

Ibsen and the Actress

by

Elizabeth Robins

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IBSEN AND THE ACTRESS

ELIZABETH ROBINS



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NOTE

This Essay was given as a Lecture before the Royal Society of Arts under the auspices of the British Drama League, March 12th, 1928.

4

[In addition to Desmond McCarthy, mentioned on page 6, translator Edmund Gosse and John George Robertson (professor of Scandinavian literature) had spoken. Bernard Shaw was the last speaker, one week after Robins. See End Note 1 for ER's reaction to Shaw's remarks.]

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IBSEN AND THE ACTRESS

I CANNOT but think, as I stand here, of my predecessors in this place. No one can have had a greater sense of profit or a deeper pleasure than I in the stores of learning, the profundity of criticism, above all, the deep and moving intellectual sympathy which have been offered here to the memory of the great Norwegian. I had not realised, and it is a reassurance to think, that Ibsen is so alive to-day—so present to the challenging mind and the discriminating enjoyment.

But in spite of indebtedness for my share in gratitude for all this, I have felt here, at intervals, a little lonely for the “helpers and servers” of that institu-

tion to which, after all, we owe Henrik Ibsen. If I except a brief reference by Mr Desmond M'Carthy (and very telling it was!), among all this wealth of testimony from the study there has been hardly a thought for, and there has been no mention of, the stage. I came to wonder was this partly because the theatre is still homeless among the people who speak Shakespeare's tongue? One day that will be considered.

You have been hearing about Ibsen as man; as an influence in European literature; as dramatist. To "place" Ibsen as any of these, we must remind ourselves afresh of the chasm that may exist—that so often does exist—between the literature of the drama and the literature of the stage. Apart from the mass of unacted, unactable prose plays, there is the great body of poetry

in the form of drama. The readiest instances in the English language are, of course, Tennyson and Browning; and there is the whole company of poets before and after those two, who created in dramatic form a literature that never became stage literature. Unlike Ibsen, the authors of these poetic dramas made their reputations without help from the stage, and if they live at all, they live on the printed page. But Ibsen's poetry, apart from what went into his acted plays, would not have carried his name outside Scandinavia.

I cannot lag behind anyone in recognising that Ibsen was first and foremost a poet, if I think only of "Paa Vidderne" and the collection of exquisite little early lyrics. But my point is, without the help of the stage the world would not have had an Ibsen to celebrate; and without Ibsen the world

would not have had the stage as it became after his plays were acted.

The reason I am here this afternoon is because of Ibsen's significance to actors. Apart from the fact that no one being can speak for the people who acted Ibsen, the choice of the one was felt to be restricted—an effect of the mere passing of time. I think the organisers of this series of lectures were right to try to find a woman. I mean to set out my reasons for that presently.

In dealing with Ibsen's significance to the acting profession, I naturally think of one actress in particular whose view would have been immensely interesting. I mean, of course, the woman to whom belongs the lasting honour of being the first person to play a great Ibsen part in England—Janet Achurch. As she is not here, I was going to say—but in a sense she is here, vivid in the conscious-

ness of all who ever saw her act. As she cannot, however, speak to you, I think the makeshift-best I can do in this direction is to tell you a little about my own recollection of the first production of *A Doll's House*, for—thinking of the title of this paper—that occasion, in addition to so much else, stood for Ibsen and at least three actresses: Janet Achurch, Marion Lea, and myself, plus I don't know how many more, who were to be affected by that day's happening. I do not know whether I had ever heard Ibsen's name till the afternoon when I went with my friend Marion Lea to see her friend act *A Doll's House*.

I cannot think such an experience was ever ushered in with so little warning. There was not a hint in the pokey, dingy theatre, in the sparse, rather dingy audience, that we were on

[Consult the bibliography for Hill, citing John, for pointing out that Marion Lea and Janet Achurch had trained together at Theatre Royal, Margate, under Sarah Thorne.]

the threshold of an event that was to change lives and literatures. The Nora of that day must have been one of the earliest exceptions—she was the first I ever saw—to the rule that an actress invariably comes on in new clothes, unless she is playing a beggar. This Nora, with her home-made fur cap on her fair hair, wore the clothes of Ibsen's Nora, almost shabby, with a touch of prettiness.

I never knew before or since anybody strike so surely the note of gaiety and homeliness as Janet Achurch did in that first scene. You saw her biting into one of the forbidden macaroons, white teeth flashing, blue eyes full of roguery, her entire *Wesen* inviting you to share that confidence in life that was so near shipwreck. The unstagey effect of the whole play (and that must have owed much to Charles Charrington) made it,

Wesen: being, essence

to eyes that first saw it in '89, less like a play than like a personal meeting—with people and issues that seized us and held us, and wouldn't let us go.

I remember Marion Lea wanted desperately to play Nora—in the provinces, in America, anywhere. Strangely, it didn't take me like that. Janet Achurch's acting had carried me clean out of myself. I didn't even feel on that first occasion, as I did later, that the Tarantella dance was, from the point of view of the theatre, somehow a mistake. But the famous lines: "Millions of women have done so" and ". . . it burst upon me that I had been living here these eight years with a strange man, and had borne him three children"—for all time they should be said just as they were first said, and by just that person. I have never changed my mind about this though I have

seen a number of Noras, in various countries.

To go to that play once was to be compelled to go again. The second time I was able to follow the sheer acting more—shall I say professionally. I am afraid I felt I knew about acting. I certainly had seen a good many plays. In an old-fashioned stock company on the other side of the Atlantic, where an evening's entertainment would sometimes consist of a curtain-raiser, the main drama of the evening, and an afterpiece, I had played, during two years (by dint sometimes of doubling and even trebling), nearly three hundred parts. I had afterwards gone touring in romantic melodrama with the father of Eugene O'Neill; after that, in Shakespeare with Edwin Booth. Yes, I thought I knew. And this *Doll's House*, with its little-known actors and its

poverty-struck setting, was not only the most thrilling, it was the most satisfyingly *done* modern play I had ever seen. Each person in the caste seemed the heaven-appointed person for the part. Charrington again! But the acting of the children must have been Janet Achurch's own contribution. They were not stage children at all. They clung about her, they *really* laughed, they got in her way, they belonged to her. My one moment of anxiety, that second time of seeing (and I was always to feel this), was a doubt whether the dance would come off. Somehow for me it never did quite—in spite of all the actress could do. The Tarantella seemed a piece of theatricalism, Ibsen's one concession to the effect-hunting that he had come to deliver us from. As for Dr Rank, Charrington never, in all his days, played anything so well as that

13

[Nora has schemed to pretend to dance badly, in order to convince her husband to spend more time with her rehearsing so that he will not look at the letters in his mail box until after the public performance. We know the letter from Krogstad threatens blackmail, even as Nora has spoken up for Krogstad to keep his job when Torvald becomes the new bank manager.]

funereal figure. He gave Rank a creepy uncanniness that goes creeping over me even in memory. There was death and the grave in his long dull-coloured face. In the early part of the play Nora's warm bright confidence splintering against that tombstone of a man gave one a chill.

14

I do not remember much about the Mrs Linden of that occasion except that, looking on from the front, she seemed just right. It fell to me, a little while after the Charrington season, to play Mrs Linden with a wholly different caste. Coming close to her, as acting a part brings close, was another matter, and in that quite common fact there is significance for people who care to understand the function of the actor. In mere length Mrs Linden is a small part, but it was for me a great experience. I despair of giving an idea of what that

little part meant, not only of vivid pleasure in working at and playing, but of—what I cannot find any other word for than—self-respect. Ibsen was justifying what some of us, with very little encouragement, had blindly believed about the profession of acting.

In setting down my notes I have not aspired to be historical. I have tried quite simply to fix a personal impression. It was Marion Lea who first saw the opportunity in *Hedda Gabler* and invented our going to see Mr Heinemann, the publisher, to get the acting rights. That settled (provisionally to our finding a producer), we undertook to see the managers ; but they were more difficult of access, so we wrote to them. We saw them ultimately and tried to persuade them that their indifference and their loathing were equally mistaken. We failed.

“There’s no part for *me!*”

“But this is a woman’s play, and an uncommon bad one at that!”

“What you can *see* . . .!” and so on.

Then Marion Lea, again the initiator, urged me to join her in producing *Hedda* ourselves. This was courageous of her. It was no secret that we had, neither of us, any money; but Marion had a jewelled bracelet and I had a small treasure that I could throw in the pot. With these “securities” we borrowed from an amiable friend £300, and set to work.

The first thing was to enlist the co-operation of the translators, Sir Edmund Gosse and Mr William Archer. They showed a singular confidence in us—all unproved as we were. They allowed us to collaborate in a somewhat more speakable version for stage use. I don’t

mean for a moment that we had anybody's consent to the least alteration of Ibsen's meaning, but we were allowed to alter Ibsen's English dress. We found in this latitude a very inspiring kind of freedom. I have somewhere several sets of page proofs of *Hedda Gabler* as they left the hands of the translators; one set scored over in Marion Lea's handwriting, one with mine, and our final agreed recommendations. These Mr Archer fully criticised, sometimes denounced and utterly declined; but the final result was, I think, a very speakable, very playable version, no less faithful—I have always held more faithful—to Ibsen. Anyway, it was immense fun. Then choosing the caste as though it were choosing a Cabinet at a national crisis . . . then the rehearsals, everybody keen, excited, pulling with us (few London plays have

ever been rehearsed longer or more carefully). Then the production!

The press notices were a palpitating excitement, especially those we jeered at—with anxiety in our hearts. But we put on a bold front. Mr Clement Scott understand Hedda?—any man except that wizard Ibsen really understand her? Of course not. That was the tremendous part of it. How should men understand Hedda on the stage when they didn't understand her in the persons of their wives, their daughters, their women friends? One lady of our acquaintance, married and not noticeably unhappy, said laughing, "Hedda is all of us."

Hedda was not all of us, but she was a good many of us—so Mr Grant Allen told the public. Anyway, she was a bundle of unused possibilities, educated to fear life; too much opportunity to

develop her weakness; no opportunity at all to use her best powers.

I shall lay myself open to the charge of too great simplicity, but I am going to remind even such an audience as this of some aspects of the Hedda story. It is some time since the play has been done in England, but that is not my real reason. My real reason is, this one of Ibsen's actresses did not see Hedda as she was described by any critic, and Ibsen still seems to me to side with the actress.

Hedda is first represented to us as an enviable person. We hear of what General Gabler's daughter had "been accustomed to"; how fond she was of dancing, and shooting at a mark and riding with her handsome father—she "in her long black habit and with feathers in her hat." "So beset with admirers," Aunt Julia says—who would

have dreamt she would marry a mere professor? Well, she wasn't on the scene sixty seconds before it was clear she knew there was joy in life that she hadn't been able to grasp, and that marriage only emphasised what she was missing.

—It was never any wish of mine to whitewash General Gabler's somewhat lurid daughter. Even in the heat and glamour of that first personal contact with a great Ibsen part, I was under no temptation to try to make her what is conventionally known as "sympathetic." One surviving recollection bears witness to that. Among those who never much cared about Ibsen, but always came to see him acted, was Lady Bell. At the first performance of *Hedda* she was thought by her companion to be in danger of lending herself too much to the glamour of the play; so this friend

of Lady Bell's youth warned her: "It's all very exciting, but I wouldn't trust her round the corner—that woman playing Hedda."

I had the best of reasons for not trying to mitigate Hedda's corrosive qualities. It was precisely the corrosive action of those qualities on a woman in Hedda's circumstances that made her the great acting opportunity she was—in her revolt against those commonplace surroundings that the bookworm she had married thought so "elegant"; her unashamed selfishness; her scorn of so-called womanly qualities; above all, her strong need to put some meaning into her life, even at the cost of borrowing it, or stealing the meaning out of someone else's.

Hedda's first and dearest dream had been to find contacts with life through the attractive young man of letters,

Eilert Lövborg. That hope ended in driving him from her at the point of a pistol—not, as one eminent critic has said, “in the ostentation of outraged purity which is the instinctive defence of women to whom chastity is not natural.” Hedda drove Lövborg from her in disgust; disgust at the new aspects of vulgar sensuality which her curiosity about life had led him to reveal. She never denied it was her doing that he revealed these things; it was not her doing that he had them to reveal. They made her gorge rise. The man who had wallowed in that filth must not touch Hedda Gabler—certainly not fresh from the latest orgy. The effect of that experience, plus the conditions of her own life and upbringing, was to throw her into marriage with the least ineligible man she can find who is decent, and no one can

deny that poor Tesman was entirely decent.

The result was not peculiar to Ibsen characters. In one form or another, as we all know, it is a commonplace in the history of people whose nervous system generates more force than the engine of their opportunity can use up. Hedda speculates, like many another woman, on the opportunity politics would give to her husband, and, through him, give to her; but she is too intelligent to have much hope of Tesman in that direction. She is no sooner home from her boring honeymoon than she finds that a girl she had looked down on and terrorised at school—shrinking, gentle Mrs Elvsted—has reclaimed the dissipated Lövborg. More than that, largely by her faith in him, she has helped him to write what they are calling a work of genius. The timid Thea Elvsted has actually left her

husband and her home to watch over Lövborg, so that he may not fall into evil courses again. How on earth had it all come about? Hedda, by turns, worms and coerces the facts out of Thea: "He gave up his old habits not because I *asked* him to, for I never dared do that; but he saw how repulsive they were to me—so he dropped them."

As simple as that! None of those shady stories told to Thea—but the pretty little fool has his dreams in her keeping; she has helped to turn them into reality. And Hedda has lost him. For Hedda there would be "others." The insinuating Judge Brack, with his aristocratic profile and his eyeglass, is already at the door—but never the man whose faith in his own genius, faith in life, had given Hedda the one respite she had known from mean standards, mean fears.

Those had been times for Lövborg, too, of respite from his meaner self. Hedda's passion for external material beauty was not the only kind of beauty that swayed her. Lövborg in his moods of poetic exaltation had given her, too, a glorious sense of freedom, of daring. She had her phrase for those high moods of his. It was the phrase that, with a truly Ibsenite irony, became famous in England in a totally different sense. When Hedda asks eagerly, "Did he have vine leaves in his hair?" she was not inquiring whether Lövborg was drunk with the fiery Scandinavian punch, but whether he had been tasting a diviner draught. She was using her symbol for his hour of inspired vision, which had had for her, too, its intoxication. Now she has lost all that—unless—unless she can break the hold of this irritating little goose. Thea had said

she'd been so frightened of Hedda at school. Well, she should be frightened again!

It is a commentary on actress psychology that though in those days I accepted, and even myself used, the description of Hedda as a "bloodless egoist," I was under no temptation to play her like that. Here I was in debt to Ibsen's supreme faculty for giving his actors the clue—the master-key—if they are not too lofty or too helplessly sophisticated to take it. Ibsen's unwritten clue brought me close enough to the "cold-blooded egoist" to feel her warm to my touch; to see Hedda Gabler as pitiable in her hungry loneliness—to see her as tragic. Insolent and evil she was, but some great celebrators of Ibsen have thought more meanly of Hedda than the text warrants. She knew, she did not deny, her prime

weakness. Lövborg in the second act says of Thea in Hedda's presence:

“And then she is so brave!”

“Good heavens,” Thea exclaims, “I brave!”

“Very courageous,” he rubs it in, “where your comrade's interests are concerned.”

“Ah, yes,” says Hedda, “Courage. If only one had that.”

“What then?” Lövborg insists.

“Then life would perhaps be livable after all.”

She knew there was no deadlier enemy than Fear; but her circumstances (and they were in essentials the circumstances of all women “of position,” as it is called) made Fear the master of the show. To the timid, trembling Thea, who yet could brave public opinion—having less to lose—Hedda had found herself crying out:

“Oh, if you could understand how poor I am! And fate has made you so rich!”

Hedda *was* poor—but not one of the abject poor; for she had one form of courage. It is a form despised by a good many people who themselves lack it. I mean that courage that can refuse life on certain terms. These, in Hedda's case, were terms which two kinds of women find quite tolerable. They are the simple women and the slavish-minded women. The simple sort would have made a comfortable humdrum life with Tesman. Behind Tesman's back the slavish-minded would have led an *accidenté* existence with Judge Brack and his successors.

I do not remember that even the friendliest critics took in the real significance of the ending of the first act.

“Well,” Hedda says to her husband,

“I shall have one thing at least to kill time with. . . .”

“Oh, thank heaven for that!” says poor Tesman fervently. “What is it, Hedda? Eh?”

“My pistols,” she says.

“Your pistols!”

Hedda (with cold eyes): “General Gabler’s pistols.” She goes out. . . .

“No, for heaven’s sake, Hedda darling — don’t touch those dangerous things! For *my* sake, Hedda! Eh?” He rushes into the garden after her and the first curtain comes down.

Long before she met the man she married, Hedda had looked on General Gabler’s pistols as possible allies. They had early prevented Lövborg from adding Hedda Gabler to the list of his Mademoiselle Dianas and other light o’ loves. At the last, Hedda was to give Lövborg a pistol that he might do

with it what she had long meant to do, if life should fail her utterly. It will be remembered there were two pistols. She still had one for her own need.

It is perhaps curious Ibsen should have known that a good many women have found it possible to get through life by help of the knowledge that they have power to end it rather than accept certain slaveries. Naturally enough, no critic, so far as I know, has ever noticed this governing factor in Hedda's outlook, her consciousness of one sort of power, anyway—the power of escape. The reason men have not noticed the bearing this had on Hedda's character and fate seems plain enough. Certainly the particular humiliations and enslavements that threaten women do not threaten men. Such enslavements may seem so unreal to decent men as to appear as melodrama.

Ibsen not only knew better; he saw further than the special instance. He saw what we at that time did not; I mean the general bearing of Hedda's story. This so little concerned us when we were producing Ibsen that we never so much as spoke about it.

You may be able to imagine the excitement of coming across anything so *alive* as Hedda. What you won't be able to imagine (unless you are an actress in your twenties) is the joy of having in our hands—free hands—such gloriousactable stuff. If we had been thinking politically, concerning ourselves about the emancipation of women, we would not have given the Ibsen plays the particular kind of whole-hearted, enchanted devotion we did give. We were actresses—actresses who wouldn't for a kingdom be anything else. We got over that; but I am

talking about '89-'91. How were we to find fault with a state of society that had given us Nora and Hedda and Thea? Unlike Mlle Brandes, whom I was later to see playing Hedda in Paris, Marion Lea and I never thought of there being anything difficult to understand in the Ibsen women till people challenged them. *Then* in sheer self-defence we became controversial. But whether we met abuse or praise, in the end it was all grist to our mill. It was tonic to be attacked. To be understood and praised was—whatever it was, we came out of it all, without loss of the bracelet or the small treasure, with a tidy balance at the bank, with a kindling memory and a lesson.

Ibsen had taught us something we were never to unlearn. The lesson had nothing to do with the New Woman; it had everything to do with our

particular business—with the art of acting. Events, after *Hedda*, emphasised for us the kind of life that stretched in front of the women condemned to the “hack-work” of the stage. That was what we called playing even the best parts in plays selected by the actor-manager. The important managers were actors then. I cannot say that without saying it was good to work under John Hare at the Garrick. But all that interval after *Hedda* was secretly filled with waiting for the next Ibsen.

Marion Lea had married and gone to act in her husband's plays in America. *There* was an actress (I cannot but think) after Ibsen's own heart!—skilled, eager, highly sensitive. Above all, her own striking originality did not stand in the way of complete loyalty to her author. She already had a singularly

keen appreciation of the aims and ends of good stage-management. It should be said that having to do with Ibsen greatly heightened that faculty. She had complained before that so many actors "play the lone hand"; they consider their business is to make their part—whatever it is—the pivot of the play. Perhaps more than anyone I ever worked with, Marion Lea had the sense of playing with the whole orchestra. Yet she had a perception of character so independent, clean-cut, daring, that people who had seen her success in Shakespearean comedy hardly recognised her when she came on, for instance, as *Thea*. And make-up had very little to do with this genius for individualising. Her performance of *Thea* was a triumph of art; but so unforced, so true to life, that people wouldn't believe she was acting at all. The result was she never

had one-tenth of the recognition she deserved. Many of the critics and most of the managers mistook the self-discipline of the artist for limited range.

One of the few who did not fall into this error was Mr Bernard Shaw—and who could recall Ibsen days without seeing that figure flash across the scene, leaving a trail of laughter, sometimes of consternation, but always a more vivid sense of our material and our opportunity. Mr Shaw was the man, or more truly he later became the man, who could have heightened and prolonged the value of certainly one of Ibsen's actresses; for, beyond any critic of his day, Mr Shaw was master of the power to make reputation. Had he been in a position to write some of the things he said about the performance of *Thea*, the managers' eyes would have been opened. As it

was, Marion Lea was early lost to Ibsen and the English stage.

But Ibsen's fame in England had now reached a point where there was competition—among actresses—as to who should have the next play: “*If it's actable,*” said the cautious. “How can we know?” There was *no* knowing. One of Ibsen's characteristics was his refusal to tell even his most trusted friends a word about any work till it was finished. The nearest he ever came to such confidences was in his answer to Mr William Archer's rather hopeless questioning as to what was to be the subject of the next play: “Some devilry or other,” said Ibsen, and he wouldn't promise his devilries to any actress—or to any theatre. He wouldn't even commit the play in book form to any English publisher.

On top of this refusal, the most enter-

prising publisher of the day, Mr William Heinemann, dropped his scores of other preoccupations and posted off to Norway. Mr Heinemann had heard that Ibsen was said never to give an interview to anyone he didn't know, and to few enough of those he did know.

If I remember, Ibsen was not induced to make an exception of Mr Heinemann; but the great man's son was tracked down. Sigurd Ibsen said he was as much in the dark as anybody; he didn't even know whether it was a man's play or a woman's play. But he was properly alive to the significance of having on the door-step a cosmopolitan publisher like Mr Heinemann—or perhaps he realised there *wasn't* another like him. Mr Sigurd knew, anyway, here was the man associated with the best business results an Ibsen play had yet achieved in English, so he promised

he would see what he could do. Mr Heinemann came home convinced he as good as had the nearly finished play in his pocket.

He was right. By the time the first sheets of *The Master Builder* reached England it was not necessary for me to wait yet longer while the translators turned it into English, or I think I should have died of impatience. I had the experience "frightfully thrilling" ("forfaerdelig spendende," as Hilda Wangel would say) of being able by then to read Ibsen in the original. That promised a collaboration closer still.

The play was found to be open to the charge of symbolism. That view did not, to my own consciousness, hold me then as it did on re-reading the other day. At the first contact, thirty-five or thirty-six years ago, we thrilled to it as

poetry. The actress recognised it as life—the kind of life that is most real in the theatre, that breathes freest on the stage. With *The Master Builder* Ibsen would, I believed, make his way to one of the established theatres.

I naturally took the play first to the theatres where I had already played, or to those which had offered engagements. I was told *The Master Builder* was simply unintelligible. Oh, it was wild! It was irritatingly obscure. It was dull, it was mad, it would lose money.

I had one special friend among English managers. Two or three years earlier Beerbohm Tree had put me in the position (a lucky one for an alien and a stranger) of understudying the leading lady's part in his theatre and, as it turned out, of playing her for a while. But for this I should have spent just four days in England instead

of the rest of my life; so, amongst other things that I owed to that versatile, generous, and lovable man, I owed to Beerbohm Tree the chance of being in the Ibsen saga at all. That much to explain why, though Mr Tree loathed Ibsen and had been one of the most vehement and picturesque fulminators against him, I finally took *The Master Builder* to the Haymarket.

Beerbohm Tree turned out to be the one manager in London who could see anything in the play. To my delight, what he could see was himself. Yes, he would produce it—on condition. The condition was that we should lift the play out of its sordid provincialism. We would do this by dint of making the people English; more particularly by making the Master Builder a sculptor. Many people in those days would have backed that view.

Fortunately, Mr Herbert Waring was ready to join me in the responsibility of producing *The Master Builder* as Ibsen had written it. Herbert Waring it was who found a man ready to put down a small sum that would give the play a hearing. For me there had been just one haunting doubt about the enterprise: Was I *quite* young enough to stand for the Younger Generation knocking at the door? Among the reassurances on this score I have always cherished the one Sir Edmund Gosse set down in his preface to the play. But before that was written, while we worked on *The Master Builder*, doubts were not so much solved as clean forgotten in the sheer absorbed delight of dealing with such material and with such helpers.

It was a great piece of fortune to have as fellow-actor and fellow-producer such

a partner as Mr Waring. He and I gathered together what I still think was an ideal caste; and we had for chiefly the one man in the world who could do most for our author, and, by that road, do the most for us. Standing guard over Ibsen's interests, at every rehearsal, note-book in hand, a kind of Recording Angel setting down our sins of omission or commission, was William Archer. Nothing escaped him, from the slightest inflection of voice, the significance of the smallest gesture or most fleeting expression, up to the crescendo of a climax or the capital crime of the smallest alteration of the text—nothing escaped that note-book. Either on the intolerable instant, or at the end of the act, he would have us each and all up for judgment.

No one could speak out of experience of Ibsen and the actress in England

and not make some, however inadequate, recognition of the bridge between the two—the bridge built and guarded by William Archer. I have sometimes wondered what the interview would have been like had the great Duse herself made to Mr Archer her request for a happy ending to *A Doll's House*!

I doubt if it has ever happened before, that a distinguished critic and man of letters has given so much of his thought and time, given a patience tireless, remorseless, to the guardianship of another man's renown. William Archer did all this not for Ibsen only. He did it for dramatic literature; he did it for love of and understanding of the stage. As for the value to the actors of the keen participation in our work of such a mind and such an equipment, only we, who worked with him, know

what Ibsen's plays in England owed to William Archer.

The dress rehearsals of all the Ibsen plays I was concerned in producing brought round us the inner circle of Ibsen supporters, and a few of those who in our opinion *ought* to be supporters. These select but agitating parties often gave the unprofessional critic a chance to help us. Among far more important instances a minor one comes back. Someone said Hilda's dress was not quite right. I knew it. I had meant to have another fitting; but Herbert Waring and I had not only ourselves to think about, we had everybody else's part and clothes to think about, the rightness of the scenery, the lighting, the advertisements, the seating—all the thousand things that make up a production as a whole. I certainly was not going, on this last

breathless evening, to worry about Hilda's collar.

At the end of that final dress rehearsal Henry James joined the group on the stage. He interrupted somebody's congratulations:

"Yes, yes—but . . ." he fixed me with his melancholy look, "to-morrow a thousand eyes will be pecking at you—pecking at that"—he touched the collar.

So, late, tired, I went off in a hansom to see what could be done to make Hilda more . . . impeccable. But whether the collar lay flat or rode up didn't matter to me as I stood waiting outside The Master Builder's door at the first matinee performance next day, knapsack on back, alpenstock in hand, a prey to those alarms and desperations that seize the actor before he goes on, worst of all that *nearly* last moment before the cue, when you have barely time to

measure the distance between the door that opens on the stage and that more merciful door that opens on the street; when you know you want nothing so much on earth as to be able to rush out of the theatre, take ship and vanish forever, or even get yourself run over; somehow, anyhow, to be rid of the awful need to march on to that battlefield, as Mr Bernard Shaw rightly calls the stage.

Ibsen, more than any author I have known, comes to the rescue of the actor in this misery. He never deserts you, if you trust him. Practically he "does it" for you. On Solness's line:

"Yes, just you see, Dr Herdal, presently the Younger Generation will come knocking at my door . . ."

Herdal laughs: "Well, what if they do?"

"What if they *do*? Then there's an

end of Halvard Solness." (Knock.)

"What's that?"

"Someone at the door."

Solness braces himself. "Come in," he says, and all the rest was . . . inevitable.

This is one of the plays—the other is *Rosmersholm*—that I won't pretend to speak dispassionately about, so it may be as well there is time to say very little. No other (and I played in seven of Ibsen's)—no other ever seemed so much mine as *The Master Builder*. No other ever brought such a sense of . . . release, such conviction of having the audience with me, and at the same time such freedom from the yoke of the audience. It was as if one played not only, as the good old advice directed, "to the last row in the gallery," but farther still—to an audience invisible. And this feeling was not disturbed by

the sounds from the actual audience. They took the "points" I thought obvious, and they took the points I least counted on anybody's noticing—*my* points, those that Ibsen had left me not merely to make, but to find. And, in addition to these, there was in the air (any actor will understand) that unmistakable response—and I do not mean applause—a response no less to the "little devil" in Hilda than to her thrilling sense of the adventure of living; a response to that queer mixture of wildness and tenderness; that determination to have her own imperious way, crossed by the necessity to feel what other people were feeling. Ah, that made it very difficult for Hilda to be only the wild bird of prey—made it impossible.

In one or two of the scenes it used to seem to intensify that sense of closeness

to the spirit of the thing, to say over to oneself (silently, of course) the equivalent phrase or so of the original. I remember in particular the scene where Hilda, in one of her most troll-like moods, happy, impudent, sits at the feet of the Master Builder's wife on a little stool in the garden. It is just before the elder woman's pitiful confidences. Partly to make Mrs Solness feel she likes being with her, Hilda has to say: "Ah, here one can sit and sun oneself like a cat." That particular Hilda used to hug her knees and, in the little pause, say to herself the Norwegian sentence Ibsen had put in Hilda's mouth. The warmth, the idle sensuousness of those words: "Ah—her kan en rigtig sidde og sole sig som en kat"—they made for a contrast in mood that needed no outward emphasis from the actress when a little later, alone

with the Master Builder, after the wife is gone, he asks:

“Are you cold, Hilda? I think you look cold.”

She answers: “I have just come up out of a tomb.”

One thing happened during that time I used to think I would like Ibsen to have known—though you will very likely wonder why. We had been told that exceedingly critical person, Lady Burne-Jones, had been saying remarkable things about the play. No one, least of all she herself, had expected it to take such hold of her. When some time later I met her this is what she said:

“After the final curtain I remember being disturbed by the applause. When I got up to go, I was bewildered to find the theatre empty; and I never knew how long I'd been sitting there alone.”

I have not spoken of the tremendous

sensation created by that first production of *Ghosts* which we owed to Mr Grein, nor the imperishable impression made by Duse in the same play thirty years after, nor of her *Lady from the Sea*—those are great chapters by themselves.

The steps by which other Ibsen plays, individually and in a cycle, came to be put on the stage in this country by an Ibsen actress is another story. I like to remember I had a hand in the production of *Little Eyolf* where Janet Achurch again made an unforgettable impression in the long part of Rita, while Mrs Patrick Campbell, in the small part of the Rat Wife, gave perhaps the most haunting and perfect piece of poetic acting that stands to her credit.

Just so "right" as they were in *Little Eyolf*, just so wrong was my old friend Miss Genevieve Ward as the wife of John Gabriel Borkman in the play

of that name. Miss Ward was a fine example (especially in Shakespeare parts) of the actress of the old school. She had found appreciation the round world over; but nothing would induce her to listen to Ibsen's prompting. Her ears were full of the stage directions of all the Sydney Grundys of the last fifty years. It was instructive, if infuriating, to see how her refusal to take her cue from her new author—how the need she seemed to feel to show a sense of humour and tragedy superior to Ibsen's—affected disastrously not only herself but others. And this brings me to my final point.

Ibsen's relation to the player is either singularly close, or, in effect, complete detachment. More than anybody who ever wrote for the stage, Ibsen could, and usually did, collaborate with his actors. I do not mean that he ever consulted

one of them ; the collaboration was a subtler thing than that. Ibsen was by training so intensely *un homme du théâtre* that, to an extent I know in no other dramatist, he saw where he could leave some of his greatest effects to be made by the actor, and so left them. It was as if he knew that only so could he get his effects—that is, by standing aside and watching his spell work not only through the actor, but *by* the actor as fellow-creator.

There are over-many instances for citation here, but Ibsen's principle is worth emphasising. All that he seemed to require of the actor was that he should not be too conceited, or too hopelessly divorced from naturalness to be *fit* to collaborate with such a playwright—a poet who, with all his consummate craft, had taken Nature for his master-mistress.

Given actors moderately intelligent, content to trust Ibsen to put them into the right *Stimmung*, they find Ibsen has done precisely this. By the power of his truth and the magic of his poetry he does something to the imagination that not only gives the actors an impetus, but an impetus in a right direction. And I do not say *the* right direction. Whatever direction the individual gift and temper of the actor inclines to, the effects that Ibsen leaves him to make are Ibsen's effects. Just as much they are Ibsen's when, in one actor's hands they turn out one thing, and in another actor's something different—different except for their incomparable freshness, their air of startling spontaneity, of being made to fit the player or the player born to play the part.

Ibsen's deep knowledge of human

nature, coupled with this sixth sense of his—the sense of the theatre—was less clouded than in most writers by a desire to dramatise himself; and in saying so I have not forgotten *Brand* or *Peer Gynt*. Certainly, as he grew older, as his experience ripened, he was more and more interested in and more aware of the effect of modern life on women.

My hope has been to show you the grounds on which the title of this lecture may be justified, for my own position is, that no dramatist has ever meant so much to the women of the stage as Henrik Ibsen. This is no less true although many admirable artists have never played him. They do not know, perhaps, that the parts they have made successes in would not have been written but for Ibsen. I am not criticising their judgment; it is probably sound. With exception of the

very greatest—the great, as Duse was great—people who have been a good while on the stage are less likely to show Ibsen at something like his full value than people whose talent is still mobile and comparatively modest, receptive. Make no mistake, you must let Ibsen play you, rather than insist on your playing Ibsen.

“Collaboration.” Maeterlinck has said: “*Il y a une plus haute collaboration que celle de la plume—celle de la pensée et du sentiment.*” One of the highest of all is, surely, this collaboration between playwright and player.

To those of us who were given a share in shaping for the stage some of Ibsen’s characters it is an unfading glory of memory that there was a moment when, led by him, we “mounted right to the top”—and heard harps in the air.

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“Il y a une plus haute collaboration que celle de la plume--celle de la pensée et du sentiment.” [There exists a higher collaboration than that of the pen—that of thought and of feeling.]

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Ibsen and the Actress
by
Elizabeth Robins

1928

Hogarth Press

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End notes follow this page.

Also, consult The Robins Web for a version that includes annotations and a bibliography of scholarship on the essay:

<https://www.jsu.edu/robinsweb/erplays/>

End Note 1 from unnumbered page 4

ER attended Shaw's lecture in the same series one week later, or March 19, 1928. As I state in my essay, "The Theatrical Politics of Elizabeth Robins and Bernard Shaw," Robins had another engagement, the recording of an essay for the BBC. But her diary noted her attendance: "The final Ibsen lecture. 5:30. Shaw this time; his address is a thing of shreds and patches. Where is Ibsen in all this? I kept saying." I also state that Shaw likely pushed the committee to invite Robins to lecture, and I note where a summary of his remarks is later published. J.E.G.

End Note 2, p. 35 Shaw popularized (and distorted) Ibsen in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* as early as 1891. He did not regularly write criticism for the stage until 1895. His reviews as theatre critic for the *Saturday Review*, 1895-98, were republished in book form in the 1930s as *Our Theatres in the Nineties*. Shortly after performing in Langdon Mitchell's *Deborah*, for which Robins read the prologue, Mitchell and Lea, now married, returned to America.

Images of ER as Hedda and Hilda

59

Public domain image of Robins as Hedda Gabler, from *The Critic* 9 April, 1898, New York City, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=chi.74708366&seq=268>



Public domain image of Robins as Hilda Wangel in *The Master Builder*, from Internet Archive edition of Cassell's universal Portrait Gallery, <https://archive.org/details/cassellsuniversa00londiala/page/188/mode/2up?view=theater>.

