

IBSEN ONCE AGAIN

BY CLAYTON HAMILTON

I

IT IS now a dozen years since Madame Nazimova made her first appearance in the English language, in the part of Hedda Gabler. To students who were thoroughly familiar with the play, her impersonation of this character seemed to be based upon a misconception; but it was at least well rendered, and the very novelty of a Hedda conceived as sensuous and languorous, instead of coldly and brilliantly intelligent, resulted in a great deal of unmerited praise from the reviewers. Madame Nazimova had been previously seen, in Russian, as Regina in *Ghosts*,—a part that she has not yet played in English; and her Hedda was soon followed by a rendering of Nora Helmer in *A Doll's House*. Her Nora—in contradistinction to her Hedda—was satisfactory in all respects, and established her beyond cavil as an Ibsen actress of a very high order. A year later, she played Hilda Wangel to the Master Builder of Mr. Walter Hampden, whose performance of this massive part was monumental in its rugged grandeur, and amazed all commentators on the current situation by scoring a commercial success which kept the theatre crowded week after week with a play that had previously been assumed to soar “over the heads of the public.” Two years later Madame Nazimova exhibited a memorable rendering of Rita Allmers in *Little Eyolf*; and her performance of this character—particularly in the first act—touched the high-water mark of her achievement

as an actress of Ibsen. Yet, since the spring of 1910, Madame Nazimova had not again revisited the glimpses of Broadway with any play of Ibsen's until she was recently persuaded by Mr. Arthur Hopkins to undertake a series of Ibsen “revivals.” [The word “revival” is somewhat insulting to the greatest modern dramatist, because it suggests that his plays have been at some time dead, and have needed a miraculous resuscitation; yet, in a theatre which has falsely set a premium on novelty, it has crept into common usage in the vocabulary of comment.]

The present Ibsen season was inaugurated by Mr. Hopkins at the Plymouth Theatre on the evening of March 11th, with the first performance of *The Wild Duck* that had ever been offered in the English language in New York,—though an excellent rendition of this play had been previously given in the German language in January, 1917, with that admirable actor, Herr Rudolf Christians, in the rôle of Hjalmar Ekdal. In this production, Madame Nazimova assumed, for the first time, the minor but delicate and difficult part of the little martyred Hedwig, and acquitted herself with credit. *Hedda Gabler* was resumed—with less success—on April 8th; and *A Doll's House*—the most popular of all the Ibsen plays—was triumphantly repeated on April 29th. At the very outset of the undertaking, Mr. Hopkins and Madame Nazimova had promised the public to set forth subsequent productions of *Ghosts*, *The*

Master Builder, and [possibly] *Little Eyolf*.

These Ibsen "revivals" have been generously patronised, especially by the studious classes who frequent the cheaper seats; and *A Doll's House*—at the moment when this article is written—is crowding the Plymouth Theatre to capacity. The response of the public gives ample attestation to the fact that a decade is too long a period to banish Ibsen arbitrarily from the theatres of Broadway. Madame Nazimova's impersonations are not, by any means, of even merit. According to the judgment of the present commentator—*E pluribus unum*—her Nora is in all ways satisfactory, her Rita is exceptionally admirable, her Hedwig is cleverly adequate, her Hilda is merely passable, and her Hedda is utterly mistaken. Yet all of her performances of Ibsen—good and bad—are worth seeing many times, because—even at their poorest—they afford repeated opportunities for studying the masterpieces of the greatest modern playwright.

Why should it not be possible—as a practical, commercial proposition—for Mr. Arthur Hopkins to persuade Madame Nazimova to repeat these plays, not merely once in a decade, but every year, in the last six weeks of the waning theatre season? Each of the half dozen dramas in the Ibsen repertory of this actress could be counted on to do a good week's business, year after year. There is always a public for great plays; and each season delivers to the theatre a new "class"—as the word is used in reference to military mobilisation—which is eager for an opportunity to see so celebrated and so popular a drama as *A Doll's House*.

When *The Wild Duck* was presented by Mr. Hopkins on the evening of March 11th, it came to most of the audience as a new play, after a decade which had been strangely bare of performances of Ibsen; and the effect upon the public and the critics was remarkable. Mr. Hopkins's method of production is founded sanely on the theory that it is better to leave a play alone, to work its will on the spectator, than to attempt to decorate or to embellish or even to interpret it. His stage-direction is admirable not so much because of what he does as because of what he refuses to do. Simplification is his method, and simplicity is his excellence. In producing *The Wild Duck*, Mr. Hopkins did not allow himself to be overawed by the gigantic reputation of the author. He directed the performance with the same freshness—and, one might almost say, the same irresponsibility—that he might have shown in staging a "script" by John Doe,—a promising but quite uncelebrated playwright. As a consequence of this easy-going method, the audience was surprised to discover that Ibsen is enjoyable, and that it is possible to buy tickets for an Ibsen play because of the incentive of a wish for entertainment, instead of a desire for instruction or a solemn sense of duty.

The Wild Duck, though grim in subject-matter and truly terrible in its culminating moments, was conceived essentially as a sardonic comedy. As Mr. Edmund Gosse has justly said,—“The topsy-turvy nature of this theme made Ibsen as nearly ‘rollicking’ as he ever became in his life.” The surprising thing, therefore, is not that the audience should laugh at Ibsen's “rollicking,” but that anybody should have been

surprised by the spontaneity of this laughter. And even more surprising was the tardy discovery of the reviewers that *The Wild Duck* is genuinely enjoyable in the theatre. Ibsen had lost much, in the appreciation of the public, from the accidental fact that his plays had been banished from our current stage for nearly a dozen years. During the passage of this decade, he had come to be regarded—to state the fact conveniently in slang—as a sort of “high-brow,” instead of a sure-enough competitor for the plaudits of an avid audience with so practical a pair of playwrights as Mr. George Broadhurst and Mr. Bayard Veiller.

II

Ibsen died in 1906; and now, for the first time, he is beginning to be appreciated in this country from the disinterested point of view of sheer dramatic criticism. So long as he was still alive, his plays were studied not as plays, but under the different labels of “literature,” “philosophy,” or “sociology.” The casual patrons of our theatre were told that they should see his dramas because of a sense of duty and not because of the incentive of enjoyment; and, in pursuance of this method, even so popular a piece as *A Doll's House* was heralded by many commentators as a sort of family funeral.

The reason for this *cul de sac*, which pocketed for many many years the popularity of Ibsen as a purveyor of entertainment, is easily apparent. Our native knowledge of Ibsen was imported overseas from England; and it was in England that the misconception of this author as a “high-brow” first originated. Ibsen was “discovered” for the English

public by Mr. William Archer and Mr. Edmund Gosse; but, when these two enlightened critics endeavoured to deliver their discovery, they found themselves impeded by the mediæval institution of the British censorship of plays. Because of this impediment, the very first performance of an Ibsen play in England—that epoch-making production of *Ghosts* which was shown in 1891 by Mr. J. T. Grein before the private audience of the Independent Theatre Society—was regarded by the general public as a thing tabooed and flung beyond the pale. In consequence of this condition, the comments called forth by this first performance of a play of Ibsen's in the English language were based upon contrasted theories of ethics instead of being based on theories of dramaturgic craftsmanship.

Ibsen was criticised—in the England of the early eighteen-nineties—as a sociologist, a philosopher, a man of letters, a moralist, a propagandist,—in short, as everything except the one thing that he really was,—a practical and interesting playwright. His technique—as a professional dramatist—was not discussed, despite the repeated pleas of so appealing a dramatic critic as Mr. Archer. Instead, his commentators—*pro* and *con*—contented themselves with throwing mud or throwing roses against his subject-matter,—which is, of course, the last thing to be considered by a genuine dramatic critic in analysing any well-made play. Not what an author says, but how effectively he says it in the theatre, is the proper theme for celebration by dramatic criticism; for, in the great art of the drama, the “message” of an author is superior to comment, and nothing offers invi-

tation to the technical interpreter but the mere efficiency displayed, or missed, in the elocution of this "message" to the public.

III

Because of the incubus of the British censorship, an impression was spread abroad, throughout the eighteen-nineties, that Ibsen should be regarded as a philosophic thinker and a man of letters, instead of being judged as a playwright ambitious to receive the plaudits of the theatre-going public. From the effect of this misconceived impression, our casual American audience is only now beginning to recover. Our local public is now learning, tardily, to see that Ibsen was a playwright, first and last and all the time.

The truth of the matter now, at last, appears to be that Ibsen was a very great artist of the theatre, and was nothing else at all. Quite obviously—in the cold light of our later learning—he cannot be accepted seriously as a man of letters. He had no literary training; and he never acquired the advantage of a literary culture. In the decade of his 'teens, he did not go to school: in the decade of his twenties, he was not even registered as a regular student in the provincial University of Christiania. His entire education was not literary but theatrical. At the age of twenty-four, he went to Bergen as the general stage-manager of a stock-company in that isolated town; and, in this capacity, he worked a dozen hours every day throughout five successive years. His annual salary amounted, in round numbers, to three hundred dollars; and his apprenticeship may be understood most quickly if we face the fact that,

throughout the formative period of his youth, he exerted all his energies, at a dollar a day, to the tasks of setting forth a new play every week with a stock-company localised before the public of a little city as secluded as Schenectady, New York.

In these years of his apprenticeship, Ibsen had no time to read; and all that he could learn was acquired incidentally from his necessary business of presenting to the local Bergen public many French plays of the school of Scribe. His own first play of any prominence—*Lady Inger of Östrat*—was written in emulation of the current formula of Scribe; and this minor but inevitable incident is indicative of the important fact that Ibsen's education was derived not from the library but from the stage. Never at any time—in the midst of a perilous attempt to earn his living against agonising odds—did Ibsen ever find the leisure to become a "man of letters." In his twenties and his thirties, he read a few plays of Schiller and a few plays of Shakespeare; and, at the same period, he seems to have become more familiar than he was willing later to admit with both parts of Goethe's *Faust*; but, to the end of his days, he remained distinctly—and this fact became with him a point of pride—a playwright who knew next to nothing of the history of literature. Though most Norwegians are accustomed, as a matter of course, to study many other languages, Ibsen never acquired an easy fluency in any foreign tongue but German. Late in his life, he said to one of his Boswells that he hated all the plays of Alexander Dumas *filis*, and added the unexpected comment,—"But, of course, I have never read them." The last remark was, presumably, more candid than the first:

for Ibsen, in his later years, was genuinely proud of the fact that he had read little except the daily newspapers. When commentators pointed out that the patterned formula of *Ghosts* recalled the technique of Euripides, he would retort irately that he had never read Euripides.

It was not until the time of the Italian tour which Ibsen undertook in the middle of his thirties that he ever actually saw any of the major works of architecture, painting, or sculpture that are existent in the world. At this belated moment, he attempted—to employ a phrase that is current in the narrowly restricted world of professional baseball—a “delayed steal” of culture; and his experience ran parallel to that of our own Nathaniel Hawthorne, who also made a pilgrimage to Italy at a time of life too long deferred. Like Hawthorne, Ibsen appreciated the wrong paintings, admired the wrong statues, and waxed enthusiastic over the wrong works of architecture. While showing the sensitised impressibility of a responsive temperament, he betrayed also the effects of an early education that had been exceedingly defective. Even in responding to the appeals of such æsthetic regions as Rome, Sorrento, and Amalfi, Ibsen remained the stage-director of a stock-company in Schenectady, instead of rising to the rarer atmosphere of a stimulated man of letters.

If Ibsen lacked culture in the realm of letters—and he frequently, when interviewed, insisted on the point that he was not well-read—it is even more obvious that he claimed no standing whatsoever as a sociologist or a philosopher. He regarded himself as a playwright, first and last and all the

time,—that is to say, a craftsman whose task it was to interest the public by holding, as 't were, a mirror up to nature in the actual, commercial theatre. His teacher was Eugène Scribe,—that exceedingly adroit technician who codified the formula of “the well-made play” [*“la pièce bien faite”*]; and the contemporary of whose exploits he was most justly jealous was Alexander Dumas *fils*,—who, like himself, attempted in his own way to improve and to perfect the formula of Scribe. Ibsen was not a philosopher; for he was ignorant of the accumulated records of philosophic literature. The author of *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* is not to be regarded primarily as a poet; for he had never studied any other universally important poem except the first and second parts of Goethe's *Faust*. To sum the matter up, he should not be considered in any other light than as an honest craftsman of the theatre who endeavoured—in accordance with that downright statement of the practical Pinero—“to give rise to the greatest possible amount of that peculiar kind of emotional effect, the production of which is the one great function of the theatre.”

Because of the distressing influence of a mediæval British censorship, Ibsen was long regarded, in the English-speaking theatre, as a sort of Doctor Munyon of the drama, lifting loftily an admonitory finger to the moralists and crying, “I'm for health!”, while his opponents countered with the Puritanical assertion that his purpose and effect were merely to disseminate disease. Now at last—in consequence of the repeated efforts of Madame Nazimova and the new enthusiasm of Mr. Arthur Hopkins—the undertakings of this downright manufacturer of

plays for the general and normal public are beginning to be appreciated at their worth, as compositions which require the disinterested admiration of all who seek "to learn and propagate the best that is known and thought in the theatre of the world."

VIOLETS

BY NANCY BARR MAVITY

THERE'S a place for violets,
By a brown stream, among the long swaying grasses;
Deep and purple and wistful and tender and gay,
Fresh as the joy of youth.
I have filled my hands with their green stems,
I have hidden my face in their coolness.
Violets, I lean to kiss you over the years.

But there's a place for violets—
They laugh and shake their beauty to the wind;
They need no aid of memories.
Where I walk the grey streets they are blue,
And snow cannot cover their fragrance.
You planted them in my heart, my friend—
I send you violets out of the love in my heart.