

Contents

5	From Page to Stage
7	Henrik Ibsen
14	Writing <i>A Doll's House</i>
24	Backstory
28	The Action
	<i>Act One</i> 28
	<i>Act Two</i> 39
	<i>Act Three</i> 52
69	Characters
78	Setting
80	Staging
83	Lighting
85	Costumes
88	Props and Furniture
92	Sound and Music
94	Endnotes

From Page to Stage

When we read and study plays, we sometimes forget that the playwright wrote them to be performed. The point of this book, therefore, is to show how the words on the page can be read as a guide to the way the action unfolds on the stage and, in particular, how one of the most influential plays ever written, Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, can be read as a work specifically conceived for the theatre.

To do this we need, first, to assemble the basic facts of Ibsen's life, and understand how the play relates to the rest of his work. We need to investigate his intentions, above all when it comes to the question of feminism; although it's impossible to ensure that these intentions are realised on stage (modern theatregoers have different views of the world from those of Ibsen's original audience¹), a strong grasp of them is essential if we're to understand how the play was put together in the first place – and what it can say today.

It's also important to see Ibsen's masterpiece in a broader context, so we'll want to gain some knowledge of the world in which his play is set – in this case, middle-class life in late nineteenth-century Norway – and understand something of the beliefs and codes that governed it. Again, this may take us to surprising places and won't result in definitive knowledge, but it will, at least, help us to approach the play with some of the care and respect that it deserves.

Third, we should understand the idiom in which Ibsen was writing, particularly the nineteenth-century movement known as 'naturalism'. We need to get a sense of the theatre he was reacting against, as well as examining the aims of the naturalist movement as a whole. And in doing this we should remember that the heightened poetic quality of Ibsen's drama is a long way from modern realism.

Fourth, and most importantly, we need to examine the play's dramatic action, the unfolding story, in all its many twists and

turns. Page and stage are inextricably linked and only a close reading of the entire text will allow us to imagine how it works in the theatre. And so we'll look for any clues that the playwright has given about how he imagined it in performance. We'll want to study the stage directions and try to picture the effect that Ibsen is trying to create.

The story of the play can only be convincingly told when it's inhabited by three-dimensional, living people, and so we need to examine the play's characters in detail, their fears and wishes, their strengths and weaknesses, their individuality and unpredictability. This should be based on a careful study of the long chain of events that each character has lived through before the action begins – their 'backstories' – but will also require insight into what drives them still.

Finally, since naturalism attempts the presentation of a dramatic illusion of real life, a study of *A Doll's House* requires a detailed understanding of its physical setting and scenery. This means attention to more than simply the walls and the doors, the windows and the floors; it's the furniture and fittings, the stove and letter box, the props and bric-à-brac that convey so much. And we need to consider what clothes the characters should be wearing, to indicate not simply their psychological make-up, but also their class, financial resources, status and style, as well as think about the lighting, sound effects and music that the play requires. *A Doll's House* was written to be performed in the theatre, and this book will try to return it to its true home.

This book doesn't pretend to be a definitive guide to how *A Doll's House* should be staged. Since there are so many imponderables – the scale of the theatre, the range of actors available, the talent and skill of those involved, the budget and so on – and each new group of artists inevitably brings its own perspectives to a production, it's unwise to attempt to be prescriptive. Instead, I've tried to concentrate on what Ibsen himself has specified, secure in the knowledge that creative and intelligent people will want to interpret this information in their own way. The theatre continuously reinvents itself, from generation to generation, and this book exists above all to help make that happen.