Ibsen: The Dramaturgy of Fear* (NY: Columbia UP, 1999) 1.
6. George Bernard Shaw, quoted in Michael Meyer, *Henrik Ibsen: The Top of a Cold Mountain 1883-1906* (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1971) 179.
7. Elizabeth Robins, *Ibsen and the Actress* (London: Hogarth Press, 1928), quoted in Robert A. Schanke, *Ibsen in America: a Century of Change* (Metuchen, N.J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1988) 182.
8. Erroll Durbach, *Ibsen and the Theatre: The Dramatist in Production* (NY: New York UP, 1980) 9-10.
9. Inga-Stina Ewbank, "Ibsen on the English Stage: 'The Proof of the Pudding is in the Eating,'" in *Ibsen and the Theatre: The Dramatist in Production*, ed. Errol Durbach (NY: New York UP, 1980) 37, 40.



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