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Stages' DOLLHOUSE is Excellent Production But New Ending Mars Uneven Modern Adaptation of Ibsen's A Doll's House

Sunday, April 7, 2013

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Stages Repertory Theatre has mounted an excellent production of **Rebecca Gilman's** Dollhouse, a modern adaptation of **Henrik Ibsen's** masterpiece, A Doll's House but Ms. Gilman's adaptation has not been true to Ibsen's original ending of the play and this mars the entire production.

A Doll's House received its world premiere on December 21, 1879 at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen, Denmark. This play holds the distinction of being the world's most produced play. The play was considered tremendously controversial when it was first performed because it criticized the traditional roles of men and women in the 19th-century institution of marriage. The ending became a rallying cry for women around the world. Because of the radical departure from traditional behavior and the theatrical convention involved in Nora's leaving home at the end of the play, her act of slamming the door as she leaves has come to represent the play itself. Nora has an epiphany during the third act and decides that she has been kept like a doll in a doll's house by her husband and is stuck in a horrible marriage where nothing ever serious has been discussed between her and her husband and nothing will ever change. Ibsen was writing not so much about feminism but the importance of individuals to discover themselves anew and to move forward consciously and courageously into that new journey.

Ibsen was forced to write an alternate ending when the play was first produced in Germany because the production's lead actress refused to play the part of Nora unless Ibsen changed the ending, which, under pressure, he eventually did. In the alternative ending, Nora gives Torvald another chance after he reminds her of her responsibility to their children. This ending proved unpopular and Ibsen later seriously regretted his decision on the matter. Virtually all productions today, however, use the original ending, as do nearly all of the film versions of this play, with the notable exception of Rebecca Gilman's new adaptation. Ms. Gilman's modern adaptation has Nora leaving but then returning to the empty life she has just left behind, thereby cancelling out the epiphany she has just had to escape the madness of her existence. This choice actually made me angry as I left the theatre on Friday's opening and I am still angry as I write this critique. I was angry because I sat through almost two and a half hours of theatre and was left empty, disappointed, and deeply dismayed by this alternative

ending which I believe to be a serious slap in the face of feminism and a far cry from Ibsen's original intent of writing a play about individualism and enlightenment.



Rachael Logue as Nora, David Matranga as Terry (Photo: Bruce Bennett)

Director **Eva Laporte** has beautifully cast this flawed adaptation and is constantly painting stirring images with her insightful and telling direction. Ms. Laporte tries desperately to make this seriously flawed adaptation a real and meaningful story, but, unfortunately, the adaptation too often resembles a soap opera or a sitcom. I would rather have experienced a new translation and a production of Ibsen's brilliant and mind-blowing play as a period piece rather than witnessing this forced modern adaptation.

The wonderful **Rachael Logue** portrays the perfect Nora as a not so sympathetic character at all. In the first act, she tells us everything we need to know about her—that she is superficial, a liar, a spendaholic, a shopaholic, a sociopath of sorts, and a flirt and a tease. Ms. Logue convinces us of all of her inane characteristics until she has an epiphany toward the end of the play that she has been stuck in a very unhappy situation. Ms. Logue's performance is phenomenal as her demeanor completely changes 180 degrees as she frees herself from her cocoon and emerges as a completely different being, intent upon leaving her mess of a life. I would imagine that the playwright's decision to allow Nora to leave and then return to her banal existence is unsatisfactory for Ms. Logue as well as an actress. Indeed, she slouches back into her Chicago condo in 2004 to the same old routine of begging for money, trapped under her husband's strict scrutiny once again. Where's the rub? Where's the satisfaction? It makes no sense that Nora is leaving the possibilities of a new life behind and returning to die in the dollhouse she has just abandoned. Why would she boomerang right back into her miserable existence? This implies a very cowardly Nora. The Nora Ibsen created was courageous, not cowardly. I can imagine the new enlightened Nora, after a divorce settlement, creating a fabulous new life for herself that does not include being entrapped by a superficial husband and a life that left her empty, cold, and completely unsatisfied.

David Matranga's performance as Terry, Nora's husband, is remarkable, and he convinces us that he cares more about keeping Nora within a budget than caring about her as a wife and a mother.

Jon L. Egging is wonderful as Pete, a lifelong friend of Terry. His drunken scene where he tries to seduce the very flirty Nora is brilliant.

Jennifer Dean creates a deft, touching, and highly memorable portrayal of Kristine Linde, an old college friend of Nora's. Ms. Dean's delivery is extremely impressive here in her Stages debut. Keep a very close eye on her and

her rising star.

Samuel John is excellent as the smarmy Raj Patel, a loan officer at the bank where Terry works.

Michelle Elaine is fine as Marta, the children's nanny.

Scenic design by **Kirk Domer** faithfully and believably captures a condo in Chicago in 2004.

Lighting design by **David Gipson** is excellent.

Costume design by **Andrew Cloud** could not be better.

Stay away from this tremendous waste of time, talent, and treasure. Dollhouse is an insidious insult to the brilliant classic from which it is adapted, Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House.

Dollhouse runs through April 28 in the Yeager Theatre at Stages.

For tickets, please click on: <http://stagetheatre.com/>

Categories: **General**

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