



## BWW Reviews: Stages' DOLLHOUSE - A Suspenseful, Thrilling Ride

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by David Clarke



Stages Repertory Theatre is presenting a tense and taut production of [Rebecca Gilman's](#) DOLLHOUSE. The 2010 play is a modernized retelling of [Henrik Ibsen's](#) classic A DOLL'S HOUSE.

DOLLHOUSE is set in Chicago, circa 2004. Scandals, like Enron, have rocked American society, and the financial stability of the country is starting to falter. [Rebecca Gilman's](#) narrative puts a wealthy couple at the center of the pressure-cooker drama, where Terry keeps close tabs on the families various accounts with hopes to pay off debts and Nora is a shopaholic with a spending addiction. Tension mounts while anxiety gives way to anger and shows for dominance, racing towards [Henrik Ibsen's](#) famous door slam. Yet, in DOLLHOUSE, [Rebecca Gilman](#) adds a modernizing twist to the classic ending that will give audiences plenty to talk about, but, in my opinion, only serves to solidify how disgusting and unlikeable the two main characters really are.

Direction by Eva Laporte expertly builds tight and stressing tension as the play progresses. Many members of the audience, myself included, steadily inched closer and closer to the edge of our seats, especially during the second act where there are fewer funny moments to relieve our nerves and set us at ease. Under Eva Laporte's direction, the pace is steady and enjoyable. In the few moments does falter a bit it is because the writing repetitively asserts character traits that the audience is already aware of.

Rachael Louge impeccably creates an incredibly self-assured but seemingly childish and immature woman in her portrayal of Nora Helmer. Her effervescent and bubbly façade perfectly hides her intense and deep worries about finances brought on by her secretive borrowing of money from a college acquaintance. Despite being worried about finances, Rachael Louge's Nora Helmer joyously and gleefully overspends money, using large portions of her husband's earnings on elaborate Christmas presents and other various needlessly expensive items. In love with the rich and lavish lifestyle she feels her husband should be able to provide for her, Rachael Louge's Nora Helmer complains about having to buy from shamefully inexpensive stores such as Pottery Barn and Target, which easily and emphatically garners disgust and hearty chuckles from the audience. In



addition to wondrously portraying a woman who is so materialistic that she turns our stomachs, Rachael Louge skillfully showcases Nora Helmer's rigid and brutalizing business acumen. She knows how to handle, deal with, and control the business aspects of life, brokering deals like a shark on Wall Street. Her Nora Helmer is a woman who is not afraid to use her looks and sexuality to manipulate the men in her life in hopes of scoring some cash and what she thinks of as respect.

As Terry Helmer, [David Matranga](#) portrays a man who wants nothing more than to be the leader and breadwinner for his family. He capably micromanages the family's accounts and finances to ensure that they are getting out of debt and bettering their fiscal standing, all while providing the best life his money can purchase. [David Matranga](#) sensibly plays a character with a firm demeanor that seems inexplicably in love and caring; however, as pecuniary burdens begin to press down on him, the cracks begin to show. Soon [David Matranga's](#) Terry Helmer pristinely morphs into a forceful and domineering man, adding rich levels of intimidation that run the gamut of keen mental acuity to rough sexualized physicality.

[Jennifer Dean](#) skillfully plays Kristine Linde, a close friend of Nora Helmer's from college. In many ways, she is the foil to Nora Helmer, as she is adroitly responsible with her money and has the "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mentality in her post college careers. [Jennifer Dean](#) expertly creates in Kristina Linde a woman who struggles with materialism because she does not derive meaning from it. For example, \$8 lattes and expensive chocolates seemingly repulse her. All of this adds to showcase how [Jennifer Dean's](#) Kristine Linde is wholly fair, sincerely reasonable, and meticulously weighs her options, making the most sensible choice each time. Moreover, she looks for respect and power due to her cognitive abilities.

Samuel John's Raj Patel is somewhat of an antihero in the play. It seems that [Rebecca Gilman](#) wants the audience to despise him because he plays a seemingly vindictive man, appearing to only seek what he feels is owed to him. After all, it is Nora Helmer's inefficiency in her repayment obligations to him that sets the unnerving plot in motion. Yet, Samuel John's portrayal of Raj Patel earns our respect and trust. He creates a man that desperately needs to be repaid so he can continue important and beneficial research, and he yearns for a way to repay his parents. When Samuel John's Raj Patel is broken and defeated, the audience cringes; however, we cannot help but cheer him on as he explores other options to finance his significant research.

Family friend Pete, played by Jon L. Egging, is entirely likable and sympathetic from beginning to end. He is hilariously sardonic and does what he can to be a good friend. Jon L. Egging's Pete shows a wide range of convincing emotions, as he unwittingly becomes a pawn in Nora Helmer's games.

As Iris and Marta, Melissa Molano and Michelle Elaine deftly allow for Nora Helmer's attempts at humanizing herself. They are offered showy and excessively large gift cards to Target in addition to being promised other gifts for Christmas. Both women craft characters that respectfully accept the gifts, but seem conflicted in doing so because it is so artificially overgenerous. Meanwhile, they are left to care for different aspects of the Helmer's home life, Iris the cleaning and Marta the children, which further implicates Nora and Terry Helmer in their seemingly privileged and picturesque lives.

Hazel Egging and Isabella Morrison are remarkably cute and adorably port[Ray Macey](#) and Skyler Helmer.

Scenic Design by Kirk Domer is impressively homey, posh, and sophisticated. Upon seeing the well decorated and designed set, I was struck by how beautiful and inviting it felt. The hardwood floors, the neutral grays, the warm accent colors are all simply gorgeous and elegant. For added realism, the sink and refrigerator appear to be fully functional.

Costume Design by Andrew Cloud captures the fashions of the 2000s. The clothing choices are fitted and tailored well, which makes them look all the more luxuriously expressive.

David Gipson's Lighting Design is simplistic and realistic.

Sound Design by Philip Owen is realistic as well. The addition of alarm system beeps for the front door opening and closing is inspired.

Jodi Bobrovsky's Properties Design is lavishly sophisticated, including real champagne for the play's final moments.

Stages Repertory Theatre's production of DOLLHOUSE is an enjoyable ride and thrilling experience. Having not been exposed to [Henrik Ibsen](#)'s original A DOLL'S HOUSE, I found that I enjoyed the show more than my wife did. Regardless of our opinions on [Rebecca Gilman](#)'s script, we were both impressed by how well the tension was created and sustained, and we were both completely blown away by the fascinating work of the cast and crew.

DOLLHOUSE runs in Stages' Yeager Theater through April 28, 2013. For more information and tickets, please visit <http://stagestheatre.com> or call (713) 527 - 0123.

Photo by Bruce Bennett. Courtesy of Stages Repertory Theatre.

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Rachael Logue as Nora, [David Matranga](#) as Terry.

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