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Stages' modern 'Dollhouse' does Ibsen proud

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Rachael Logue and David Matranga star in Stages' production of "Dollhouse," Rebecca Gilman's contemporary adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's classic drama "A Doll's House."

By Everett Evans

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Playwright Rebecca Gilman had her work cut out for her in crafting "Dollhouse" as a contemporary adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's landmark 1879 drama "A Doll's House."

In Ibsen's plays, much of the power derives from the weightiness of their late-19th-century atmosphere - the electric charge of then-taboo themes and social critiques set against the buttoned-up garb and comparably confining social strictures of the Victorian era. How could Ibsen's tale of Nora's awakening to her existence as a "doll" wife carry the same dramatic weight when transplanted to the strikingly different world of 21st-century Chicago?

In Gilman's sharply observed modern equivalent, enjoying a riveting Houston premiere at Stages, the surprise is just how potent the drama remains. This smart, polished retelling convinces us of the implicit point - that, as regards the problem of human relationships and the struggle to live, more things have stayed the same than have changed. Yet while cleverly constructing equivalent situations and relationships, Gilman fits the story to contemporary America with extensive, extremely apt details. "Dollhouse" becomes even more a story of how economic circumstances influence all our lives, and its sarcastic critique of obsessive materialism is as funny as it is devastatingly accurate.

"Dollhouse" is set in an upscale condo in Chicago's Lincoln Park in 2004, on the cusp of the economic downturn. As the play opens, Nora Helmer returns from Christmas shopping laden with expensive purchases for virtually everyone. We see the impending crisis: She lives way beyond her means and lies about it to her husband, Terry. His efforts to manage the situation ("show me the receipts") are futile because Nora is expert at manipulating Terry (and everyone else around her) with her practiced routines of flirting, pouting and such. What's worse, Terry, just promoted a key lending officer at a bank, likewise is addicted to the thrill of acquiring costly stuff.

The greater crisis is that Nora is being blackmailed by Raj, from whom she borrowed a large sum a few years earlier, to pay for Terry's rehab after he'd become addicted

to painkillers. Raj, whom both Nora and Terry knew in college, wants Nora to persuade Terry to have his bank approve a loan necessary to save Raj's business from cratering. Nora finagles desperately for a way to square the situation. But with all the secrets and lies, it's plain the Helmers' fancy residence is a house of cards ready to collapse at any moment.

Gilman's writing combines human insight with dramatic punch. The play's commentary on financial irresponsibility and meaningless materialism keeps it both funny and relevant. Yet Gilman also keeps raising the dramatic stakes for all the characters, including Nora's college friend Kristine, who was once Raj's lover, and Terry's former roommate Pete, striving to conceal his infatuation with Nora. Gilman even adds a fresh fillip to the play's famous Nora-walks-out-slamming-the-door ending - certain to prompt debate among many who attend.

Director Eva Laporte makes it all play out most persuasively in this beautifully calibrated rendition.

Rachael Logue makes a marvelous modern-day Nora. She's just what the role demands, in that she can be simultaneously incorrigible (in what she does) and winning (in the way she does it). She's seductive, impulsive, manipulative, a blend of childlike innocence and reckless wrong-headedness. Yet when she must finally face the truth, stand up for herself and her choices, she's a pillar of angry strength.

David Matranga is likewise ideal as Terry - practical, ambitious, wary and stressed to the max from walking the financial and career tightrope. We can see his overtaxed patience wearing away to exasperation, and when he finally explodes, the rage and viciousness are impressive.

Jennifer Dean gives a superbly subtle performance as Kristine - thoughtful, understanding, a little wounded. Jon L. Egging scores with his neatly detailed portrayal of Pete, the wise-cracking, taken-for-granted buddy. Samuel John lends quiet menace as the tenacious, resentful Raj.

A key design asset is Kirk Domer's handsome set depicting the Helmers' stylish condo - and that chunk of Chicago skyline viewed through a skylight adds a nice grace note.

Ibsen himself, were he alive today, likely would appreciate the boldness, intelligence and keen perception of this renovated "Dollhouse."