

Negotiating Between Then and Now: Directing Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*

John Staniunas

Dramaturgy is the beginning of the process for a director approaching a production of a play. Having a solid knowledge of past productions, researching every inch of the text, knowing everything there is to know about the play and playwright, reading critical analysis and commentary. All this is par for the course. But I also believe that the dramaturgical process does not end with the first rehearsal. There are three areas that I believe keep the process of dramaturgical discovery alive from inception to closing of the play. I call them the three "E's": experience, engagement and events.

1. Experience: physical contact with people, places and things.
2. Engagement: with the text through dissection and discussion.
3. Events: carefully planned before, during and after production.

As every director should, I ask myself the most basic of questions when starting a new project. Why do this play? Very often, when I have a desire to study a text, I usually do not know why I need to mount a production, I just have this gut feeling, I know I need to do it. But as a classic play like *Hedda Gabler* is researched and re-examined, I believe there must be a variety of contemporary reasons to explore the text. There are many reasons **not** to present a hundred-year-old Norwegian play at an American University. The play is considered a modern classic, and yet [and perhaps] it is outdated in its concepts. The play is categorized, rightly or wrongly, as one of Ibsen's realistic dramas. But why study realism from one hundred years ago? Haven't we moved on? Don't we know more than we did then about the inner workings of the human mind, and aren't there more interesting and more contemporary plays which explore the same issues?

If the truth be told, I love this play because I am in love with the central character. I love that she is complex, both evil and kind, warm and sexy yet icy and frigid, a walking, living, breathing oxymoron. I love her, yes. But I also like her, which to some may appear frightening. No matter how outdated she may appear at first glance, there is more to the character of Hedda Gabler than meets the eye. Ibsen wrote a juicy role for a female actor; every great actress has desired to play, or has already played her. The most recent resurgence of interest began with John Robin Baitz's new translation of the work for Annette Bening in Los Angeles.

Bening said the only way for her to understand Hedda was to play her, that the problems that Ibsen poses are so fresh and she relates to them all, that a woman deciding that she needs to address herself in order to be a mother and wife is just as impermissible today for a woman as it was 100 years ago.¹ The performance was not well received, but the translation went on to a rousing critical success and star-making turn for Kate Burton (daughter of the late “Sir Richard”) on Broadway. Other recent and notable productions include Martha Plimpton’s rather feminist approach at Steppenwolf and Judith Light’s rendition at the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington, D.C.

Hedda Gabler is a vibrant piece of theatre. A classic, the perfect well-made play. But does the play still resonate for a contemporary audience? Does it resonate with contemporary ideas and emotions? Discovering the play’s impulse, it’s soul, if you will, was what I sought throughout the entire process. My investigation began with a question. How was Hedda perceived then, when the play was first produced and how is she perceived now, after a hundred years of production and criticism? Two historical “visions” of Hedda emerged in my research. The first vision sees the character through very unsympathetic eyes. As proposed by Dr. [Mr.] Ibry G-F Theriot, she is the “Bitch Archetype” that dramatists have employed and audiences comprehended for centuries, an “unwomanly woman” whose corrosive qualities are her best feature as a character. Hedda is also perceived as a “hysterical” in this vision: a frigid woman, a sexual neurotic. When the play debuted, Ibsen’s critics, mostly male, could not understand her motives. “We do not understand Hedda Gabler, nor believe in her. She is not related to anyone we know,” wrote Bredo Morgenstjerne.² The second “vision” is the Victorian Everywoman. As outlined by Edward Geist she is a strong, healthy, young woman who is the end product of a nineteenth-century lady’s education, a poetic soul who is capable of greatness, but boxed in by the options she finds available to her (motherhood being the most stifling and least self-creative). During Ibsen’s time, oft quoted actress Elizabeth Robbins said “how should men understand Hedda on the stage when they didn’t understand her in the persons of their wives, their daughters, their women friends.”³ I desired to focus on reception as a means by which I could negotiate between these two Hedda’s. Would she be perceived in the same manner now as she was then? I wanted to direct a production that would take into account the history of reception surrounding the play as well as the contemporary theoretical concerns.

One way of doing this was to ask our audience. Although George Bernard Shaw warned that “no strangers should be present at rehearsal . . . rehearsals are absolutely and sacredly confidential,”⁴ midway through the rehearsals of *Hedda Gabler* and with complete calculation on my part, I interrupted the process to have an open rehearsal for strangers. The date was set for two weeks before technical rehearsals. I invited Ibsen scholar, Oliver Gerlund, author of *A Freudian Poetic for*

Ibsen's Theatre, to fly in and view a rehearsal the evening before the open event. Professor Gerlund is a noted Ibsen scholar whose major professor was also a noted Ibsen scholar. I wanted a mix of people present at the "event." I invited theatre and film faculty, staff, designers, graduate students, friends and the general public. I invited professors from the English department and Scandinavian studies. And most of them came, about 50-60 people. The moment was designed to interrupt the rehearsal process in order to talk with people who had studied the play, seen it before, and received it through critical analysis, and those who had not. I wanted to know what they thought. I wanted them to invade our process and intervene in our choices by sharing their insights as an audience. Everyone who came to the event had an opinion about the play and especially the playing of the central character. This character is a magnet for opinion.

Anyone who understands the delicate nature of the rehearsing will more than likely assume that I was crazy. At this stage in the rehearsal process, the actors barely know their lines and have barely begun to hit their stride. When I announced to the cast my intention to have an open rehearsal prior to opening, they were excited. The morning of the event they were petrified. The main purpose for the open rehearsal was educational, a means of generating a discussion/dialogue about the ideas and themes in the play, to help us, the production team, deduce how what we had staged thus far was reading [as relevant], and what was no longer relatable to a contemporary audience. Was the play connecting to an audience made up of a vast mix of people, including the students, the ones I desired to reach the most, the 20 and 30 year olds, whose perception of 19th century society and values is limited to Merchant-Ivory films, at best?

The discussion at the open rehearsal event erupted into a passionate yet polite shouting match about how *Hedda* should be played. On the one side were the "promoters of evil," on the other the defenders of empathy. The men said: "I don't hate her enough, she's not evil enough. I wanted to see more of the monster." The women said: "I like her . . . why shouldn't I like her? I liked that I could identify with her." Somewhere in the middle of all this was a middle-aged man, who after the event, confided in me that he found the portrayal of the character well-done and very disturbing. He was sexually drawn to her as a vibrant and exciting woman, while at the same time terrified of her ability to have such power over him. "Oh, man . . . she frightens me . . . [he said] . . . and she excites me." The open rehearsal allowed us to identify and then defy people's preconceptions of *Hedda* as a character, her role in society and her selfish and seemingly questionable choices. We needed a means by which we could create a set of choices that would allow a complicated response to her story. And, we desired to make her real, a reflection of the audience . . . the *Hedda* in all of us.

"Once, at a public dinner, Ibsen was congratulated upon the magnificent parts his plays provided for their interpreters. The old gentleman scowled terrifically.

‘Parts!’ he said, when he rose to speak; ‘I do not write parts. I create men and women.’”⁵ Yet, real men and women cannot be easily created or categorized. Though modern science has had tremendous breakthroughs over the last 100 years in understanding the human psyche, one fact remains; we are all unique individuals, in part conditioned by our backgrounds and social surroundings. And the exploration of this uniqueness has no better platform than the theatre. That is why we create characters in a compressed world and situation, why we have dramas. Ibsen’s original intent for this play, after all, was to not deal with any so-called problems, but to “portray human beings, human moods, and human destinies, as conditioned by certain relevant social conditions and attitudes.”⁶

Hedda’s very nature is as “human” and recognizable as our own image in the mirror. Do we not fear scandal? Do we not feel jealousy? Do we not do things on a whim without fully comprehending the consequences? Do we not settle for second best? Do we not fantasize about control over another human being? Do we not try to relieve our boredom by any means possible? Do societal bonds unwittingly not bind our imaginations? But how often do we actually look into that mirror, and what do we really recognize in the reflection? Ibsen wrote, “our whole being is nothing but a fight against the dark forces within ourselves.”⁷ In our most private and intimate thoughts, looking into a mirror, what do we see? This was the Hedda we found the most challenging and most complex to assemble.

My dramaturgical and directorial *process* began in Kansas, but my dramaturgical and directorial *journey* began in Norway. Ibsen once said “you can not know my plays or the people who inhabit them unless you know Norway.”⁸ I took him at his word. I wrote a grant. I contacted the Center for Ibsen Studies at the University of Oslo, and the Ibsen Museum. I bought my ticket and armed with my script and my research, I went to Norway. I visited museums, galleries, and libraries. I walked the entire city of Oslo. I tried to imagine where Hedda and Tesman would have lived (somewhere on the west side of town). I went to the theatre. I talked with the people, studied their habits and mannerisms. I searched everywhere for the characters in the play . . . in the faces of the people, in their mannerisms, way of behaving, in the beauty of the land and the history of the time. And Ibsen was everywhere. He was portrayed in paintings and sculptures, throughout the city, even in a contemporary art exhibit that I chanced upon one afternoon. He was playing in the theaters, he was being read on the street, studied in the classroom, written about in the newspapers.

One of the more exciting exchanges on my trip was a round-table discussion at the Ibsen Centre. Four scholars and I sat for two hours in a charming cafeteria and posed production questions about the character of Hedda Gabler. The scholars were from China, Iran, Germany and Norway and their insights were brilliant. Central to the discussion was a way to make the character exist today. Dr. Astrid Saether, the director of the Centre, talked about the character of Hedda as having

poetry in her soul. Dr. Saether's words were romantic and poetic. She said Hedda has the potential to achieve something fine but lacks the ability to find it. It made me think that the Hedda she described could exist only in Norway, where the character is so close to the culture, that her plight could be organized sympathetically. Professor Farindokht Zahedi, the scholar from Iran, agreed with Dr. Saether. After living in Norway for only two months, she realized that the color of the flowers had great meaning to the Norwegians, different from what she herself thinks of the flowers and different from the way she looks at light, sunshine and candlelight. But Dr. Zahedi also believed Hedda as a character possessed universality and that the play and character are still a vibrant piece of work. She relayed that today they could not publicly produce this play in Iran because of the central character's defiance and strength of will. "It wasn't like this during the days of the Shah," she said. "Then we could produce what ever we liked . . . you could say anything you wanted that was not against the Shah's government. Right now, we cannot say anything we want. My seventeen-year-old daughter cut her hair and dressed as a boy in order to move freely around Tehran . . . all the young girls are doing this . . . dressing as boys. This is very Hedda to me, this behavior can be termed Hedda-ism."⁹

Together, we discussed all of Hedda's "wants." She wants to live the life of Brack. She wants to be independent. She wants to have an exciting life in the world where decisions are made. She wants to have power. She wants to be an executor of action. She wants to live the life that she wants. She wants to fight Thea, to have influence and control over Eilert, to maneuver her way out of this maze, this labyrinth that she has trapped herself in.

Armed with books, articles, notes, photos and memories, I returned to Kansas, much like Tesman returning from his honeymoon trip. In order to make Hedda human, I decided that the role and the play had to be orchestrated in a very careful and physical manner. I relied on the use of triangulation in the blocking to represent the many triangular relationships in the play. Whenever possible, Hedda was placed (or placed herself) in the advantageous position of the middle. All the other characters were encouraged to organize their roles in a triangular fashion, both physically and psychologically, around Hedda. Of particular help in this process was the article "Sight and Insight: Stage Pictures in Hedda Gabler" by Professor Kay Unruh Des Roches. We discovered that to know Hedda was to organize her through the obstacles that she encounters. The physical obstacles. Things. The desk. The piano. The pistols. The manuscript. The flowers. The sofa. The chair. The curtains. The fireplace. These are objects, symbols that express her feelings. I worked closely with the scene designer to choose the right objects, the right symbols and to have Hedda interact with them in the "right" way.

We also sought to know, and frame specific moments when Hedda is "happy." When she is "excited." Most of the time she is difficult to get to know. She rarely

talks about herself as most of us do, she often acts desperate and for seemingly strange reasons. To discover what made her happy allowed us to frame her wants and desires in more human and less melodramatic ways. The happy moments juxtaposed against the dramatic, the desperate and the hateful allowing Hedda to appear young, to have wishes and dreams, to be the woman that Lovborg, Brack and Tesman all find fascinating. This thinking also helped us to frame the opening moments of the show. Spurred on by the evocative, if slightly neurotic bird trapped in the proverbial cage opening as interpreted by Fiona Shaw on stage and television in the early 90's, I too desired that the first image the audience should see is our "Hedda." The musical score for the production, composed by Jason Kneip, an M.A. candidate in Music, was integral to assembling a Hedda we could understand and know. All the musical expressions in the play were generated from Hedda's feelings, moods, wants and desires.

While in Norway, I combed the music stores for inspiration, everything from military to folk music, including a rather obscure but haunting recording entitled *Wizard Women of the North*. We chose to open the show with Hedda on stage dancing her way through a series of musical themes, first, a lone woman's voice is heard (captured beautifully by vocalist and friend, Dr. Sarah L. Young) as she stares in the eyes of the portrait of her father, General Gabler. The sound is of a dramatic soprano, a wizard woman, conjuring memories, remembering her past, somewhere between "sleep and wake," and almost on the verge of screaming. Then as the violin starts to play a waltz, she drifts off into a fantasy ballroom where there can be heard clinking glasses and the laughter of male suitors. Then military drums and the sounds of battle invade the party. She crashes against the piano; a pain is felt in her abdomen. Piano and violin music is heard again as she fights to suppress the pain and return to the past. Women's laughter invades her mind, the music fades as the sound becomes deafening. She is brought back into reality by the sound of female voices outside the door, gossiping and rambling on. She flees the stage as Berte and Aunt Julie enter.

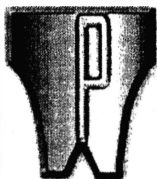
In negotiating between the how then and the how now, I took a lesson from the character of Hedda herself. As organized by Ibsen (and I quote liberally from his writings), Hedda feels as though she is "suffocating." She is "trapped in a loveless marriage and a bourgeois existence." She was not "made to be a mother." Her home smells of lavender and rose petals, it reeks of death. It is already September; the leaves outside are turning, yellow and withered. "One marries Jorgen Tesman, but one occupies one's imagination with Eilert Lovborg. One leans back, shuts one's eyes, and imagines his adventures." Everyone needs a task in life, as Voltaire writes, a garden to cultivate. When Eilert comes back into her life, Hedda must go back in history and as Sandra Sarri writes, "recapture the past" (hers and Eilert's) to do battle with it, to make up for what was lost out of fear, to find purpose in her otherwise dull and tedious life.¹⁰ It is part of what John Northram

describes as the Viking spirit, it is a heroic aspiration in a time, place and culture that deny her heroism. But history is, as Brian Johnston asserts, “dangerously seductive.”¹ As Ibsen said, “after all is said and done, life is not tragic . . . life is ridiculous . . . and that cannot be borne.”¹²

This is how we worked, moving from delusion or illusion with respect to the past, to recognition. Battling history, negotiating the then and the now, we found a Hedda who was human, real—not just a character. Producing *Hedda Gabler* became a good study guide for my fundamentals of directing students, who became as much a part of the process as the cast, perhaps even more, since they were privy to all my triumphs and frustrations while directing the production. In some ways the journey is still on. I have seen three productions of *Hedda Gabler* since I directed it two years ago. I continue to have a physical as well as intellectual response to the play and to Hedda. As with every project, I find that experiencing and engaging in the work through events brings you closer to the discovery of meaning in the present day. As Hedda says . . . “I have danced myself out. My time is up.” Thank you for reading.

Notes

1. As paraphrased from an interview with Annette Bening in *American Theatre*.
2. Original reviews on *Hedda Gabler* from the archives at the Ibsen Centre, Oslo, Norway, October 12, 1999.
3. Elizabeth Robbins, *Ibsen and the Actress* (1928; New York, 1973).
4. Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy eds., *Directors on Directing* (Indianapolis, Bobbs-Merrill Educational Publishing, 1976).
5. Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy eds., *Actors on Acting* (New York, Crown Publishers Inc., 1970) 392.
6. Ibsen notes translated by Michael Meyer from the archives at the Ibsen Centre, Oslo, Norway, October 12, 1999.
7. Ibsen notes translated by Michael Meyer from the archives at the Ibsen Centre, Oslo, Norway, October 12, 1999.
8. *The Modern World: Ten Great Writers Henrik Ibsen*, dir. Nigel Wattis, with Michael Meyer, A Public Media Incorporated Release, 1988.
9. Excerpted from a tape recording of round table discussion at the Centre for Ibsen Studies: John Staninunas, USA; Astrid Saether, Norway; Farin Zahedi, Iran; Chengzhou He, China; Steige Zo, Germany; October 14, 1999.
10. Sandra E. Saari, in “Hedda Gabler: The Past Recaptured,” *Modern Drama*, 20 (1977): pages unknown.
11. Brian Johnstone, *The Ibsen Cycle* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University, 1992).
12. Ibsen notes translated by Michael Meyer from the archives at the Ibsen Centre, Oslo, Norway, October 12, 1999.



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