
REVIEWS

A Doll House. Based on the Play by Henrik Ibsen. CD-ROM. Johns Hopkins University's Digital Drama Series. South Burlington, VT: The Annenberg / Corporation for Public Broadcasting Multimedia Collection, 1997.

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There's no doubt about it, Y2K or not: the computer and all its related technologies have revolutionized the ways we do business and education, interact and orient ourselves in our environments — personally, socially, practically, intellectually. And it isn't just words the machine transports to us, it is also photographs, moving video images, colors, sounds, and music, and all the potential dimensions in which these entities interact. This is true from the most practical application of all — we may bring up on our screens constantly updated photographs, seconds apart, of immediate weather conditions in the nastiest high mountain passes and decide before we leave whether its worth it or not — to the most edifying of intellectual pursuits — understanding the social, existential, and philosophical parameters of one of history's finest literary masterpieces, in this case a play, like the computer, of revolutionary substance.

We are being offered no less by Johns Hopkins University's CD-ROM on Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll House*. Let it be said right away: it is a thrilling tool for any individual pursuing the techniques of staging a play and even more so for the teacher introducing to students the world of Henrik Ibsen.

Ibsen wrote *A Doll House* during the summer of 1879 at age 51. Following its premiere at the Royal Theater in Copenhagen, 21 December the same year, it immediately aroused great discussion and controversy at meetings and in pamphlets following each performance in Scandinavia and Germany, later in England, America, and France. Its message is, obviously, that marriage isn't a sacred untouchable institution. If the two persons involved lead institutionalized lives, their sense of self will suffer and the marriage end with the eruption of a door slamming. The play evoked a movement for social change whose repercussions still are being felt today. It has not only become standard inventory of theater productions all over the world but has also inspired volumes of scholarly interests and general social debate.

The CD-ROM is intelligently designed to portray Ibsen's dramatic literature as both theatrical event and historical document. The former is first and foremost accomplished by no less than 70 minutes of videotape of selected scenes from three different and excellent productions of the play starring Claire Bloom and Anthony Hopkins (1973), Jane Fonda and David Warner (1973), and Juliet Stevenson and Trevor Eve (1991). This feature of the *Performance Archive* allows you to view the same scene as interpreted by different actors and directors and when compared to Ibsen's original text (also available on the CD-ROM, naturally, in the *Prompt Book*) the film sequences present the perhaps most efficient and edifying educational experience. The various freedoms taken or choices made by directors and actors as they speak or move, or do not move, around the room, observed in such comparisons on one's very screen with the possibility to pause and review and re-listen, establish the play as a living cell whose message suddenly gains even more presence and importance than when a part of a scene on stage runs the risk of escaping as just one moment in a fleeing sequence. The CD-ROM makes possible such objectifying contemplation through which study of detail complements the whole.

In addition, the stage history of the play may be retrieved through the *Design Archive* in which drawings and photographs (set up in a user-friendly overview of slides) document stage creations and costume designs from the earliest productions until now. The *Dramaturg's Office* contains a selection of Ibsen's letters and notes pertaining to the play as well as a summary of Ibsen's life, enabling the user to consult the biographical dimension of the textual study for those often enlightening bits of information.

As fascinating as the dramatical dimension of this CD-ROM in video and still photo is, the educational scope lies no less in its suggestions for research and further reading included in part on the CD-ROM. A simple click on the mouse transports the user into a well stocked *Library* of texts more or less directly pertaining to *A Doll House*. *Reviews and Notices* directly cover specific performances of the play and in the section on *Critical Commentary* one may pursue scholarly viewpoints on Ibsen's drama more generally. However, it is in the archive *Historical Context* that one finds a surprising wealth of texts illuminating the background for Ibsen's dramatic commentary; this provides the modern reader/viewer/user with a knowledge-base for contemplation beyond the drama. Building upon themes in the drama, the *Historical Context* is divided into four sections: *Disease and the Body*, *The Woman Question*, *The Bourgeoisie*, and *Christmastide*. In *Disease and the Body* we find texts as different as a debate over women's intelligence in *Fortnightly Review* (1874) and excerpts from Susan Sonntag's cultural essays on

illness, "Illness as Metaphor" (1979). *The Woman Question* features among many others Søren Kierkegaard's controversial "The Seducer's Diary" (1843), Arthur Schopenhauer's "On Women" (1951) and Florence Nightingale's "Cassandra" (1852). "The Communist Manifesto" by Karl Marx contrasts Ida Blom's "The Journal of Scandinavian Family Life" (1980) in *The Bourgeoisie* collection, and finally *Christmastide* is represented by among others Alexander Tille's "Yule and Christmas" (1889) and Claude Lévy-Strauss' "Father Christmas Executed" (1952). Obviously, in a wide range of texts the relevance of some is more evident than that of others, but in all this dimension of the CD-ROM is a pleasure of readily available information urging its reader to conduct further research. Such edifying placement in a historical — both cultural and intellectual — context of the play whose theatrical qualities may be studied on screen in moving performance by excellent actors almost simultaneously is indeed the greatest accomplishment of this digital drama. It guides its users into a world of performance and thought and constitutes a vibrant reminder of that existential issue Ibsen in his days saw more clearly than most.

Ibsen was a practical man. The first German performance in 1880 excelled in the kind of controversy that followed the play. The theater's lead actress who was to play Nora refused to perform the ending scene in which she leaves her family behind the slamming door, insisting that *she* would never leave her children. Having no copyright protection, Ibsen decided that it would be better to write the happy ending himself than to let someone else do it. This alternative ending which did not become a success (the actress and theater soon returned to Ibsen's original) is included on the CD-ROM:

Nora: "Oh, this is a sin against myself but I cannot leave them."

(Half sinks down by the door)

Helmer: (joyfully, but softly) "Nora!"

This is a valuable inclusion, indicating that the 1990s are perhaps not the first of times to see the pressure of "family values."

The System Requirements are reasonable. For Macintosh: a 68040 or greater processor (including Power Macintosh); System 7.1 or greater; at least 8 MB available RAM; a 256-color monitor; and a 2x CD-ROM drive. If using a PC: a 486 running at 66MHz; Windows 3.1 or Windows 95; at least 8 MB available RAM; and a 2x CD-ROM drive.

As it is Ibsen's genius which this educational tool of sophisticated technology profoundly celebrates, you wonder what he would say had he the opportunity to indulge in such a kaleidoscopic resource of the impact of his drama. The answer is obvious: considering the socio-pedagogical interest of *A Doll House*, Henrik

Ibsen would surely applaud. Let us see many more such creatively and intellectually astute investigations of literary masterpieces! ❁