

**FIRST NIGHT**  
by  
**Nicholas  
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A Doll's House ★★  
*The Playhouse*

## Ibsen pulsating with violent new life

**I**T MAY have been a 19th-century rallying call for female liberation in the male-supremacist days when British women were not even allowed to vote. But oh what a fierce and fresh life this old Ibsen play achieves in Frank McGuinness's new version, and what a disturbing 1890s gloss the director Anthony Page has given it.

When last was there A Doll's House in which a sense of danger so lurked amidst one Norwegian family's Christmas festivities? Not in my memory. This is an Ibsen production which, in its last act revelations, pulsates with the threat of male violence.

The scene, as Deirdre Clancy designs it, looks traditional enough — with its cluttered, bourgeois sitting-room. And it may seem too traditional for those hankering for Ibsen without realistic trappings. But there's more to the stage-picture than meets the eye. Janet McTeer's Nora, long blonde hair all out of control and ungrown up, bursts breathless upon the stage, like a 13-year-old girl in the grip of some huge excitement.

It's a defining moment. For the evidence suggests Miss McTeer has decided to play Nora, mother of three young children, quite literally as Ibsen's doll-wife. With giggles, gushes and simpers, hands forever gesticulating and fluttering, this compelling Nora ogles and inveigles



Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR

**Janet McTeer: A performance that grips — and chills**

Owen Teale's Torvald, her bank-manager husband, as if he had to be seduced anew each day. And there's no missing the sexual electricity which courses between Teale and McTeer, or the way this Nora titillates John Carlisle's smitten, dying Dr Rank. Miss McTeer's performance may be a little strained and straining for us at first. But then the performance begins to grip — and chill — because it becomes clear that Nora's act is nervous camouflage to conceal her fear of Torvald.

**T**EALE'S powerhouse of a performance, a slim young man bulging with smugness and male chauvinist superiority, carries a distinct undertow of menace. For all his air of freck-coated, Victorian decorum, you feel he would not be averse to a little wife-battering — all for her own good of course.

So Miss McTeer's Nora, shimmering with nerves and anxiety, tries to placate a potentially violent husband. Having years earlier forged her father's signature as surety for a secret loan to help Torvald, the past has now

risen up in the shape of the sombre blackmailing Nils Krogstad (superb Peter Gowen), who provided the money. When the home-truths about Nora's forgery break in the form of Krogstad's Christmas Day letter, the scene, thanks to McGuinness's lucid version and Page's imaginative direction, is not played in the usual way with Torvald merely downcast, and nothing but self-righteousness and self-pity on view.

Instead, Teale's Torvald, shaking with rage, has the air of a dangerous, self-obsessed man on the verge of losing control. And Miss McTeer's devastating, emotionally-wracked Nora, seems to age years in moments. Her abrupt decision to leave husband and children, which Victorian critics thought unbelievable, comes to seem in this brilliantly-conceived performance as her first adult act. This first-rate production does us, Ibsen and the West End proud.

Ratings: No stars — adequate  
\* good   \*\* very good  
\*\*\* outstanding   X poor

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de Jongh Doll's House Standard



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