
THEATRE

Ibsen & the Absurd

By John Weightman

TWO OR THREE MONTHS ago, I expressed a very unfavourable reaction to *John Gabriel Borkman*, as performed at the National Theatre with a brilliant cast including two dames and a knight. It was, in fact, the lack of true knightliness, of any genuine psychological nobility in the character of Borkman himself, that I objected to. It seemed to me that Ibsen was deploying his symbols in far too obvious a manner to engender falsely tragic emotion about a hollow, neo-Nietzschean tycoon, and I was puzzled that such a play should be thought a modern masterpiece. I am still of the same mind as regards *John Gabriel Borkman*, but having now seen a superb performance of *Hedda Gabler* at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre and having put myself through a vacation course of Ibsen reading, I must hasten to make *amende honorable*.

John Gabriel Borkman is a relatively poor play, in which the characteristic Ibsen elements are unconvincingly combined and the straining after tragedy ill-judged. But the better works—and *Hedda Gabler* is one of them—have a fascinatingly bleak quality, which is perhaps Nietzschean in the deeper sense of being beyond good and evil. Hedda is certainly not a good woman; she is an unashamedly destructive bitch, and it is not surprising that the moralistic press of the 19th century should have exclaimed about the “moral sewer gas” of Ibsen drama. Some of the newspaper comments are quoted in the RSC programme, as if they were self-evidently mistaken, whereas they are perfectly true from a certain angle. No one who believes in goodness as a prime virtue could be comfortably at home in Ibsen’s universe. If I am not mistaken, it would be impossible to name a single interesting “good” character in any of the major plays. Even Nora, in *The Doll’s House*, has iron in her soul, and Ellida, in *The Lady from the Sea*, gives remarkably short shrift to her returned sailor, who has remained faithful for unnumbered years. Ibsen’s forte is the creation of rasping, disagreeable characters, who are impatient about life and very prone to look upon death, absence or departure as an immediate alternative. So true is this that, on reading *Rosmersholm*, I found myself wondering why Dame Rebecca West took her pen-name from the rather dislikable heroine of that play who, after the failure of her first attempts at progressive

activity through manipulating a wishy-washy lover whose wife’s mind she has poisoned, concludes a suicide pact with him and jumps off a bridge.

In short, Ibsen’s critical attitude to average bourgeois society, which was so exciting for the forward-looking people who first welcomed his plays, is far from making him into a positive, Left-Wing humanitarian. Indeed, he seems to have no stronger term of abuse than “liberal.” Would he really have wanted a decent, well organised society, in which municipal councils were honest and family life all sweetness and light? Does he really believe in the fundamental goodness of man and the perfectibility of society? I doubt it. He sometimes gives the impression of holding these views, but only because his exasperation with the *status quo* makes him behave as if he were on the side of the angels. Judging by the darkest plays—*Hedda Gabler* and *The Master Builder*—the only angel he is genuinely allied with is Lucifer, i.e. the Promethean angel, of whom Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* was only a modern reminting. His deepest commitment is to the freedom of strong individuals who are striving to be themselves, whatever that may mean, in an incomprehensible universe. Unlike his half-disciple Shaw, he is not an evolutionary meliorist with secondary Nietzschean overtones; he is much nearer to being a primary Nietzschean, a Promethean Absurdist, like Malraux, Sartre in some moods, and the early Camus.

HOWEVER, HE HAS different levels of sensibility and they are variously arranged from play to play. A peculiarity of his situation in dramatic history is that he is a master of *la pièce bien faite*, as exemplified by Scribe, Sardou, Dumas fils, etc. His patterns are always firmly arranged, the symbols richly polyvalent and the general effect strong, if not always immediately comprehensible. But one feels each time that it ought to be clear, because the tone of the play seems to be pointing a moral. The explanation for this may be that the 19th-century *pièce bien faite* derives in its turn from the Anglo-French bourgeois drama of the 18th century, which was essentially a moralising form, intended to express middle-class seriousness and do-good-ism, as opposed to aristocratic frivolity and panache. Ibsen makes lavish use of all the stock theatrical conventions associated with the form and its moral preoccupations: arrivals and departures, separations and reunions, guilty secrets emerging from the past, the interwoven stresses of commercial and sexual morality, class differences and family conflicts. One or two of his plays, in fact, are very close to the most conventional

examples of the genre. *Pillars of Society* has all the typical features, including a central hypocritical character, Bernick, who is converted to virtue in the end, and that typical device of the French bourgeois drama, *l'oncle d'Amérique*. *An Enemy of the People* is a slightly more sophisticated instance of bourgeois drama; Dr Stockmann, the hero who sets out to denounce municipal malpractice, is not a wooden personification of virtue, like, say, the heroes in Diderot's *Le Père de Famille* or *Le Fils Naturel*; he is impulsive, indiscreet, vain and not at all a humanity-loving democrat; but the general line-up of the characters in terms of black, white and grey corresponds to the simplistic patterning of the bourgeois drama. If Ibsen had written only this sort of play, he would have been a minor questioner of social evils, like Dumas fils and Brieux, and he would have died with the 19th century.

IN HIS BETTER WORKS, he does not simply subvert conventional morality or proceed by paradox, which is Shaw's typical device. After exploring the moral issue in the clash of the dialogue, he may bring the play to a dramatic conclusion with a definitive event—a death, a suicide or a departure—which, however, leaves the issue undecided. Besides, the implications of one play may seem to contradict those of another. There is a contrast between his artistic practice and his general behaviour. In his correspondence and *obiter dicta*, he sounds sure of his opinions, aggressive and dogmatic, as if he were impatient with the many fools who could not see the truth staring them in the face. A letter to Brandes, dated 1882, expresses his belief in the minority of the enlightened, the vanguard which pushes on to the points the majority has not yet reached, and concludes categorically: "That man is right who has allied himself most closely with the future."

Yet, for instance, if we take the vexed question of marriage, which is one of his constant concerns, does the future demand that all unions founded on a degree of hypocrisy should be broken up, at whatever cost, in the name of moral honesty, or that it is better to keep a defective marriage going rather than risk upsetting the apple-cart? At the end of *The Doll's House*, Nora goes off into the unknown to achieve self-realisation, leaving her three children to be looked after by the servants and her mediocre husband, and her decision appears ruthlessly heroic: she herself may come to a bad end in a good, individualistic cause, while her abandonment of the children is a crime mitigated by self-sacrifice. The lesson of *The Wild Duck* is quite different: Gregers Werle, through his prim, bachelor insistence on the truth, ruins the re-

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lationship between Hjalmar and Gina, which worked in a ramshackle way, and causes the death of Hedvig; he is castigated by Relling, precisely for not seeing the practical advantages of *mauvaise foi* in making life livable for frail humanity. In one context, Ibsen is denouncing bad faith; in the other, he is justifying it as a necessary ingredient of existence.

One may explain this by saying that Ibsen, in spite of his moralising stance, is perhaps not so much a moralist as a playwright interested in dramatic effects. He may be ringing the changes on similar elements in order to exploit the maximum range of theatrical emotion. In one context, the spectator is expected to throb in sympathy with Nora; in the other, to vibrate in disapproval of Gregers, and in each case it is the reaction that counts, rather than the principle behind it. If the theatre is considered to be primarily a Temple of Emotion (and many typically theatre-minded people appear to be able to enjoy any emotion for its own sake, without needing to enquire into the organic coherence of its roots), well and good. But this was one of my objections to *John Gabriel Borkman*; getting the arrangement slightly wrong, Ibsen showed him behaving disagreeably, like Gregers, and yet was adorning his behaviour with poetic effects, as if we ought to sympathise with him, as with Nora.

THERE ARE MANY curious little twists in the plays which leave one wondering whether Ibsen intended them to be interpreted as human-all-too-human confusions in the characters themselves, or whether they are unassimilated fragments in his own philosophy of life. For instance, why does Nora abandon her children? She implies at times that, having forged a signature, she is morally unreliable and therefore cannot bring them up properly; she has to go off and discover herself before she can assume responsibility for other people. She is surely wrong in her reasoning because, as she points out elsewhere, her crime was a minor one committed with the best of intentions, and she is leaving her children in a situation poisoned with conventional morality. But perhaps Ibsen felt that she was, in a sense, guilty, and that poetic justice had to operate, as it usually does in bourgeois drama. If so, he has failed to see that, from the Absurdist point of view, which is his deepest intuition, poetic justice is just as illusory as the pathetic fallacy. There is no morality in nature or history, only the operation of necessity, which runs through everything, including the human temperament. If partial acceptance of guilt is meant to be a reason for Nora's departure, this is a flaw in the play; she ought not to have abandoned her children. It may be, of course,

that Ibsen, the playwright, thought first of the splendid dramatic device of the slammed door and wanted to get to it by hook or by crook.

A SIMILAR UNCERTAINTY occurs, with more disruptive effect, in *Ghosts*, which I have always thought to be one of the least satisfactory plays, although it is not a simple propaganda work, like *Les Avariés* by Brieux. The moral issue raised by syphilis is not difficult to state: no syphilitic person should wittingly infect the healthy or beget children, since this would be a straightforward act of malignancy. But syphilis in itself is not wicked, nor is it a punishment for wickedness; like any other disease, it is a neutral part of the so-called "economy" of nature. To superstitious minds, it can appear to be a punishment, *i.e.* a form of poetic justice, because it begins in the sexual organs and eventually affects the brain, in other words, relates to the two most prestigious parts of the human anatomy. Brieux's play, as I remember it, is a right-minded, didactic piece attacking the bourgeois hypocrisy which prevented the frank discussion of syphilis in connection with *mariages de convenance*. However, in *Ghosts*, there is a definite suggestion that Alving *père* contracted syphilis because of his immorality, that Mrs Alving connived in the immorality for the sake of preserving appearances, and that she is now being punished by seeing Oswald decline into imbecility. The details are left vague, but if Alving *père* caught syphilis only through seducing the servant girl when he was drunk, he was singularly unlucky, like the Cambridge don I once heard about who celebrated the award of his Fellowship by plucking up courage to go on one occasion with a prostitute, possibly in a well-meaning attempt to cure himself of latent inversion, and then rotted away disastrously in a few years. In any case, if the servant was syphilitic, how can her daughter, Regine, who is also the child of Alving *père*, be in robust health, when her half-brother, Oswald, has been infected? I suspect Ibsen to be arranging dramatic contrasts: Northern darkness, syphilis, and bourgeois benightedness in opposition to Southern sun, freedom, and aesthetic creativity; pure young girl in opposition to diseased young man; half-brother incestuously attracted to half-sister, etc., without getting the relationship between morality and necessity quite right.

I am not sure whether the theme of the play is meant to be "the sins of the fathers are visited on the children" or "like father, like son" (Oswald takes to drink and tries to seduce Regine). If it is the first, syphilis is being used as a form of poetic justice, which is manifestly wrong. Alving *père* could have been sexually immoral without contracting the disease, and he could have been

diseased without being sexually immoral, just as Lingstrand, in *The Lady from the Sea*, is tubercular without having done anything wrong. As for the second theme, it would be a dull form of determinism, and one not much in keeping with ordinary experience. I would guess Ibsen to be yielding to the temptation to present syphilis as a specifically bourgeois evil. Something similar happens in *The Wild Duck*, where the profligate Werle père transmits his bad eyesight (a consequence of venereal disease?) to his illegitimate daughter, Hedvig. However, as one of the characters points out in the play, Werle père goes unpunished, apart from his incipient blindness, and he even settles down to a comfortable old age with his attractive mistress, so that he is not a victim of poetic justice to the same extent. Hedvig dies, but Werle père is not immediately to blame; the fault lies with Gregers, the too-severe Puritan. The message may be that immoral fathers produce sometimes diseased, sometimes morally intemperate, sons. In both cases, at any rate, a message seems to be hanging in the air and it cannot easily be squared with Ibsen's fundamental Absurdist irony.

AT THE SAME TIME, it is in *Ghosts* that Ibsen comes closest to making the obvious point about the hiatus between morality and necessity, in connection with the decision not to insure the orphanage. Mrs Alving, making atonement for her past mistakes and yet compounding them by reinforcing her dead husband's false reputation for virtue, founds the Alving orphanage. Pastor Manders explains that to insure such a charitable institution against the risk of fire would be to display a lack of faith in Providence and its inherent goodness. He might have added that all insurance is, philosophically, a post-providentialist phenomenon. If man has to be provident, this can only mean that God is not, although attempts have been made to straddle the contradiction in such semi-Absurdist phrases as "Trust in God and keep your powder dry" or "God helps those who help themselves." A thoroughgoing Absurdist believer, such as Simone Weil, will say that God allows necessity full play and even submits to it Himself in the person of Christ; man, like the Man-God, is literally crucified on necessity. Amplifying Simone Weil's idea, we could add that the crucifix, with its two bars set at right angles to each other, the vertical one representing the ruthlessness of necessity (the downward pull of gravity) and the horizontal one representing the outstretched arms of suffering man, is a perfect symbol of the tension between scientific law and human emotion. In *Ghosts*, the orphanage burns down; God has allowed necessity full play, or God is malevolent enough to want to punish Mrs Alving's presump-

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tion and past errors even at the expense of the orphans, or God does not exist.

THE BEAUTY of *The Master Builder* and *Hedda Gabler* is that they are almost pure expressions of the frustrated Promethean impulse, uncluttered by any worry about moral justification or any particular tendency to blame society for what is, after all, a metaphysical situation, whereas *Ghosts*, *The Wild Duck* and *The Lady from the Sea* tend to confuse the metaphysical and the social. In *The Wild Duck*, the bird with the broken wing surviving in captivity can be understood, on one level at least, as the metaphysical aspiration, the Promethean impulse, smothered by bourgeoisism or the muddle of human relationships. A whole range of ornithological parallels served this purpose in the 19th and early 20th centuries: the lark, the albatross, the swan, the vulture, the eagle, the sea-gull, the blue-bird and even the cuckoo. But I cannot see *The Wild Duck* as Ibsen's masterpiece, because Gregers is mistakenly working off his thirst for the absolute through messing up still further human lives that are already beyond redemption. *The Lady from the Sea* is exceptional in that, for once, Ibsen prefers the comfortably human to the grandly impossible. Ellida renounces her oceanic Stranger, the symbol of her "craving for the unattainable... for the limitless", in favour of happy domesticity; that is, she moves back from cosmic poetry to the bourgeois drama: Undine settles on dry land. But *The Master Builder* and *Hedda Gabler* have no truck with bourgeois values, although the latter play may have the outward appearance of a bourgeois drama; Solnes and Hedda are the male and female versions of the same exasperated Absurdist character.

Solnes, being a man with a constructive gift, can create buildings which rise heavenwards, first in an automatic gesture of worship, then in a gesture of revolt. When he speaks to God from the top of the church tower, he finds that God is not there or does not deign to reply. So he comes down to build houses for men, but either men are so mediocre as not to be worth building for, or they are potential rivals and so challenge the Promethean creator's need to feel supreme and unique. (At times, Ibsen manipulates the subject/object tension almost as systematically as Sartre.) Finally, Solnes builds his own house, as a monument to himself, with its tower and its significantly empty nurseries (physical procreation, an animal, *i.e.* organic, scientific process, is a mere extension of contingency; it would take a wise father to know the "necessity" of his own child in the way a creator knows his works). Egged on by Hilde, a minor Hedda, he climbs to the top of this personal tower in a last frenzy of self-affirmation, and plunges to his death.

Hedda is devoid of artistic creativeness and, being a woman, is cursed with a womb that conceives against her will and, what is worse, is legitimately fertilised by the least interesting of her three male partners. Whereas Solnes can be positive in defiance, she can only be positive in negativity, through manipulating the men: Tesman, the mediocre, "good" husband, with whom she makes do as a bread-winner, and whom she has married through the Absurdist accident of making a remark about the house; Brack, amoral though by profession a judge, and a valid, if non-poetic opponent, with whom she spars zestfully, until he threatens to get the better of her; and Lövborg, the Dionysiac *beau idéal*, with whom she might just have thrown in her lot, had she been absolutely sure that he had vine leaves in his hair and was not just another gifted weakling, unable to distinguish between ecstasy and drink.

As Miss Glenda Jackson plays her, with magnificently sustained viciousness and a thrilling range of intonation, Hedda is not just a Norwegian Madame Bovary, longing for romantic fulfilment; she is a suburban Lady Macbeth or Madame de Merteuil, whose boredom is so intense as to lend metaphysical dignity to bad temper in a bourgeois drawing-room. The symbols, too, have a splendid, melodramatic simplicity and are so dreamlike that Ibsen himself may not have been fully aware of them. Hedda is a dismounted Amazon, forced to fight on foot indoors, instead of galloping freely out of doors, and her father's pistols, which she uses to frighten Brack, an ambiguous devotee of "the back way", and one of which she passes to Lövborg, are male attributes handled more competently by her than by the men. Her movement when she presents the pistol to Lövborg, offering him, as it were, a means of lethal potency with which to escape aesthetically from the humdrum, has the same mixture of sexuality and intellectual tension as Phèdre's gesture in grasping at Hyppolite's sword. The phallic symbol is being offered to the man in the one case, and snatched from him in the other, and the aim in both cases is death, the polar opposite of sex.

This is not to say that *Hedda Gabler*, like *Phèdre*, is a tragedy, since tragedy supposes some transcendental witness or counterpart or law, against which human effort and failure are being measured, and which can underwrite the catharsis. Ibsen's play is a black, Absurdist farce. Lövborg muffs his exit by shooting himself accidentally in the stomach, *i.e.* in the guts and near the genitals, during a row with a prostitute; Hedda can only retort with the vain, stylish gesture of putting the pistol to her temple, the nobly-named seat of Absurdist awareness.

NOTES & TOPICS

A Nice Place to Visit



AMERICANS, as Tocqueville and others have pointed out, are too busy finding solutions for the future to have much patience with the past—especially, one might add, the recent past. The distant past may be viewed through heroic or nostalgic lenses, but the recent past is too close for comfort. It's embarrassing because it's about us. Perhaps that is one reason why very little has been said or

written by politicians or journalists about the recently deceased but unlamented war in Viet Nam. The tragedy over, Americans are calm of mind, all passion spent. Or perhaps they are merely bored with it all, sated by 10 years of news from a country that surely cannot be of much interest to most Americans.

Because no one wants to talk or think about Viet Nam any more, many Americans will gladly assent to the notion that what finally happened there is all for the best. They will be eager to accept benign new portraits of their former enemy, in this way reassuring themselves that dread Necessity—the ignominious defeat by a minor Asian power—was really in the best interests of all concerned. Such portraits will take the form of exercises in demystification, attempts to exorcise the old demon of the communist menace by providing us with the long historical view of an “expert” on South-east Asian culture.

Such a portrait has already been painted by Frances FitzGerald in an article entitled “Journey to North Vietnam”, which appeared in a recent issue of *The New Yorker*. Ms FitzGerald clearly has the right credentials for undertaking such a

commission. She is the author of *Fire in the Lake* (1972), a book about Viet Nam that won several awards in the United States. She has also written pieces on Cuba and Iran for several influential American journals.

One may wonder about such *expert* visiting journalists, for her article, which was actually written a short time before the war ended, panders to our need to find some good in all endings—evoking as it does a North Viet Nam of order, harmony, and decency. Ms FitzGerald of course isn't prevaricating. She reports what she saw and heard—that is, what she wanted to see and hear, like the believers who went to Russia in the 1930s, those enthusiasts whom David Caute surveyed in his book, *The Fellow-Travelers* (1973).¹

One has no way of knowing whether the picture FitzGerald paints of North Viet Nam and its citizens is an accurate one, but the very language of her celebrations evokes the language of those celebrants of 40 years ago. As we now know, the gap between their tales and the reality of life in the Soviet Union at the time was enormous. Though the gap between what FitzGerald reports and the reality of life in North Viet Nam is probably not as great, since North Viet Nam lacks a Stalin, it still behooves us to be sceptical of any “tale” that smacks of the tales of the Thirties.

THE COMPLACENT RHETORIC of her piece deserves, I think, close analysis. She begins by suggesting that Hanoi is in some ways similar to Saigon: a hotel in Hanoi has an air of decayed elegance, just like a hotel she knows in Saigon. The comparison is reassuring; the world we are entering is not very different from the world we have left. But if Hanoi looks a bit like Saigon, the atmosphere of Hanoi is quite different from Saigon's: there are no whores, street sellers, or transvestites. Instead of hysterical children begging for money, she sees groups of well-behaved boys wearing red neckerchiefs. Chaos reigns in decadent Saigon, ruined by instant Americanisation, whereas in orderly Hanoi “they have kept up many of the old customs.”

Hanoi, FitzGerald implies, is the kind of city that no longer exists in the United States—a pleasant, medium-sized city, clean and safe.

“In the afternoons, Hanoians drink beer on the terrace of the little restaurant next to the lake; they rent rowing shells or go for a ride in the motorboats that putter back and forth between its islands.”

In the evenings lovers sit on benches in the small, dark place near the lake. The police, tolerant and understanding, don't bother the lovers, nor do they bother “the little boys who illegally fish in the lake with home-made spinning rods.”

¹ See also, in *ENCOUNTER*, Paul Hollander, “The Ideological Pilgrim: Looking for Utopia, Then and Now” (November 1973), and George Watson, “Were the Intellectuals Duped? The 1930s Revisited” (December 1973).