



HEDDA GABLER

HENRIK IBSEN

IN A VERSION BY BRIAN FRIEL

TEACHERS' RESOURCE PACK
RESEARCHED & WRITTEN BY
KATHERINE CONLON

HEDDA GABLER

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in a version by

BRIAN FRIEL



Darrell D'Silva
Judge Brack



Buffy Davis
Bertha



Daniel Lapaine
Eilert Loevborg



Anne Reid
Juliana Tesman



Adrian Scarborough
George Tesman



Sheridan Smith
Hedda Gabler



Fenella Woolgar
Thea Elvsted

UNDERSTUDIES



Hetty Abbott
u/s Thea Elvsted
& Hedda Gabler



Christopher Jordan
u/s Eilert Loevborg
& George Tesman



Andrew Macbean
u/s Judge Brack



Jane Lambert
u/s Bertha
& Juliana Tesman

BIOGRAPHY OF HENRIK IBSEN

Henrik Ibsen was born in the port town of Skien, Norway, in 1828. The oldest of five children, he came from a wealthy and respected merchant family. His father, Knud Ibsen, originated from a long line of ship captains and his mother, Marichen Altenburg, was the daughter of a ship owner. His father's career as a merchant started promisingly, but in the mid 1830s financial problems forced Knud to close down his business and sell the family home. This change in fortunes made resentful Knud turn to drink, which had a big impact on the young Henrik Ibsen. Themes of debt, alcoholism and female suffering would later be reflected in his work.

At the age of 15 Ibsen left home to start work as an apprentice pharmacist, and during this time he started writing his first poems and plays. When he was 18 he fathered an illegitimate child with a servant at the apothecary, and although he supported the boy financially until he was a teenager they are believed to have never met. In 1850 his debut play *Catiline* was published and *The Warrior's Barrow* became the first of Ibsen's plays to be staged. The following year he moved to Bergen, becoming a 'dramatic author' at the Det Norske Theatre. In his six years here he wrote and staged six of his own plays and gained valuable insight into direction and production. During this time he also met his future wife, Suzannah Daae Thoresen, with whom he later had a son, Sigurd Ibsen, who would become the Prime Minister of Norway.

In 1857 Ibsen was appointed Artistic Director of the Kristiania Norske Theatre in Christiania (modern-day Oslo). Money was tight and times were hard for Ibsen and his family over the next few years, and in 1864 they left Norway and headed to Italy. Ibsen spent a total of 27 years living abroad, staying in Rome, Dresden and Munich. While he was away he had success with his philosophical plays *Brand* (1865) and *Peer Gynt* (1867) – works which established Ibsen as a controversial playwright willing to question and criticise contemporary Norwegian society. The popularity of these dramas further encouraged him to tackle uncomfortable subjects at a time when European theatre was meant to abide by strict standards of morality.

Ibsen published what he regarded as his most important work, *Emperor & Galilean*, in 1873. This huge ten act play dramatised the life of the Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate, but was not nearly as acclaimed as his later modernist works. *A Doll's House* was first performed in 1879; a scathing critique of nineteenth-century marital norms. Although Ibsen denied consciously writing the play in support of the burgeoning women's rights movement in Norway, its honest and frank look at the problems inherent in the traditional roles of the sexes certainly caused a stir. His dramas *Ghosts* (1881) and *An Enemy of the People* (1882) continued to provoke debate about the ethics of modern society.

In the last few years before Ibsen returned to Norway his work gradually started to become more introspective and focus on psychological themes. *The Wild Duck* (1884), *Rosmersholm* (1886) and *The Lady from the Sea* (1888) demonstrate this change, and the timelessness of the issue of personal fulfilment versus societal expectation makes *Hedda Gabler* (1890) one of Ibsen's most performed plays. At the time, however, *Hedda Gabler* received some of the worst reviews of his career.

Ibsen moved back to Norway in 1891 where he completed his last four plays, thought to be dramatic self-portraits. He died in 1906 after a series of strokes, having created 26 plays and 300 poems over his lifetime. Today Ibsen is considered one of the greatest European playwrights to have existed, with some critics regarding him second only to Shakespeare. His drive to confront what was lurking behind the facade of polite society, no matter how scandalous that was, contributed to his status as one of the founders of modern theatre, and made him a hugely influential figure for later authors including George Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde and Arthur Miller.

BIOGRAPHY OF BRIAN FRIEL

Brian Friel was born in County Tyrone, Northern Ireland, in 1929. His father, Patrick Friel, was a primary school teacher and his mother, Mary McLoone, was a postmistress. Friel originally embarked on a career in the Priesthood, but later decided to become a maths teacher and spent ten years teaching in Londonderry. He married Anne Morrison in 1954, with whom he has four daughters and one son.

Friel began writing full time in 1960 after *The New Yorker* started to publish his stories on a regular basis. In 1963 he wrote his first major dramatic success, *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* The play tells the story of a young Irishman's intended move to America, and was a big hit when it was produced by the Dublin Theatre Festival the following year. In the 1970s and 1980s Friel's plays turned to the political situation in Northern Ireland, including *The Freedom of the City* (1973), *Volunteers* (1975) and *Making History* (1988). His acclaimed dramas *Translations* (1980) and *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990) focus on family relationships, communication and nationality. In 1980 Friel co-founded the Field Day Theatre Company in Londonderry with the actor Stephen Rea.

From the 1980s onwards Friel has adapted a number of famous works, including four of Anton Chekhov's plays (for which he has earned the title of an 'Irish Chekhov'). He turned his attentions to Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* in 2008, an adaption which was praised for bringing the play's subtext right to the surface, clarifying the plot and injecting humour into the story.

Considered one of the greatest living English-language playwrights, Friel is known for being a particularly private man and rarely gives interviews. He now lives in County Donegal, Ireland, with his family.

HENRIK IBSEN CHRONOLOGY

IBSEN LIFE & WORK TIMELINE

- 1828** – Born on 20 March in Skien, Norway.
- 1846** – Has an illegitimate child with Else Jensdatter, while working as a chemist’s apprentice.
- 1850** – Writes *Catiline. The Burial Mound* becomes the first of Ibsen’s plays to be staged.
- 1851** – Moves to Bergen to begin directing productions at Det Norske Theatre, Norway.
- 1855** – First performance of *Lady Inger*.
- 1857** – First performance of *Olaf Liljekrans*. Ibsen is appointed artistic director of Kristiania Norske Theatre.
- 1858** – Marries Suzannah Thoresen.
- 1859** – His son Sigurd is born.
- 1862** – *Love’s Comedy* is published. Is appointed consultant to Christiania Theatre.
- 1863** – *The Pretenders* is published.
- 1864** – Moves to Rome.
- 1865** – Writes *Brand*.
- 1867** – Writes *Peer Gynt*.
- 1869** – *The League of Youth* is published.
- 1873** – Publishes *Emperor and Galilean*.
- 1877** – Writes *Pillars of Society*.
- 1879** – Writes *A Doll’s House*.
- 1881** – Writes *Ghosts*.
- 1882** – Writes *An Enemy of the People*.
- 1884** – Writes *The Wild Duck*.
- 1886** – Writes *Rosmersholm*.
- 1888** – Writes *The Lady from the Sea*.
- 1890** – Writes *Hedda Gabler*.
- 1891** – Returns to Norway.
- 1899** – Writes *When We Dead Awaken*.
- 1906** – Ibsen dies on 23 May.

HEDDA GABLER: NOTABLE VERSIONS & PRODUCTIONS

- 1891** – *Hedda Gabler* is first performed at the Residenz Theatre in Munich. The first British performance is also this year, directed by and starring Elizabeth Robins as Hedda Gabler and Marion Lea as Thea Elvsted.
- 1898** – First US production at the Fifth Avenue Theatre in New York, with Robins reprising her role as Gabler.
- 1906** – Italian actress Eleonora Duse is Gabler.
- 1924** – Danish actress Asta Nielsen is Gabler in a silent film.
- 1928** – Eva Le Gallienne is Gabler at the Civic Repertory Theatre, New York, which she founded.
- 1962** – Ingrid Bergman is Gabler at the Théâtre Montparnasse, Paris.
- 1970** – Maggie Smith is Gabler at the Cambridge Theatre.
- 1972** – John Osborne writes an adaptation.
- 1975** – Glenda Jackson is Gabler, Peter Eyre is George Tesman and Patrick Stewart is Eilert Loevborg in a British film adaptation.
- 1981** – Judith Thompson’s adaptation is first performed at the Shaw Festival, Canada.
- 1991** – Diana Rigg is Gabler in a Yorkshire Television production.
- 2004** – Cate Blanchett is Gabler in a Sydney Theatre Company production.
- 2005** – Eve Best is Gabler and Benedict Cumberbatch is George Tesman at the Almeida Theatre, London.
- 2008** – Brian Friel writes an adaptation which premieres at the Gate Theatre, Dublin.
- 2009** – Christopher Shinn’s adaption is first performed on Broadway with Mary-Louise Parker as Gabler.

HEDDA GABLER

PLOT SYNOPSIS

1890, Oslo, Norway.

Newly married Hedda is struggling with the prospect of a lifetime with her reliable but unexciting husband. Under the constraints of polite society her behaviour becomes increasingly manipulative and erratic, with disastrous consequences for all involved.

The play is set in Hedda and George Tesman's new house, and follows 36 hours of their lives there.

Hedda Gabler, the daughter of an aristocratic general, and her academic husband George have returned to Oslo after their six-month honeymoon. Juliana, George's aunt, keenly awaits news of a pregnancy, and believes Hedda – who is strikingly attractive and higher in social status than George – is a great catch. For Hedda, meanwhile, the marriage is one of convenience. George is a dependable man, and his pending professorship promises to secure for Hedda something close to the life she is accustomed to. However it is clear from the start that Hedda, trapped in a mundane middle class life, is struggling to deal with the lack of control over her own future.

Hedda asserts her dominance in their new house by treating her husband's loyal maid Bertha with disrespect, and slyly insulting Juliana. She makes it clear that she has no interest in fitting in with George's family, perhaps to everyone except him, who remains naively positive about their future together.

The arrival of Eilert Loevborg, George's academic rival, starts to throw things off balance. Eilert was a renowned alcoholic, but thanks to help from Thea Elvsted, Hedda's old schoolmate, he has reformed his ways and brought out a very successful book in the same field as George. Thea was Eilert's muse, and she has left her husband for him. George learns from their friend Judge Brack that the professorship he was as good as promised could potentially be given to Eilert instead, and warns Hedda they will have to curb their spending.

When Eilert visits the house he tells George he will not be running for the professorship, and reveals that he and Thea have been working on a new manuscript – the sequel to his book. It becomes clear that Hedda and Eilert had an intimate relationship in the past, and that Hedda is jealous of Thea's influence over him. Hedda starts to manipulate the situation, and provokes Eilert into drinking and attending Judge Brack's party that evening.

When George returns from the party the following morning he tells Hedda that he has Eilert's new manuscript, which Eilert had dropped whilst drunk. Eilert later visits Hedda and despairingly tells her that he has lost his masterpiece. Despite knowing that it's safe, she encourages Eilert's desire to commit suicide by giving him a pistol and telling him to make sure it's a beautiful end. Hedda burns the manuscript, and tells George that she did this to ensure that he would be the leading academic. She also reveals to him that she is pregnant.

Later on, Judge Brack arrives with news that Eilert has committed suicide. Thea is devastated, and she and George decide to recreate Eilert's destroyed manuscript using the notes she took. Brack secretly tells Hedda that in fact it probably wasn't suicide at all: Eilert came to a messy end at a local brothel. He also reveals that he is aware the pistol was Hedda's, and that if he were to inform the police there would be a big scandal.

Hedda cannot bear the thought of Brack's power over her. She leaves the others and shoots herself in the head.

HEDDA GABLER

ACT BREAKDOWN

ACT I: MORNING

The play begins with Juliana's arrival at the Tesmans' new house, where Bertha is now employed. Bertha expresses concern about Hedda's cold and bossy demeanour, and they discuss George's recent doctorate with pride. George enters and Juliana tells him that his aunt Rena is very ill, before subtly inquiring if a child may have been conceived during the couple's honeymoon. George is oblivious to her probing, and assumes she is referring to the professorship he is hoping to obtain. Juliana tells George that his troubled friend and professional rival Eilert Loevborg has brought out a new book. Hedda appears, immediately criticising Bertha's work.

Soon after Juliana leaves, Thea Elvsted arrives at the house in a distressed state. She tells Hedda and George that Eilert Loevborg is back in town, and fears that he will fall back into a drunken and debauched lifestyle. Hedda asks George to write to Eilert and invite him over. Once Hedda is alone with Thea she encourages her to confide in her. Despite Hedda's bullying of Thea as a child, Thea accepts her apparent offer of friendship and confesses that she has fallen in love with Eilert and left her husband and stepchildren for him. Hedda admires her courage. Thea reveals that while Eilert had been working in her household she saved him from his destructive behaviour, as well as helping him write his newest book. She also mentions a rival for Eilert's affections; a red headed performer who threatened to shoot him the last time they parted.

Judge Brack arrives, and tells George that the professorship has been opened to new applicants, including Eilert. George worries that they have been spending beyond their means on the expectation that he would get the job, and puts a halt to Hedda's lavish plans for their home. Annoyed, Hedda takes comfort in playing with the pistols her father left her.

ACT II: AFTERNOON

Hedda fires a shot at Brack who is approaching the house from the garden. When he angrily asks what she is doing, Hedda tells him it's only a game. Brack tells Hedda how much he has missed her during her honeymoon. They flirt with each other and jibe at George. Brack suggests they enter into a 'domestic triangle' arrangement, whereby everyone's needs could be satisfied. Hedda tells Brack that she is often taken over by a dark impulse to hurt others. She reveals that she never wanted to live in the house that George has acquired huge debts to secure for her, and has no interest in having a child.

Eilert arrives and reveals a new manuscript – the sequel to his book. Brack invites Eilert to his party that evening but Eilert declines, choosing to stay in with Hedda and Thea. Eilert reveals that he will not be competing against George for the professorship. Once alone, Eilert asks Hedda why she married George. They discuss how Eilert used to confide his darkest secrets to Hedda, and how their friendship disintegrated when Eilert attempted to take things further. At the time Hedda threatened to shoot him, but admits she now regrets not having had the courage to take the leap with Eilert. Hedda asks if Thea knows about their past, but Eilert says she is too foolish to understand.

Thea arrives, and Eilert tells Hedda that Thea is his soul mate. Hedda tells Thea that Eilert called her a silly woman. She then goads Eilert into drinking alcohol and attending Brack's party. When the two women are left alone, Hedda tells Thea she wants control over the destiny of a man like Eilert. Frightened by Hedda's behaviour, Thea decides to leave. Hedda orders her to stay until Eilert returns to take her home.

ACT III: DAWN THE NEXT DAY

Hedda and Thea are in the drawing room and have fallen asleep waiting for the men who have not returned. Hedda wakes up and tells Thea to go upstairs and get some sleep. When George returns home he tells Hedda that Eilert read from his new manuscript last night, and he admits feeling jealous that such a weak and damaged man should be so talented. He says that Eilert gave a speech about the woman who inspired the work, which George and Brack understood to be Thea. When the men left Brack's house, George, a little way behind, found Eilert's manuscript lying on the street. George decided to keep it over the night as Eilert was too drunk to look after it; in fact he was unaware he had lost it at all. Hedda asks to read the manuscript but George is reluctant to give it to her. George reads a letter from Juliana, with news that his aunt Rena is dying. He asks Hedda to come with him to see her, but she refuses. He leaves the manuscript with Hedda.

Brack arrives and tells Hedda that Eilert ended up with Mademoiselle Circe – a performer. Hedda guesses that she is the same woman Thea mentioned the day before. Eilert accused Circe of stealing from him and a fight ensued between them, resulting in Eilert's arrest. Brack mentions that he and Hedda could be caught up in the scandal as Eilert spent the evening at their houses, and says that Eilert should not be welcome at the Tesman household any longer.

Brack leaves and Eilert arrives soon afterwards, looking dishevelled. He tells Thea that their working partnership is over, and that he has torn up the manuscript. In shock and disbelief, Thea accuses him of destroying their child together. When Thea leaves Eilert tells Hedda that he cannot bear his old way of life since Thea helped him turn things around. Hedda is resentful that Thea has been able to shape his destiny. Eilert confesses that he did not tear the manuscript up, but is ashamed to have lost it over the night. He tells Hedda he has decided to kill himself. Hedda asks him to do it in one beautiful gesture, and gives him a pistol. Once he has gone she feeds the manuscript into the fire, saying she is burning Thea and Eilert's baby.

ACT IV: THAT EVENING

George asks Hedda why she didn't tell Eilert his manuscript was safe. She tells George that she burnt the manuscript to ensure that Eilert wouldn't overshadow George's work. George is touched by this seemingly loving gesture, and when Hedda also reveals that she is pregnant he is overcome with joy. Thea returns, agitated with news about Eilert's involvement in an accident. Brack arrives and tells them that Eilert shot himself in the chest. Hedda is satisfied that he ended his life with beauty.

Thea and George decide to try and recreate Eilert's manuscript using Thea's notes. Whilst they are sat away, Hedda tells Brack that she is contented to have shaped a man's destiny. Brack reveals that he censored the story for Thea's benefit. In fact Eilert died in hospital after being shot in the groin in Mademoiselle Circe's bedroom, where he had drunkenly returned to find the manuscript. The police believe that Eilert had stolen the pistol, but Brack recognised it as Hedda's. He promises to keep this quiet, and tells Hedda that should the truth be revealed there would be an enormous scandal. Hedda tells Brack that she couldn't bear for him to have that power over her.

Hedda, struck with fear, shoots herself in the head. While George and Brack are in shock, Thea gathers up her notes and moves away from the scene.

HEDDA GABLER

CHARACTER BREAKDOWN

JULIANA TESMAN

George's devoted aunt. Juliana never married, and she and her sister Rena have spent much of their lives bringing up their dead brother's son, George. She is pleased about the marriage but does have concerns about Hedda's taste for expensive things, and is helping George with his finances despite having little money herself.

BERTHA

George and Hedda's housemaid. Bertha used to be Juliana's maid, but has just started work in the Tesmans' new home. She has cared for George since he was a baby, and they are both very fond of each other. She has concerns about Hedda's rude and disparaging behaviour, and feels a bit lost in the new household.

GEORGE TESMAN

Hedda's husband. George is a moderately successful cultural historian, driven by his research. He spent the majority of his honeymoon in the archives rather than entertaining his new wife, and hopes to achieve a professorship although he will never be a brilliant academic. Friendly and enthusiastic, he is often oblivious to the real motivations of those around him.

HEDDA TESMAN (NÉE GABLER)

Daughter of the renowned General Gabler. Hedda comes from an aristocratic background and after her father's death married George when she saw her life as a single woman coming to an end. She's never really loved George, but he offers the stable lifestyle she requires. The object of many men's desires, she is attractive and flirtatious but too afraid of scandal to act on her impulses.

THEA ELVSTED

Wife of a resident magistrate and went to school with Hedda. Thea seems anxious and meek, but behind that she is determined and resilient. She was also the object of George's affections for a short time. Lower in social status than Hedda and bullied by her as a child, she is wary of Hedda's true character. Unlike Hedda she puts her feelings into action, and left her husband and stepchildren for Eilert.

JUDGE BRACK

Hedda and George's friend. Brack is a well-dressed and well-connected gentleman from the same class as Hedda. He made the arrangements for the couple's new house and George is in considerable debt to him. He enjoys the company of women and has an eye for Hedda, with whom he conspires and acts as a confidante. He also has a penchant for American slang.

EILERT LOEBORG

George's academic rival. Prone to alcoholism, brawling and womanising, Eilert is still a far greater writer than George. He knew Hedda when she was younger, and she was fascinated with his tales of debauchery. After leaving town in disrepute and working as a tutor for the Elvsted family, he has returned with a new book hoping to be accepted back into society.

19TH-CENTURY NORWAY & THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Norway saw a great deal of political and social change during the course of the nineteenth century. In 1814 Norway declared its independence from Denmark, and established a constitution based on the American and French models. Later the same year the Norwegian parliament agreed to accept a union with Sweden under the condition that the Swedish king would allow Norway to keep its constitution and independent institutions. After years of recession and hardship following the Napoleonic Wars, Norway's economy started to pick up during the 1830s and 1840s. At the same time the nationalist movement was gaining pace, as Norwegians sought to define and express their national identity and culture.

Norway was mostly unaffected by the revolutions which swept through Europe in 1848. The economy, as well as the government, was still largely controlled by the aristocracy, and Norwegian society remained conservative and rigidly divided by class. As in much of Europe the vote was a privilege rather than a right, available only to men from the upper sections of society. Although the 1850s and 1860s saw social reform and some developments in favour of women's rights, including the right to inherit property, a woman's status was always lower than that of a man from a comparable class.

Over the next few decades the farmers and labourers of Norway joined forces to become a serious political force. The nationalist movement, combined with economic and social change, came to a head in the 1880s, when the last king of Sweden and Norway was forced to relinquish aristocratic control of the government. In 1898 all men, with the exception of those receiving poor relief, were granted the vote. By the time Henrik Ibsen was writing *Hedda Gabler* in 1890 the traditional class structure that had characterised Norway in the nineteenth century had been shaken up, and although the social classes were still discernible they were becoming increasingly blurred.

The 1880s and 1890s were also transitional decades for women's rights in Norway. Nineteenth-century women were expected to abide by strict standards of behaviour, and were believed to be instinctively morally superior to men. It was thought that women were biologically destined for domestic life. Marriage, motherhood and care of the household were the natural steps for women, and any deviation from this path was met with suspicion. Their presumed intellectual inferiority made male authority a necessity, and at the other end of the spectrum from the 'angel of the house' was the sexually degraded prostitute, represented by Mademoiselle Circe in *Hedda Gabler*.

Challenges to these patriarchal norms became more frequent throughout the nineteenth century, and from the 1860s the fight for universal suffrage was becoming increasingly organised all over Europe. By 1882 women were admitted to the University of Oslo, and in 1884 Norway had established its own women's rights movement – the Norwegian Women's Movement Association. Even though Ibsen denied claims that he was a feminist, the content of his plays certainly show that he was sympathetic to the cause. His work was picked up for this reason by the American actress and suffragist Elizabeth Robins, who performed the role of Hedda Gabler in the play's first English and US staging.

Hedda Gabler caused a scandal when it was first performed in 1891, with critics branding it immoral and sordid. Hedda goes against everything respectable upper class women should be: she has no interest in her impending motherhood or her future as George's obedient wife. But although Ibsen intended to criticise social norms he was not writing in support of women's rights in particular.

'It was not my purpose to deal with what people call problems in this play. 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'

Henrik Ibsen

Rather than serving as an example of the 'new woman' of the nineteenth century by challenging societal values and constraints, Hedda can be seen as a direct product of Ibsen's age – she is hopelessly stuck in a transitional period. Caught between a desperation to break free from domestic life but terrified of the consequences, Hedda becomes trapped in a marriage she didn't want because she wasn't brave enough to take action. In fact, it is Thea Elvsted who comes closest to embodying the modern woman in *Hedda Gabler*. Thea has the determination and courage to change things in her life and seize the opportunities that present themselves. She leaves her husband for Eilert Loevborg without concern for the scandal it might cause, and unlike Hedda she is honest and frank about her personal desires.

HEDDA GABLER

A TRAGIC HEROINE

One of the questions which *Hedda Gabler* raises is whether the play can be considered an example of a tragic drama. Greek tragedies contain certain elements which culminate in a disastrous end for the hero or heroine of the story. Aristotle identified the features of classical tragedies in his work *Poetics*, which include:

- A reversal of fortune for the hero/heroine
- The hero/heroine is essentially a good person but has a flaw, or makes a mistake, which contributes to their downfall
- The hero/heroine often achieves some kind of revelation about human life and destiny
- Tragedies have a cathartic effect on the audience, who fear for, pity and experience the suffering of the characters

Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* certainly shares some of these characteristics. For the psychoanalyst and critic Lou Salomé, Hedda is a tragic heroine because she can only be truly freed from her flawed existence through death. We see Hedda's change in fortune begin when she marries George Tesman; her life as a single woman at the centre of high society has seemingly evaporated before her eyes and leaves her trying to cope with a situation in which she feels powerless. Her downfall is ultimately her own doing – she makes the mistake of marrying George for the wrong reasons, but she is also a heavily flawed character who unsuccessfully manipulates people in an attempt to negotiate her own weaknesses. Salomé argues that Hedda's death is tragic because it is an act of self-renunciation: she is a free spirit who cannot be tamed by conventional society. Her suicide demonstrates her self-awareness and releases her from a false world.

For other critics, however, *Hedda Gabler* cannot be classified as a tragedy. As a character Hedda is difficult to sympathise with; her behaviour towards others suggests that she is perhaps not an essentially 'good' or courageous person with a weakness like the archetypal Greek hero. At the heart of this issue is whether she can be considered a victim or a villain in the play – is she the consequence of an oppressive society which values women only in terms of their capabilities as wives and mothers, or is she a callous manipulator, bending people's wills without concern for the devastation it will cause?

Another debatable issue is whether Hedda Gabler achieves a revelation or grows in self-awareness throughout the play. Caroline W Mayerson argues that despite Hedda's desire for a beautiful death which will liberate her from the trappings of society, her suicide actually appears small and futile in reality. Although Ibsen arranged Hedda's death to resemble the classical tragic end, in the context of the play we can see that it's not a noble or heroic act. The psychological turmoil that Hedda experiences seems to act as a barrier stopping her from making any real self-discovery about her life. She chooses death not because of any insight she has gained from her mistakes, but because she cannot face the consequences of her actions.

Although it is undeniably difficult to sympathise and identify with Hedda Gabler, it is also hard not to pity her for the situation in which she finds herself. Contemporary audiences would have fully grasped the implications of Hedda's relationship to nineteenth-century patriarchal society, which accounts for the scandal upon the play's publication and is the reason it was used in support of the women's suffrage movement. By using Hedda as the heroine, or anti-heroine, of the play Ibsen was clearly attacking a culture which stifled women's potential and fostered the feelings of entrapment and desperation that Hedda experiences. For all her flaws, the character of Hedda Gabler serves as a potent reminder of the individual's complex relationship to society, and how we today reconcile our own needs with the roles and responsibilities expected of us.



MAJOR THEMES

GENDER

Ibsen was a pioneer of dramatic realism, which focused on the frank examination of social issues in a manner, which the audience would clearly relate to. In *Hedda Gabler*, the differing roles of men and women are put into sharp focus. George, Brack and Eilert are very much part of the public sphere – they have vocations and interests outside of the domestic environment in which the play is set. Hedda and Thea, on the other hand, are defined in relation to men and the private sphere of the household. Hedda's future is clearly laid out for her as a wife and mother, and Thea is Eilert's saviour and muse – first reliant on him and then George to express her academic ideas.

In following Hedda's psychological descent throughout the play, Ibsen is plainly criticising the lack of acceptable life choices and opportunities for women in nineteenth-century society. He is questioning whether a culture, which sees motherhood as the pinnacle of a woman's life might actually have damaging consequences for women without a strong maternal instinct. In his notes for *Hedda Gabler*, Ibsen

wrote that women 'aren't all created to be mothers'. This controversial opinion is most clearly reflected in the character of Hedda who, in her suicide, also kills her unborn child, but can also be seen through Thea's actions as she leaves her family to pursue the man she desires. Women's complex relationship and frustration with the demands of motherhood is a recurrent theme in Ibsen's work, and his portrayal of the problems associated with accepted feminine behaviour made his female characters important icons in the redefinition of women's place in European society. The other major themes of the play – control, scandal and self-fulfilment – revolve around the concept of gender roles and expectations, issues which still resonate today around the globe.



CONTROL

Since her marriage, Hedda feels she has lost all control over her own destiny. Brought up as the privileged child of a widowed general, she has experienced more freedom in the past than many other women of her status. Guns and horsemanship were once a staple of her day-to-day life, and her father's pistols come to represent her frustration with, and ultimately the solution to, her situation. She has a taste for masculine pursuits, but the lack of a mother figure in her life has made her spectacularly unprepared for her new role as the carer of the household. Hedda has not been versed in feminine etiquette, and the transition from Miss Gabler to Mrs Tesman involves a startling loss of independence. She is expected to put her life of leisure behind her and become a secondary persona: wife to George. In an attempt to gain back some control, Hedda uses her skills of persuasion and manipulation to exert influence over what is happening around her. If she cannot see a way to mould her own future, shaping other people's destinies is the next best thing.

Hedda cannot bear the thought that she has lost her control over Eilert Loevborg to the timid and fretful Thea Elvsted. She encourages Eilert to drink and attend Judge Brack's party knowing that things can only end badly, and later burns his manuscript and gives him the means to commit suicide. Unfortunately for Hedda her attempts to control Eilert's destiny and death don't go to plan, and her manipulations leave her vulnerable to Judge Brack's will. Brack is the true controller of the play; he is experienced in finding subtle ways to exert his power, and it is a fitting end to Ibsen's critique of male-centric society that Hedda finds herself under his command before she kills herself. The theme of control allows Ibsen to highlight the dire consequences of the imbalance of power between the sexes in his society.

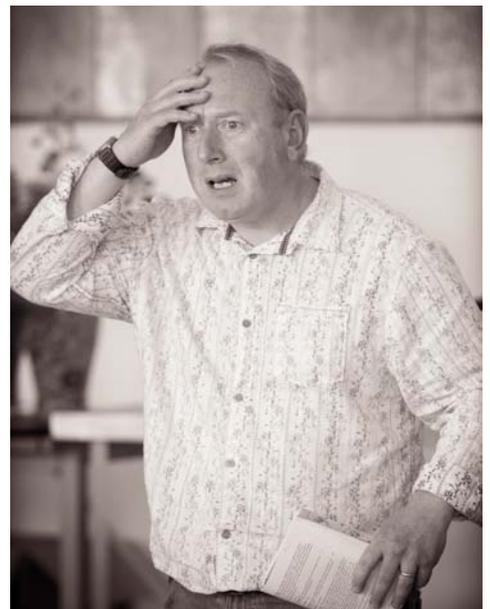
SCANDAL

Crucially, it is Hedda's fear of scandal that stops her from taking charge of her own life and leads her to try and control other people's lives instead. She is terrified by the prospect of leaving George because of the social consequences, and despite her low estimation of Thea she can't help but admire the fact that she has left her husband for Eilert, which took more courage than Hedda could ever muster. As a woman living in the nineteenth century, Hedda's reputation rests on her morality and virtuous nature. It is evident that she has always been cautious to avoid falling into disrepute – when Eilert became too intimate with her in the past she threatened to shoot him – but now as a wife she is expected to sacrifice her own needs and conform. An affair of the 'domestic triangle' kind as suggested by Judge Brack would have far more serious implications for Hedda than Brack, as a woman's restraint and sexual purity was the foundation of her character.

Although Eilert Loevborg was driven from town on account of his scandalous behaviour, he still hopes to be accepted back into society as a reformed and successful historian. A woman's reputation could not be healed so easily, and the tools at men's disposal to help rebuild their status – such as academic study – were not widely accessible or even of use in restoring women's character. It is Judge Brack's suggestion of the level of scandal which would fall on Hedda should it be revealed that she had been embroiled in Eilert's sordid death at a brothel, that pushes her into her own suicide. Through scandal, Ibsen highlights the social constraints and inequalities inherent in his culture.

SELF-FULFILMENT & SELF-DESTRUCTION

Perhaps the biggest question that *Hedda Gabler* poses is how we can reconcile our individual needs with the larger expectations of our societies. Ibsen suggests that nineteenth-century bourgeois life constrained, and had the potential to seriously damage, those who failed to be fulfilled by it. Hedda sees her marriage as brick wall separating her from her own self-fulfilment; she feels trapped in the mundanities of life and cannot see the route to happiness. Instead of seeking out different ways to fulfil her needs, as Thea does when she leaves her husband and tracks down Eilert, Hedda starts to self-destruct. This process begins when she agrees to marry George Tesman, choosing stability and propriety over unpredictability and excitement. Her fear of scandal sparks her descent into self-destruction, which continues with her pregnancy, failed attempts at manipulation, and finally her suicide. Unlike Eilert's obviously destructive behaviour, which reveals itself through his actions, Hedda's destruction is internal and psychological; we only see glimpses of it until her final act. Unable to determine the course of her life, or successfully manipulate those around her, her lack of self-fulfilment leads to her death.



AN INTERVIEW WITH SHERIDAN SMITH *(Hedda Gabler)*

How did you prepare for the part of Hedda?

I hadn't read *Hedda Gabler* before I was offered the part, and Anna Mackmin rang me and asked if I wanted to play it. Then I saw online that it was the female *Hamlet* and all these different scary things which I think can unnerve you. For me it was just about understanding another character – finding out why she did what she did. Anna Mackmin is a brilliant director who had a real clear vision of how she wanted to do this production, and Brian Friel's adaptation is very different to the Hedda Gablers that have been done before. We wanted to make it fresh and a bit more accessible for people and get a younger audience in, so hopefully that's what we've done. That's what attracted me to it – to do something different with it and make her more human I guess.

What's been the biggest challenge for you in this role?

I've never done classical theatre before, so it was scary and daunting. There's that pressure of feeling that because it's been done by so many people before you that you have to do it a certain way – people have a preconceived idea about how they want it to be played. If you're doing something brand new then you can do whatever you want with it and put your own stamp on it, and people just accept that. I think hopefully people who come to it with an open mind can see that this is a totally different version. It is all new for me, and when I look out at the audience at the end there are a lot of younger people. We want it to feel like a new play rather than something which has been done over and over. It's a brilliant role and a brilliant story, and an important one for women and young girls to see I think.

Do you find yourself sympathising with Hedda's situation?

I didn't want to make her sympathetic – it wasn't that I wanted the audience on side as such, but I just wanted to understand her. She does these terrible things and makes terrible decisions and it's always played that she's calculated and manipulative, and that it's planned from the off what she's going to do. In our version she's thinking on her feet and is a woman trapped; she's a victim of her circumstances really. I can't imagine what it would have been like back then to not have any rights, and to be just somebody's possession, somebody's wife. You're a kept woman, your job is to have a baby and stay at home. She was frustrated with that and didn't want that. So of course you look at what she's got around her – a loving husband, and it does make her look like a spoilt brat. But it's what's inside, that she just wants more, and that frustration of not having any control – that's what I wanted to get my head around. Even though she's making these terrible decisions you see that she's just trapped, she wants a release somehow and nothing works out. She feels more and more enclosed, to the point where she has no escape.

Usually you read something and you go, 'okay I know what I'm going to do with that', because it's so black and white. She's so complex and when I've YouTube'd it you just see this woman that's getting off on power and enjoying meddling in people's lives, but you never understand why she kills herself, or feel any sympathy for her. In Brian's adaptation I think that's a lot clearer, that she says she gets these possessed moments and she can't control them. She's crying out for help constantly, but she's getting pushed back in her box and doors slammed in her face. Even when she tries to explain that she's got this fear that she's going to do something bad they just say 'oh it's just because marriage is traumatic'. So I do kind of feel sympathetic towards her and I just had to try and do her that way: more humanised I guess. I hope that's what people take away from it.

How do you think Hedda's character compares with Thea's?

Thea is everything that Hedda doesn't have the courage to be. I related to that fear with Hedda. I don't have a lot of courage; I get very nervous and it took all my nerve to do this role. You want to play safe because you know it's what you can do, if you stick to what's in your range as an actor, so this was really stepping outside the box for me. Hedda lacks courage; she admits it over and over again throughout the play. She's settled for the stable, dependable husband. You could say, 'well you've made your bed, lie in it', but I understand that frustration of not having the courage to go for what you want, or to be radical, or do what Thea does which she envies so much. Brian's version is really clever, because [Thea] is the girl who goes off into the future and seeing what happens to Hedda maybe changes things for her. I think it's got a really important message; I just love this adaptation and I think it's so much clearer and more accessible. Even though Thea's normally the silly anxious one in the play, in this version she's not and it makes Hedda seem even more flawed.



Do you find it difficult to come out of Hedda's mindset at the end of the day?

I think leading up to it I was feeling the pressure quite a lot. Anna said early on, 'you've got to leave it on the stage once we start up and running, because you'll go mad'. You have to learn to switch off, which I'm hoping I will now we're performing. I'll be able to come in, release all my anxiety and energy on the stage and then just go home and chill with my dogs and be me again. It's fine if you're doing *Legally Blonde* and it's all bubbly and cute, with a Chihuahua and pink feather boas. I don't mind taking that home, but you don't want to take *Hedda Gabler* home, she's pretty dark! It's an eight-week run, and I'm going to throw everything into it. Treat every show like it's your first because everyone's coming to see it fresh. It's important to leave your work at work, I think. I'm bonkers enough as it is; I don't want to get any more bonkers!

What's been your favourite part of playing the role so far?

It's interesting playing such a complex character because every night is different. With a musical it's so choreographed - you do the same thing every night, and I do love that because you feel set in stone. Whereas with this, it's such a mountain to climb every night and such an emotional journey. It keeps it fresh, which is scary in one way. The cast are phenomenal, so just walking on stage with them and acting opposite them is exciting. When you're doing classical theatre it's going to split opinion and that's what you want, you want people to come away talking about it. If I play it safe and do the same roles that I'm used to doing then you're never taking risks. I'm actually settling in more now and feeling like I'm going to start really enjoying it. Thankfully Anna and The Old Vic took a chance on giving the role to someone who wasn't a classical actress, and I'm just loving learning so much and figuring out who [Hedda] is. I'll miss it when it finishes.

Has there been a role that you've always wanted to play?

I've never really set my hopes too high, because I've always been worried of letting myself down. Some people have a five year plan, or they go 'that's my dream role, that's my ambition'. I think it's good to be ambitious, but I'm of the mindset that I've always taken each job and been grateful to be where I am at that moment. I always think you have to give 110% to the job in hand, so I never like to think too far ahead. My mum and dad are a country and western duo, so I've grown up with Dolly Parton music. If they ever did her life story that would be amazing! There are some great female roles out there nowadays, and there's still loads I'd love to do. But I'm just so grateful to be doing it at all, so whatever comes along I'll be happy with.

Do you have a preference between working in television/film or theatre?

It's always been theatre I think, only because I started in theatre. With filming, you read it all during the read-through and that's the last time you see it as a whole until it's finished filming. You film everything out of sequence, like this five-part drama I did, *Mrs Biggs*, we'd be filming scenes from the 70s in the morning, then back to the 50s, and then 60s. So it's all jogged around and you kind of lose track of where you are, which is exciting as well because the great thing about TV and film is that you're never doing the same thing every day like in theatre where you do the same show eight times a week. But there's something quite nice about doing a whole story in one night in theatre and having the audience's reaction there, rather than just waiting for it to be shown on telly or in the cinema and not knowing what the reaction will be. When you go out there every night, you've got the whole journey to go on. Often with plays like *Hedda Gabler* or *Flare Path* that I did last time, it's such an emotional journey that in a way it's nice to come to work and let everything out. You feel like you've gone a few rounds with Mike Tyson by the end of it but it's so fulfilling, and just to get to meet people at stage door and hear their reaction is a real buzz. I think my heart is on the stage really, whether it's musical theatre or plays. I just love performing and getting to meet the audience.

Do you have any advice for aspiring actors?

I always find it hard giving advice because I think I'm still learning, I learn on every job. I'm such a perfectionist; I always want to be better. I suppose my advice would just be to choose things you're passionate about, love every minute of it, listen, learn - be like a sponge and take everything in, and hard work really. And always be nice, it costs nothing to be nice. You hear stories about people getting too big for their boots, and that's never a good thing. I think if people are passionate about their job and doing what they love, that's the most important thing. We're so lucky to be doing what we enjoy. It's a really tough old game - you've got to be pretty thick-skinned. I just think it's brilliant there are loads of young aspiring actors and actresses out there. I admire them and their passion, and I wish them all the luck in the world because they're our future stars.

AN INTERVIEW WITH HETTY ABBOTT (*Understudy for Hedda & Thea*)

How did you become involved in the production?

I happened to look at The Old Vic website, as I do every month or so, and saw *Hedda Gabler* was their next big show. I had studied the original at university and also realised that I had had some contact with the casting director before, so took a pot-shot and wrote her an e-mail!

What does being an understudy entail?

Being an understudy entails being a really close observer. Since we joined the rehearsal process we have not only unpicked the script to make sure we have absolutely made sense of it for ourselves, but have studied the actors' development in minute detail to ensure that if we were to go on stage we would understand how, why and where the character needs to get to by the end of the play. We have to understand what makes the characters tick and try and get beneath their skin as much as possible whilst staying 100% faithful to what Anna Mackmin is looking for and what the main cast have done. We also have to know the physical life of the stage and all the characters' movements, the props they handle, entrances and exits - that sort of thing.

What are the highlights and downsides of understudying?

Well, there are a lot of highlights, not least working with an amazing cast and seeing their development from the rehearsal room to the stage, but also just being able to work at The Old Vic in this capacity feels like a feat in itself. The place is steeped in theatrical history so it's great to be able to work here. Some of us are understudying more than one character so that can feel a little tricky, especially when the characters you are covering are mostly on stage at the same time. It can be tough to know where to look, though I think we have got to grips with it now! I think, for me, the idea that you could get 'the call' to go on stage at any time and sometimes without much notice is particularly scary, so I might consider that a downside for now, until I'm a bit more confident. Overall, the experience is a positive one though and just being able to rehearse on the beautiful set feels like a real privilege.

How do you prepare to play the roles of both Hedda and Thea?

Good question, It's very much a case of having to put on a different head for each character as both are very different. I think for Hedda it's remembering before I start rehearsing that she has to put on a mask in order to cope with what she has: her circumstance, the people around her, her life as it is right now. I always have to remember that she approaches most things, most conversations, with a smile - though it is very far from a genuine smile! She is a very contained character and what I mean by that is she can't express her opinions freely - what is going on inside her head, her anger and frustration - and every so often the mask slips and an impulse takes over her to do or say something she shouldn't. She's a complex character but she also has a wicked sense of fun which is revealed mostly in front of Judge Brack; she changes depending on who she is with. Thea is a bit more of a frenetic character, less calm and contained though she also has to remember her 'lot' in a male society and can't be seen to be behaving improperly. An interesting way to distinguish the two is that Hedda is very much trapped in her house, and trapped by her circumstance. Thea on the other hand has turned her back on her old life, and so in a sense she is free from her constraints and can try to forge a new life for herself. There is huge expectation for Hedda to conform and be a good wife to George, provide him with a child and behave like the lady, whereas Thea has left that expectation behind. Hedda is also from an aristocratic background and will never have a career whereas Thea, whose father was a store man on the docks, has helped Eilert Loevborg write his new book. When preparing for each character it's good just to move about on the set beforehand and remember how they hold themselves in front of the other characters - how they walk, sit and whether they move a lot. Shoes and corsets help a huge amount with preparation too!

AN INTERVIEW WITH LEZ BROTHERSTON *(Designer)*

What attracted you to designing *Hedda Gabler*?

I have worked with Anna Mackmin [the director] closely on several projects for around ten years now. *Hedda Gabler* is an interesting play, and I think that Brian Friel's adaptation is particularly accessible and an interesting take on what can be a very turgid and worthy play. He's made it very real and very immediate. I think one of the problems with *Hedda* is that she is such an unsympathetic character. As we all know – if people are mean and bad, they're probably mean and bad for a reason. Brian has gone some way to try to explain to us why Hedda behaves the way in which she does, and I found that kind of real and tangible, and really accessible.

Did you have a strong visual concept to begin with, or did it evolve over time?

Designers work on the project months and months before you reach the rehearsal. Once I'd started to research Norwegian houses and Scandinavia in general to get a flavour of what I thought Scandinavia felt like to me, or how Norway felt to me, then I just took hints from the script about the house being beautiful and about it being Hedda's dream home. I took the influences from there and came up with the rooms which we've done.

What was the biggest challenge in designing for this production?

I think just trying to make it relevant without it being period and dull. Trying to make the characters feel like you might know them without them just parading around in period costume. You do try to find the character within a costume, try to find just something that's relevant to today. For instance, the stage directions have Hedda killing herself off stage – I think we've gone beyond that now with film and stuff. To see the blood in front of you is a very twenty-first century thing on a nineteenth-century play.

Do you have any advice for aspiring designers?

It's tough, it's a hard business and you've got to assess the opportunities. You really need to train, you need to go to art school. I believe it gives you the best time to develop and develop your skills in accumulation in terms of drawing or models, or however you want to do it. There isn't a short cut really – I've been doing it for 20 odd years and I still try and find new ways to communicate ideas. The training is the most important thing.



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