

That beautiful play A Doll's House is on again at the Playhouse. However much it seems we've now got Ibsen's message, it seldom fails to grip. Anthony Page's production brings out its merciless theatricality: how it's about roles and people so lost in them that, when the crunch comes, there's almost nothing left.

It starts very insidiously. Janet McTeer's Nora 'oohs' and 'ohs' and skitters like an ingenue comedienne. Owen Teale's Torvald is sappy-stern, but able to laugh a little at himself. In other words, they play the Helmers' marriage game as if it was just what it pretended to be - a Hi-honey-I'm-home sitcom. All conflict is suppressed, and the effect is to implicate the whole of their lives in falsity, sex included. It's very right that Teale should do not just a patronising, sanctimonious tyrant, but such an obviously randy one.

In fact, almost every aspect of this production hits home, notably Frank McGuinness's very vivid and direct translation and the deathly bachelorhood of John Carlisle's Dr Rank. In the awful, thwarted flirtation between him and Nora, McTeer brings the character close to derangement (more so than in her tarantella, which falls a bit flat). But what's most admirable is the way she embodies Ibsen's resolute refusal of a sentimental solution: she can't be reconciled and she can hardly be liberated either.

In the rapid gear changes of Act III, McTeer does her self-realisation, not with sudden cool self-command, but in a rapture of distress. She is, for the time being, destroyed. The play tells a hard lesson. Oppression is lastingly bad for you, and won't be cured by walking away from the cause. Nowadays people talk down the 'social' Ibsen. I think it's remarkable how much he saw round all the questions he was opening up.

Tom Lubbock Doll's House Observer



Clipped By:

ianlharris

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