**Blaming Nora**

**With a new production of A Doll's House about to open at the Donmar in London, AS Byatt looks again at Ibsen's tragic heroine - whose plight she once thought so shocking - and finds her silly and insensitive.**

A Doll's House was, and is shocking. Halvdan Koht, an early biographer of Ibsen, records that it "exploded like a bomb into contemporary life" and "pronounced a death sentence on accepted social ethics". As a student, reading it for part of a tragedy course, I was shocked in a way that was completely unexpected. I was quite happy for the ethics of marriage to be put in question. But there is a Darwinian imperative (to do with the selfish gene) that a woman should not leave her children. Nora shut the door, and I was as perturbed as Ibsen could have hoped. When the play was first presented in Germany in 1880, the actress Hedwig Niemann-Raabe refused to act the final scene, on the grounds that "I would never leave my children". Ibsen was forced to write a different "happy ending", where Helmer forces Nora to the nursery door and she sinks down helpless before it. This didn't please the public, and was eventually abandoned.

A Doll's House explores the nature of women within society and its rules, but as Ibsen insisted, it is not a play about the rights of women. Nora's story is part of a searching exploration of the female at the turn of the century. She is silly like Madame Bovary, confined in a house full of pointless "things". Tolstoy in many ways disliked Anna Karenina, who was also silly, but he understood and wrote the terrible pain she felt in being separated from her child because she had left her husband. At the time of the play, Freud was asking "What do women want?" and finding no answer. "The ideal wife is one who does everything that her ideal husband likes and nothing else," wrote George Bernard Shaw, in The Quintessence of Ibsenism, in a chapter entitled "The Womanly Woman": "Now to treat a person as a means to an end is to deny that person's right to live."

Toril Moi, in her searching and splendid book, Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism, takes us back to Hegel, whose description of human society had one set of ethical imperatives for males, as social beings, and another for women, whose ethical imperatives are seen entirely inside the small structure of the home, where they are wives, mothers, sisters, daughters, and not really individuals. What this produced, as Moi explains, was a set of constructed "ideals" of love, fidelity, self-sacrifice and so on, that constricted and deformed many human lives and selves.

Ibsen wrote A Doll's House in Amalfi in 1879. The previous winter in Rome he had proposed that women be allowed to be present at the annual general meeting of the Scandinavian Club, and that they should be made eligible to become librarians there. "Is there anyone in this gathering who dares assert that our ladies are inferior to us in culture or intelligence or knowledge or artistic culture?" The motion about the librarianship was carried. The other was lost by one vote. Ibsen was furious. He left the club, and returned to make a furious speech in which he inveighed against the women who had intrigued against him on this question. "They had thrown his gift into the mud. What kind of women are these? They are worse - worse that the dregs, worse than scum." In 1898 he addressed the Norwegian Association for Women's Rights in Christiania. There he delivered a kind of manifesto:

"I have never written a poem or a play to further a social purpose. I have been more of a poet and less of a social philosopher than most people seem inclined to believe. I thank you for your good wishes, but I must decline the honour of being said to have worked for the Women's Rights Movement. I am not even very sure what Women's Rights really are."

Ibsen was interested in human beings, simply and dramatically. When Nora announces that she is leaving Helmer, the following dialogue takes place:

Helmer: But to leave your home, your husband, your children! Have you thought what people will say?

Nora: I can't help that. I only know that I must do this.

Helmer: But this is monstrous! Can you neglect your most sacred duties?

Nora: What do you call my most sacred duties?

Helmer: Do I have to tell you? Your duties towards your husband and your children.

Nora: I have another duty which is equally sacred.

Helmer: You have not. What on earth could that be?

Nora: My duty towards myself.

Helmer: First and foremost you are a wife and mother.

Nora: I don't believe that any more. I believe that I am first and foremost a human being - like you - or anyway that I must try to become one.

"First and foremost a human being." Toril Moi says that Ibsen is the greatest dramatist after Shakespeare, and one reason for his greatness is that he is interested in human beings even more than he is interested in social constructs or systems of belief. Helmer's and Nora's moral limitations, and their tragedy, are worked out in relation to, and because of, the habits and beliefs of their times. But Ibsen is interested in the raw human being also. He explores both nature and nurture.

There is a true story, in which Ibsen himself was involved, behind A Doll's House. It is the story of Laura Kieler, who had written a novel in the 1860s, Brand's Daughters, and got to know the Ibsens - Ibsen called her his "skylark". In 1878 she sent the manuscript of another novel, hoping Ibsen would recommend it. He thought it was very bad and said so. She needed money because she had borrowed - as Nora does in the play - to take her tubercular husband to Italy to "save his life". On receiving Ibsen's letter she forged a cheque, was discovered, and treated like a criminal by her husband, who committed her to a lunatic asylum, taking her back only grudgingly.

In Rome, in 1878, Ibsen wrote "Notes for a Modern Tragedy", which describes the moral frame of A Doll's House. He writes, among other things: "The wife in the play ends up by having no idea what is right and what is wrong; natural feelings on one hand and belief in authority on the other lead her to utter distraction"; "A woman cannot be herself in modern society. It is an exclusively male society, with laws made by men and with prosecutors and judges who assess feminine conduct from a masculine standpoint"; "A mother in modern society, like certain insects, retires and dies once she has done her duty by propagating the race." Laura Kieler, it should be said, was very distressed by A Doll's House, as her situation was widely known.

The play was published in book form and sold a large number of copies. Ibsen made most of his money from sales of books rather than stage performances - plays in those days, even when successful, ran for only short periods. Its first English theatre production was in 1889 with Janet Achurch as Nora. Before that there were two private productions - one starring Eleanor Marx, with George Bernard Shaw as Krogstad, and Eleanor's appalling partner, Edward Aveling, as Torvald. The play is very different read as one would read a novel, to what it is when staged with a beautiful and sympathetic actress as Nora.

This is because every time I read the play I find myself judging Nora with less and less sympathy. The play is, as is frequently pointed out, flawlessly constructed - there is not a wasted word, and every scene tightens the noose around Nora's neck. There is a tragic inevitability to the way in which her "crime" is brought into the open. But with the same momentum she displays a silliness and insensitivity that are also part of her downfall. At the beginning she is lying to Torvald about the macaroons he has forbidden and she has concealed. This could be comic but is part of a tissue of lies and evasions that make up her life. Whether these lies are a function of social pressures or Nora's own nature is left to us to determine. Hedda Gabler, another married woman doomed to triviality, resorts to malice and cruelty. When Mrs Linde appears with her tale of hardship and poverty, Nora flutters and fails to imagine what she is talking about. She says "You must tell me everything" and immediately embarks on the narrative of her own money problems - which are to do with a luxurious holiday for a well-off couple, not the impossibility of making ends meet. She then speaks to Krogstad, who lent her the money and is now in danger of losing his job at Helmer's bank because of a comparable "indiscretion". Krogstad points out that she forged her father's signature. Nora says she could not have told her dying father of the threat to her husband's life.

Krogstad: Then you would have been wiser to have given up your idea of a holiday.

Nora: But I couldn't. It was to save my husband's life. I couldn't put it off.

Krogstad: But didn't it occur to you that you were being dishonest towards me?

Nora: I couldn't bother about that. I didn't care about you. I hated you because of all the beastly difficulties you'd put in my way when you knew how dangerously ill my husband was.

Here Nora is archetypally Hegel's woman, seeing things only in terms of her own place in her own family. But she is also incapable - as a human being - of imagining Krogstad.

One of the scenes I find most moving is Nora's brief exchange with Anne-Marie, the nurse. Rich, or comfortably-off, women such as Nora are mothers - but all Nora does with her children is romp before they are put to bed. Women like Nora relied on women like Anne-Marie to do the basic mothering. And Anne-Marie, like so many others, is, as she says, "a poor girl what's got into trouble and can't afford to pick and choose." In Act II Nora asks her:

Nora: Tell me, Anne-Marie - I've so often wondered. How could you bear to give your child away - to strangers?

Nurse: But I had to, when I came to nurse my little Miss Nora ...

Nora: But your daughter must have completely forgotten you.

Nurse: Oh no, indeed she hasn't. She's written to me twice, once when she got confirmed and then again when she got married.

Nora is not really thinking about Anne-Marie - she is imagining the scenario if she is forced to give up her own children. This has made her see Anne-Marie a little better. Throughout A Doll's House there are reminders that there are fates and hardships much worse than anything in the Helmer household, which is no more than a doll's house. One of Helmer's most absurd and revealing moments is when he sneers at Mrs Linde's knitting (on which she depends for a living) and tells her she should do embroidery - "it's much prettier". "But knitting now - that's an ugly business - can't help it. Look - arms all huddled up - great clumsy needles going up and down - makes you look like a damned Chinaman."

Nora's insensitivity is at its starkest in her conversation with Dr Rank, who has come to tell her he is dying. First she expresses "relief" when he tells her his bad news is about himself. Then when he tells her that "within a month I may be rotting up there in the churchyard", she says: "Ugh, what a nasty way to talk!" He persists - "As soon as I know the worst, I'll send you a visiting card with a black cross on it, and then you'll know that the final filthy process has begun." To which all Nora has to say is that he is really being "quite impossible this evening. And I did hope you'd be in a good mood." She tells him to laugh - he takes this as sympathetic black humour, but the audience knows she needs to charm him into lending her the money to pay off Krogstad. Instead of which he tells her that he loves her, and her feminine ethic forbids her to ask him for the loan. It is dramatically complex and there are many ways for an actress to negotiate it, requiring more or less sympathy from the watching audience. But the truth is - however we sympathise with the trap she is in - Nora is not a very sympathetic woman. Others - including other women made up by Ibsen - would have had more human sympathy, more capacity for imagining other people.

Great tragedy asks us to care for flawed or even stupid people - Pentheus, Othello, Macbeth - but the glory of A Doll's House is that it asks us to care for a small-minded person, in the moment of her realisation of her own small-mindedness. The moment when Nora dances the tarantella is one of the great moments of theatre. As Toril Moi points out, the stage instruction that her hair should come down indicates that she is seen as a sexual object by Rank and Helmer, the two watching men. The solo tarantella, a wild dance as opposed to the stately courtly tarantella, is associated with the "curative" tarantella, an uninhibited wild dancing, often days long, or danced until the dancer drops, which was supposed to work out the poison of the bite of the tarantula spider. Nora can express in her body the violence of her desperation, and also her realisation that it is indeed desperation. Mrs Linde tells her that she is dancing as if her life depended on it, and Nora replies tersely, "It does."

Helmer's response to her revelation of her forgery and its results is inadequate and wounding. He, too, is a person of limited imagination. He too, I think, has a right to our sympathy, a man trapped in a doll's house. However pompous he is, however tooth-grating his cosseting of his "songbird", however much he is immersed in mauvaise foi, the play is moving because he does love her and does not understand her departure. Moi quotes the philosopher Stanley Cavell on this. "The final scene is only harrowing if his live love for her is not denied. I have never seen it played so." Moi adds: "Neither have I." All the parts are challenging for director and actors. It will be exciting to see what the Donmar makes of the play.

• A Doll's House opens at the Donmar, Covent Garden on 14 May. Box office: 0870 060 6624

The Guardian: Saturday 2 May 2009

http://www.guardian.co.uk/stage/2009/may/02/ibsen-a-dolls-house