

HOW TO SLAM THE DOOR, OR NOT TO, OR ALMOST, OR MAYBE...

CONFIGURATIONS OF A SPECULATIVE MOMENT IN THE GLOBAL DOLL HOUSE OF PATRIARCHAL ORDER

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Only the terrorists and the Taliban forbid education to women. Only the terrorists and the Taliban threaten to pull out women's fingernails for wearing nail polish. The plight of women and children in Afghanistan is a matter of deliberate human cruelty, carried out by those who seek to intimidate and control. Civilized people throughout the world are speaking out in horror... (Radio Address by Laura Bush to the Nation, from Crawford, Texas, November 17, 2001) (Julie Holledge in this issue)

"One could also—just as a suggestion—let Hamlet have a homosexual relationship with Ophelia's father Polonius. Someone is bound to find this new interpretation illuminating" (Karasek 119, translation Ng). Thus ends a scathing review of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's "Nora Helmer" (1973) in *Der Spiegel*. (Ronald Ng in this issue)

"Nneora wake up! We actually have rights! It is just that we have been brought up in a hypocritical society where men gang up to steal everything that belongs to us, including our God-given right of existence. And you know what bothers me most? For centuries, we women have silently endorsed this social gang-up." (Linda to Nneora in "Nneora: An African Doll's House" by Tracie C. Utoh-Ezeajugh; see Awo Asiedu in this issue)

While more recent studies, along with the increasing number of texts available by Inuit authors, have revealed the ways in which such understandings gloss over the complexities of Inuit gender roles, many southern readers are unable to conceive of a hunting society which does not reflect the gender inequalities of an American kitchen in the 1950s, or a Norwegian parlour-room in 1879. (Keavy Martin in this issue)

SEEDS

To work on this special issue has been a fascinating and extremely rewarding journey. The seed was laid with a full year graduate course at the Centre for Comparative Literature at the University of Toronto in the academic year 2006-07. The course explored the following topic: *How to slam the door: Nora—Intercultural and inter-medial approaches*. Theoretically the course was informed by latest discourses in comparative literature, post-colonial studies, theatre and media studies, East Asian, German and Inuit studies as well as feminism focusing on processes of nation building, colonialism, gender equality, negotiations of cultural and political identities, gendered labor divisions in the performing arts and subsequent discourses across the globe as well as the impact of globalization.

146 This year I had the honor to teach a particularly gifted and committed group of students coming from the Centre as well as from the Asian Studies Department and the Graduate Centre for the Study of Drama. These students will be represented in our issue with essays related to their special field of interest. Thus, a cross-disciplinary approach was possible that had a great impact on the vision for our current special issue. Keavy Martin, meanwhile, is a tenure-track assistant professor at the University of Alberta while the other students—Jacquie Taucar, Ronald Ng, and Sara Osenton—are in the process of finishing their PhD projects. These scholars of the future were then joined by experienced and well-known senior scholars from Canada (Louise Forsyth), Ghana (Awo Asiedu), Australia (Julie Holledge), and myself.

We furthermore collaborated with theatre artists for in-depth interviews, like the Chinese-Canadian playwright and actor Marjorie Chan, who talks about her negotiations of cultural in-between spaces in the context of immigration and Canadian multiculturalism and how such negotiations can be made fruitful in creative work, such as in her play *China Doll* (2004). We also talked to the Norwegian director Frede Guldbrandsen, who worked on the show *Nora's Children* by Jesper Halle as the assistant director for Lin Zhaohua's production in Beijing (2006).

SPROUTS

A particular politics of labor division in the performing arts informed by patriarchal societal structures is a well-known problem, which was confirmed by our explorations of the door-slamming theme while discussing a wide range of artistic productions related to highly politically charged discourses. Men direct, women act. Women also have a strong tendency of inventing their own versions of Ibsen's theme in alternative writings. "Nneora: An African Doll's House", "China Doll" and "Five Minutes More" are good examples of that. Women can still not fully participate and benefit from androcentric cultural and political infrastructures but at least they know what to do in a room of their own.

Politically charged discourses surrounding Nora's door slam tend to focus on Nora's sexual capital/body politics, her reproduction values/motherhood, her forgery/creative economic manipulation/gendered law and her door slam/liberation as encouragement and/or threat. At the same time there is a fierce battle over interpretative power in criticism and academic discourse, which cannot be separated from particular interests in either maintaining or challenging the status quo regarding patronizing Western colonialism, feminization of "inferior" cultures, patriarchal nationalism, dogmatic types of feminism, and misogynist religions/ideologies far beyond aesthetic concerns. The reader will find this reflected in many of the essays which do not always or not only engage in literary or performance analysis of Ibsen's play (adaptations, translations, transformations included) but which take the often oppressive politics of discourse itself centre stage.

NEW PLANTS

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While Nora's actions trigger the most interest it is Torvald Helmer's complicit entrapment and the children's indoctrination with questionable gender ideologies (gendered play toys included) that should not be forgotten. Male artists started to have a second look, not just at Nora and female actors as muse or diva of playwrights and directors, but also at their self-assuring and reconfirming projections of their own needs and desires onto strong, male-created female characters. Some started to suggest alternative ways of self-critical thinking and doing that have been all too rare.

This becomes evident, for instance, when queer and controversial Rainer Werner Fassbinder, in his experimental television drama "Nora Helmer" (1974), takes both Nora and Torvald seriously as contributing parties to the problem and does not victimize either of them. Fassbinder basically declares the end of any potential for change in the rigid setting of bourgeois marriage (and the title points specifically to that as a major obstacle to equal love relationships). In the context of radicalized anti-fascist student protests and Red Army Faction's escalating activities he suggests that we either continue to engage in a cheap battle for points for ever (as in Nora's and Torvald Helmer's marriage) or we take more radical approaches to change. Fassbinder is the only one in our collection of Nora stories who cuts the tarantella scene completely and for very good reasons. As long as Nora and Torvald are bound together by the oppressive institution of bourgeois marriage, for Fassbinder, there is no feminist or otherwise liberating potential for either of them. Male critics reacted strongly and aggressively to Fassbinder's approach and his "frozen door slam" while insisting on Nora's actions as liberating, if only in a bourgeois dreamland.

When Lee Breuer co-directs and co-invents "Mabou Mines DollHouse" together with Maude Mitchell, who also plays the lead role, when Breuer for conceptual reasons identifies with Torvald Helmer (all male characters are played by little people actors) and not at all with Nora, then that is a very strong statement on its own. Breuer and

Mitchel break many taboos in their production, but they also take an honest look at themselves, their professional and artistic relationship and offer alternatives to usual practices regarding gendered labor divisions (see the essay by Jacqueline Taucar).

In Japan, the male film director Hayao Miyazaki “sees himself as a feminist. He discusses in an interview accompanying *Kiki’s Delivery Service* how he believes that women should have extra amenities to encourage their participation in the work place” (see Osenton’s essay). Men calling themselves feminists are a rather rare occurrence. And, indeed, Miyazaki’s approach to feminist expression in his animation films—interpreted by Sara Osenton as re-imaginings of Nora—is contradictory but nevertheless an interesting inspiration in the landscape of Japan’s own discourses on nationalist gender politics.

148 Julie Holledge explores historically inherent orientalism in Ibsen’s play and links it to a certain continuation of this tradition both in Western soft diplomacy (cultural exchange in the Islamic context), the colonial exploitation/export of Western first wave feminism and aggressive colonialism/war with the Islamic other. Holledge looks at three productions, all directed by men, in Iran, Egypt and the Netherlands (performed in Arabic by actors from Marrakech). Immigration and migration challenge clear distinctions between “us” and “them”. The tensions in the global village force theatre artists to consider the legal, religious and economic implications of their work with Ibsen in new and highly complicated ways. Women, however, have to be aware of the more than real possibility that culturally different yet socially similar traditions of patriarchy (i.e. western and Islamic) can cross-culturally join forces very much to the disadvantage of women, men and queer people who are stuck in between all fronts.

Finally, Jesper Halle turns his focus on the price that children (and thus contemporary Norwegian audiences) are likely to pay for conflicts that they inherit from their parents’ generation. In “Nora’s Children”, he reverses the door slam when the now grown-up children return to their troubled home. All of them are deeply troubled as well, both in their love and professional relationships. However, the title and also the actual play suggest that it is first and foremost Nora’s responsibility to keep her urge for liberation in check so that the children don’t have to suffer. Neither feminists nor responsible fathers will agree with this suggestion. However, the play exists and is a more recent male voice in the cacophony of door-slamming speculations. The Chinese interpretation of the play, however, is less concerned with the children issue as it is with the critical examination of Western performance traditions (naturalism) in Chinese theatre. This difference of interest leads to tensions in the bi-cultural theatre project.

HARVEST

It is a particular pleasure to be able to present the first English translation of the 1970s play “Five Minutes More” (“Encore cinq minutes”) by the Quebec playwright Françoise Loranger, translated by Louise Forsyth, which is accompanied by Forsyth’s insightful essay on the play’s context and artistic qualities. I truly hope that Anglophone Canadian and international theatre artists will take an interest in this fabulous speculation on Ibsen’s play from a politically engaged and feminist playwright.

In our special issue the reader will meet Nora figures under many different names. Our Noras or Nora-like figures ponder the question of door slamming in Nigeria (Asiedu), Quebec/Canada (Forsyth), The Netherlands/Iran/Egypt (Holledge), China/Norway (Budde), Germany (Ng), the Inuit North of Canada (Martin), multicultural Toronto/Canada (Budde, Taucar, Chan), Japan (Osenton) and the USA (Taucar). Corresponding to culturally, politically and economically complicated contexts at specific times, we are presented with a great variety of “door treatments” including the executed door slam, the avoided door slam, the revised door slam, the suggested door slam, the frozen door slam, the ignored door slam, the multiplied door slam and the reversed door slam. Sometimes the same decisions are made for different reasons and sometimes opposing decisions are made for similar reasons.

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GPS – GLOBAL POSITIONING SYSTEM. INVITATION TO A JOURNEY.

In the following notes I would like to invite the reader on a retrospective time travel to some of my encounters with Ibsen’s play. This will help to further contextualize how this special issue came about and how many different layers of experience it contains.

53°51’0”N 13°41’0”E EAST GERMANY, PROVINCIAL TOWN ANKLAM, 1985

My first encounter with Ibsen’s “Nora,” as “A Doll’s House” is often called in the German context, took place in an insignificant and boring town in North Eastern Germany, close to the Polish border where Solidarność, supported by workers and the Catholic church, was about to make its contribution to a major power shift in the globalizing world. Frank Castorf, a young, male directing rock’n roller who had started to shake up the East German theatre scene with all the political incorrectness needed for change, found himself in a peripheral town as a result of censorship and state interference in his work. I was 20 years old, worked as a cleaning lady and assistant of some sort at the State Puppet Theatre in Neubrandenburg, an equally provincial town yet a little larger and equipped with a daring experimental puppet

theatre that put on shows by male canonized figures like Bertolt Brecht, Heiner Mueller, Fernando Arrabal, Anton Chekhov and August Strindberg, to name a few. The company, however, was led by an industrious woman who knew how to pull the strings in the cultural and political minefield of the “real existing socialism.” She is gone, and so is the company. German unification proved to be fatal for projects like this while Castorf’s Volksbuehne am Rosa-Luxemburg Platz flourished for a decade after he had returned to the centre of attention from Anklam. However, it is at the fringes where experiments and innovation in theatre are born. In Castorf’s “Nora” Mickey Mouse was chasing his companions projected on a long strip above and across a beam of the proscenium stage. Dr. Rank was cast as a queer lesbian cynic, flirting with Nora while turning into the ultimate threat to Torvald’s little petty bourgeois and hetero-normative kingdom. Both Nora and Mrs. Linde recited long philosophical speeches on existential questions, most likely written by male philosophers. The collision between universalizing androcentric heavy blocks of literary sophistication and the bored recitation by living female voices worked out perfectly. It felt as if these voices were mocking recitations of long, lifeless newspaper speeches by usually male Politbureau members of the communist party as presented on daily TV news—detached from and ignorant of the real world.

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A misbehaving, destructive boy full of male entitlement went on a rampage on stage, foreshadowing the weak loser he was to become following his father’s footsteps. In the tarantella scene Nora is wearing a ridiculous mini dress, apparently outworn by Marianne Faithful, price tag still dangling from her knees. She sings in pseudo-operatic fashion, with a wonderful voice, the 1969 hit “Honky Tonk Woman” by the Rolling Stones, which apparently was conceived by Mick Jagger and Keith Richards during a holiday trip to Sao Paulo, Brazil while watching stereotypical, testosterone driven and super masculine gauchos on a ranch. Torvald is quite unhappy about Nora’s interpretation, stops her, takes out the guitar and sings the song, self-absorbed and angry, himself—as it should be...At the end of the show Nora leaves the theatre literally and figuratively through a surprising opening of the backstage into the cold but real world and she walks and walks and walks until she vanishes into the dark leaving her loser husband and replicated son behind. A bonfire could be seen in a far distance. No door slam, but instead a promise, a possibility for change beyond the claustrophobic dollhouse. Torvald could follow if he had the guts. He didn’t.

This was one of the most extraordinary productions of Ibsen’s play I was able to witness. The excitement it caused was not just due to the radical satire of naturalism and tiring discourses on socialist realism, but I perceived this show as radical political theatre. I watched “Nora” three times, always borrowing my parents’ car. One night I ended up in a ditch on my way home and had to be pulled out by soldiers of the National People’s Army who were still in charge of protecting the cold-war-torn state and its broken promises of justice and equality for all (the spectre of communism) from the cold war enemy. Nuclear mid-range rockets were aiming at us, stationed on both sides of the border, the Soviet Union showed first signs of col-

lapse and we watched Nora leaving the theatre in the unknown but open world. The censors were alarmed and closed down the show. The clock was ticking. Four years from then we would tear down the Berlin wall and indulge in Western consumerism, unemployment benefits and cheap tourism. The question of gender equality is still unresolved in reality. The first female Chancellor, born in West Germany, raised in East Germany, the most powerful woman of Europe in united Germany, recently declared the failure of multiculturalism. Meanwhile, Thomas Ostermeier's "Nora" tours the world with the help of the Goethe-Institute. At the end of his show, Nora shoots Helmer and walks out with an African nanny and her kids. The trajectory of that ending as I read it is the following: Interpol has probably gotten hold of Nora by now. The illegally working African nanny has to return to her battered country, the kids enjoy foster care and Nora serves life in prison for her bad deeds. No speculation, no promise, no change.

39°54'50"N 116°23'30"E P.R. OF CHINA, CAPITAL BEIJING, FIRST HALF OF THE 1990S

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Most of the early 1990s I spent in Beijing while studying at the Central Academy of Drama and directing a show at the National Experimental Theatre.¹ My experiences in China and my knowledge of Chinese history and culture changed my perspective on the world and its implications for theatre profoundly. It was the first time that the history of colonialism became palpable, although we think of China as a semi-colonized country since it was never ruled by colonial powers. Yet, colonial powers had a significant impact on the shaping of modern history in this country. One of the results was the Chinese perception of naturalism/realism and Ibsen's work. It so happened that in 1995 Wu Xiaojiang was pondering the possibility to direct a Chinese-Norwegian show of "A Doll's House" at the National Experimental Theatre. Inspired by our bi-lingual, cross-cultural production of "Put down your whip—Woyzeck" (1995, co-directed by Meng Jinghui and myself) at the same theatre, he discussed a similar approach for this idea. With the help of Norwegian soft diplomacy and the hard money of the Norwegian state he successfully staged the play in 1998, fully integrated in Norwegian politics of cultural exchange of which Ibsen became an icon and an export hit next to oil. Nora was performed by a Norwegian actor speaking English, the language of globalization and not her native Norwegian. Yet, Chinese might soon become the future language of global communication given China's economically growing power. Chinese soft diplomacy is spearheading the process by installing Confucius institutes, which are popping up in many places right now on a global scale: Goethe, Ibsen, Confucius. Cultural export is intertwined with nation states, transnational companies and androcentric politics. State-funded theatre infrastructure is still firmly in the hand of males. Male directors are the major, often only, interpreters of the dollhouse tale in performance. Nora will have to behave herself. The actors of Nora characters too.

43°42'59.72"N 79°20'26.47"W CANADA, TORONTO, "THE MOST MULTICULTURAL CITY OF THE WOR(L)D", SINCE 2005

Since 2005, I have lived and worked in Toronto. Global circulation of academics in the worldwide workforce brought me here. Unemployment was skyrocketing for East German academics and theatre artists after the unification. So I continued my global travels and again a new world opened up to me providing new perspectives on the Nora issue. Among other artistic colleagues, I met Majorie Chan as I was discovering the multicultural mosaic of the Toronto theatre scene. Up until then I was only aware of one female playwright who had attempted to write her own version of Ibsen's "A Doll's House." This was the radio play by Elfriede Jelinek called "Was geschah, nachdem Nora ihren Mann verlassen hatte oder Stützen der Gesellschaften" ("What happened after Nora had left her husband or Pillars of Societies?," 1977, title translation AB).

152 Majorie Chan, however, wrote from the perspective of a Chinese-Canadian woman, daughter of Hongkong Chinese immigrants, who felt the need to find connections between her old and her new world. After attending an exhibition at the Bata Shoe Museum in Toronto, she learned about the Han-Chinese tradition of Lotus Feet, a term for a rather physically invading practice of bound feet which is closely linked to practices of sexual desire and sexual taboo. Her "China Doll" is not an adaptation of Ibsen's play but rather a meta-comment on the impact of Noraism in China at the beginning of the 20th century and a Chinese-Canadian positioning in regard to these developments.

Based on my studies in China and subsequent studies of modern Chinese theatre history, I was well aware of this tradition and its social function in traditional China regarding gender politics. I was also aware of its implications for both classical Chinese musical theatre, such as Jingju (known in the West as Beijing Opera), which up until the founding of the P.R. of China in 1949 was exclusively performed by men, as well as the enormous impact the early perception of Ibsen plays, including "A Doll's House," had on modern Chinese discourses on modernity, the modern nation state, anti-colonial resistance and the position of women related to and intertwined with all of these factors. The year of 1935 is well known for being the Nora-Year in Chinese theatre history when women across the country were demanding to play a/this role again not only in public life but also on theatre stages. Jiang Qing, the later infamous wife of Mao Zedong, was one of those actresses. Her struggles and the uncanny dialectic of female oppression and female oppressors complicit in patriarchal violence has been portrayed by the contemporary Chinese multitalented Liu Sola (libretto, composition, stage design, lead role) in the experimental opera "Fantasy of the Red Queen" (2006), commissioned by the House of World Cultures in Berlin.

My work on this special issue, the fruitful collaboration with young and established scholars and artists, helped to expand my vision and to even more appreciate the many possible ways in which we can think about theatre, empowerment and

resistance. At the same time I was wandering through the archeological site of my own multilayered encounters with Ibsen, with Nora, with imagined and real door slamming. Some of these such moments, the collaborators of this project would like to share with their readers.

WORKS CITED

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1. Since the year 2000 and after the fusion with another theatre, this company is now called the National Theatre of China for Spoken Drama (zhongguo huaju juyuan).