

THE *Rogue* THEATRE

Ghosts

by Henrik Ibsen



In Rehearsal at The Rogue

A powerful, taut drama of legacy, love and catastrophe.

November 4-28, 2010

Production Sponsor: Ann & Nils Hasselmo

About the Playwright: Henrik Ibsen

Born in Skien, Norway in 1828, Henrik Ibsen's early life was marked by a series of sudden economic setbacks that rapidly took his family from prosperity to poverty. As the oldest of five children, Ibsen left home at fifteen to study pharmacy, with the assumption that he would eventually study medicine and become a doctor.

Instead of pursuing medicine, Ibsen decided to focus on his love of writing, and in short order turned from poetry to journalism—and to drama. His first poem, "In the Autumn," was published in 1849, and his first play, *Catiline*, was published the next year under a pseudonym.

Ibsen spent several years as a playwright and literary consultant at some of the leading theaters in his homeland before leaving the country for the Continent, living abroad for nearly three decades. During that time, Ibsen's theatrical writing took a profound shift away from the romantic nationalism that marked his early work, and began moving toward the modernist style that became his theatrical legacy.

In 1877, Ibsen penned *The Pillars of Society*, the first in a twelve-play series that focused on modern characters in contemporary settings whose peaceful lives are eroded by their past demons and deeds. In placing the issues and ideas of his own cultural context at the center of these works (issues such as marriage, hypocrisy, abuse of power, the church, truth and justice, freedom and duty, incest, euthanasia), Ibsen found himself at the



heart of European intellectual and philosophical society.

Ghosts (1881), written following Ibsen's controversial success with *A Doll House* (1879), also embraces the call from Ibsen's peer, the critic Georg Brandes, for drama to address the issues facing modern society. After completing the manuscript of *Ghosts*, Ibsen wrote to his publisher:

***Ghosts* will probably cause alarm in certain circles, but that cannot be helped. If it did not, it would not have been necessary to write it...**

After receiving world-wide acclaim for his realist dramas, Ibsen returned to Norway in 1891 and lived there until his death in 1906.

An Author is in the same position to his play as an artist is to his picture and the sculptor to his statue. An author who writes for the theatre should not photograph, but he should combine. A handsome face is the union of beautiful traits.

When I bring people on the stage I have perhaps—I think I can say in most cases—met these people in real life. I have only taken note of those points about these people which interest me."

~Henrik Ibsen

Ibsen's Theatrical Style And Genre

While theatre historians and scholars often attribute the rise in dramatic realism to Ibsen, Ibsen himself owed much to the literary critic Georg Brandes, who in 1871 gave a series of lectures that was later published as *Main Currents in the Literature of the 19th Century*. Brandes advocated a new form of literature that dealt directly with the social and cultural issues of the day, and admonished that literature that “does not put anything under debate is equivalent to its being in the process of losing its significance.” Ibsen heeded Brandes’ call, crafting plays that made societal problems the central subject embodied in everyday people and situations in a contemporary setting in order to highlight the socio-critical perspective.

Ibsen engages the era’s social debate in plays like *Pillars of Society*, which concludes with the admonition “the spirit of truth and the spirit of freedom—they are the pillars of society.” However, *Ghosts* gave Ibsen the opportunity to directly address societal issues that were typically taboo in the era: incest, venereal disease, euthanasia, and the hypocrisy of both marriage and religion. Moreover, Ibsen felt strongly that these issues should be dealt with in a manner that made it clear to his audiences that the circumstances in which his characters struggled could easily occur in their own lives.

In order to make this connection between character and audience believable, Ibsen had to create characters that spoke and behaved naturally and “had the stamp of everyday life about them”. This meant a complete abandonment of the blank verse he used in his early work, as well as the standard theatrical conceits of monologues and asides.

In addition to the clarity of speech and the removal of stilted versification, Ibsen structured his work in *Pillars of Society*, *A Doll House*, and *Ghosts* to consistently open with a late point of attack in order to focus forcefully on the issues at hand. As Bjorn Hemmer notes, this allowed Ibsen to “embody contemporary social problems through the medium of an individual’s destiny.” Hemmer goes on to point out that “this is another of realism’s main tenets in the matter of individual characterization: the particular is to throw light on the general, and from one’s response to a particular individual one should be able to glimpse the socially representative types.”

Arguably, Ibsen helped to launch the movement of realism in the theatre—but a strict definition of the

genre beyond the basic tenets mentioned above remains elusive. In his own view, Ibsen considered himself a realist, and speaks to his interpretation of that term in a letter to an acquaintance penned shortly after he finished *Ghosts*:

My intention was to try and give the reader the impression of experiencing a piece of reality. But nothing would more effectively run counter to this intention than inserting the author’s opinions into the dialogue. Do the people up there at home think I haven’t enough dramatic sense to realize that? Of course I realized it, and I acted accordingly. In none of my plays is the author so extrinsic, so completely absent, as in this last one.



*Portrait of Henrik Ibsen by Edvard Munch. Munch was part of the generation of artist following and influenced by Ibsen. Along with a series of portraits of the playwright, Munch also created a series of scenographic sketches of *Ghosts* for a 1905 German production under the direction of Max Reinhardt.*

This season, **The Rogue Theatre** is launching this publication as part of our continuing commitment to foster a dialogue with our audience about the challenging, provocative, and complex ideas behind quality dramatic language and literature.

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written and edited by:

Carrie J. Cole, Rogue’s resident dramaturg