

Nicholas de Jongh on a reductionist re-evaluation of Ibsen at Hampstead

# Hedder in the clouds

**O**NLY an outburst of caution and a clamour of cold feet can have persuaded Jenny Topper, Hampstead's new artistic director, to play safe and present a revival of one of Ibsen's best known and most revived plays as her inaugural production at this haven for new writing.

Miss Topper, who helped to discover a flock of dramatists at the Bush, promises more such discoveries at Hampstead in the future. But in the meantime John Dove's revival of Hedda Gabler, even though in a new "version" by Trevor Nunn, looks less a radical reading of a familiar text in the closeness and intimacy of the studio than a reductionist reevaluation of Ibsen's most inscrutable heroine.

Ibsen organises the downfall of Lovborg and Hedda herself in a plot of rather preposterous and clockwork contrivances.

But the motives and the character of Hedda herself are shrouded in ambiguity. She can be rendered convincingly both as a bored and trapped suburban victim and a powerful, near psychopathic agent of destruction.

Lindsay Duncan's Hedda seems on distant terms with the play. She strolls tentatively into Ibsen's drawing room wearing no more disguise than a wide, shy smile and the manner of a gauche, withdrawn young woman, uneasily at home in her new marriage. There is no trace of simmering boredom or any symptom of panic at the realisation she is trapped in the wrong marriage.

Kenny Miller's set design, with its white walls, profuse vases of white (artificial) flowers and no real windows may be faintly redolent of an incarcerating clinic. But the mood is not gloomy or oppressive.



Gauche . . . Lindsay Duncan

And Nunn's version of the text, although it sounds more natural than any other I can remember and is adorned with some notably clever felicities, does not consistently evoke the formalities of the later Nineteenth century, let alone those of Norway. "One of the lads" or "cooped up in some suburban little monstrosity" sounds modern; "bacchanial orgy" doesn't.

But over and beyond this, the pivotal figure of Hedda here lacks cue and motive. She is a becalmed, glazed beauty strolling as if in 'innocence through

the terrible events which she precipitates. Tesman, in Jonathan Coy's dramatic and convincing reinterpretation of the role, is no longer a mannereid, desiccated scholar but a stocky, vehement fellow who has fallen victim to his passion for Hedda. But both to him, to Mari Rowland Hughes's awkward Mrs Elvsted and to her old object of fascination, Lovborg, whom Dermot Crowley enacts as a bearded, burnt-out case addicted to sedatives rather than alcohol, she preserves an exemplary, smiling facade.

Even with Judge Brack, who in Clive Francis's brilliant reading is a suave and prowling lecher, silken with mild menace, this Hedda Gabler puts on the same face. The production lacks the sense of a woman developing and changing in the helter skelter of her own urges.

Miss Duncan beautifully suggests a woman whirled along by forces of which she is virtually unaware. And it is a reading which transcends the challenges of Hedda Gabler, and thus the play itself, by appearing to ignore them.

Greenwich Theatre

## de Jongh on Hedda

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