



# UPSTAGE

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# HEDDA GABLER

# PSYCHOLOGY

—The study of the mind and mental processes, especially in relation to behavior.

Hedda: Is there something I can help you with?

Miss Tesman: No, no, no! Hedda Tesman must only have happy thoughts at a time like this

Hedda: Happy thoughts? I can't control my thoughts.

# HEDDA GABLER



The Roundabout Theatre Company's production of *Hedda Gabler* stars Mary-Louise Parker, Peter Stormare, and Michael Cerveris in this adaptation by Christopher Shinn. On the following pages are interviews with some of the actors as well as a section titled, "The World of The Play," which provides more information about understanding Ibsen, his history, and his world.



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# the PSYCHOLOGY of acting

UPSTAGE SAT DOWN WITH TONY® AND EMMY® AWARD WINNING ACTRESS MARY-LOUISE PARKER TO DISCUSS THE PROCESS OF DISCOVERING HEDDA GABLER.

## Why did you want to play the role of Hedda Gabler?

People asked me to do the play for a long time and I never felt inspired by it, but Todd Haimes got me excited about it. And then I spoke to Ian Rickson and Ian got me excited about it. And it just felt right. Some parts come along at the right time. And it just felt like a good idea at this time.

## Had you experienced the play on any level before?

I studied Ibsen in school. I've seen one production of it. I have read it many times because people have asked me to do it. So I did know it, and I have a pretty good sense of it.

## I know you are in the middle of your process, but what have you been discovering about her?

I think it's sort of a bottomless part. There are days when I think, "What am I doing?" It's like Nora in *A Doll's House*. She comes so far in one play. Trying to figure out where she starts is the challenge. You can go a lot of different ways with Ibsen. It's just trying to figure out how to be true to the play and also make it interesting for people to see it for the nineteenth time.

## Are you comfortable sharing your process?

Not really. I've never really talked about it because some of it just goes through a metamorphosis and changes and some of it's private and some of it is just boring for someone else. But I do try to make it fluid so that if people come in with a different process from my own I can learn from them. I'm not so set in my ways.

## You have worked in lots of different media. What is it that differentiates the media?

Theatre is more work intensive, labor intensive. It requires more stamina. It requires more concentration. It requires a discipline. And film and television can be physically and emotionally draining because you have to get it for a moment and you have one shot at it. And if you don't nail it in that shot, or if you don't find something in that shot, or if you don't surprise yourself, that's it. That's all you get. So you're trying to stay in a place that's sort of precarious. And it's hard to maintain. Whereas with theatre you get another chance at it and it's exhausting, but I think in a good way. I think you

either love it and you get it or you don't.

## You do theatre as much as you can.

If I didn't have children I would do theatre a lot more frequently. After I did *Reckless* it was probably three years before I did *Dead Man's Cell Phone*. And that's the longest break I've ever had and that was really hard. My son was at a certain age and I wanted to be able to put him to bed at night. Nothing ever stood in the way of theatre for me before. That's the first time that's happened. But luckily, it's the kind of medium that I can do it as long as I can remember lines.

## Dead Man's Cell Phone and Reckless can be considered contemporary plays. But what about classics?

I'm not sure I'm really drawn to them anymore. I did a lot of classics early in my career when I first got out of school. I did Oscar Wilde, everything really. I felt like even the modern plays I was in I was wearing a corset for. I did this Terrence McNally play and I was like, "I'm in a corset again and it's a modern play, it's Terrence McNally you know?" So I just did a lot of that. And I just feel like for me generally I'm usually excited by a play that's never been done before; words that have never been read or touched. With *How I Learned to Drive* I just felt like when I read it I didn't really get it until I went to speak it. And it was the first time that it had ever been done; there were no preconceptions of it. It was the same with *Proof*, and *Prelude* and *Babylon Gardens*-- most of the plays I've done. So that's more exciting for me generally.

## Can you tell me a little bit about what you look for in a director?

Everything that Ian has really.

## He's very sensitive.

He's so smart. He's so dedicated, so open, generous. But it starts with his intellect. He really can converse on a number of different things on a number of different levels and he brings all of that into the room. He can access fifty things where somebody else may only be able to access five. When you work in film people draw comparisons, such as "Remember that scene in that movie..." and that just turns me off. I don't want to hear an example from a movie. I want an example



from life or literature, or art. I don't want to know how somebody did something in some Hitchcock film. I don't care. Everything gets once removed that way. He's a fleshed out, smart, humane person. He's funny and he's just great.

**Can we talk a little bit about Christopher Shinn's adaptation?**

He's so knowledgeable and has such a passion for it. And again he's very sensitive and generous, and he's worked so hard. When you do a translation it's hard because you have people picking on every line. You have a Norwegian assistant saying this is this in Norwegian. And you have actors saying this and the director's saying that. And he's been so generous and gracious. And at the same time I really feel like he knows what he is doing; we're just lucky to have him.

**Do you sense any particular challenge in this role yet?**

I think every page in this play is impossibly hard.

**Ibsen had an amazing mind especially when you think that he wrote Hedda over one hundred years ago.**

A *Doll's House* too. He wrote two of the most crucial, iconic female protagonists of that century, and probably

the next century, that have persevered until now. As you said, people are still fascinated with it and are out there trying to do it. Things don't usually have that kind of staying power.

**He shook up the middle class.**

Yes, that's true. I think there's generally a judgment on a woman who is a protagonist no matter what. I think people don't immediately go with her, they judge her first on different levels.

**I think we are a misogynistic culture in some ways.**

I do too.

**What type of advice do you give to people who tell you that they want to act or have a career like yours?**

Just don't stop and don't let anyone tell you who you should be. I feel like, in the end, everything that people responded to in my work was initially not liked by my teachers and in early auditions. They thought I was too strange or just off. I could never get a commercial. I wanted a commercial so badly because I thought of the residuals. And always, it was, you're too strange, you're too this, and in the end it's just those things about you that will work for people one day if you keep going and just be true to yourself. Don't listen when people tell you to get an architectural degree on the side because then you'll be an architect.

**You went to North Carolina School of The Arts. Did you find that experience valuable?**

Oh yeah, because I had never really acted before so I would do anything. I was such a sponge. If they asked to do an exercise I'd be the first one up. I just wanted to eat it up; I wanted to do everything. I was such an awkward, shy kid in high school and when I got to college I just exploded. I found something and someone to be who was myself, who I had denied for so long. It was fantastic for me; I got to act all day long. And I thought, "Wow, maybe I'm good at something." So that was awesome.

**I want to end by asking if there is a question that I didn't ask that you wish I had asked.**

I think people should study if they want to be an actor. You should have some path of study, some language. I think just showing up and relying on your charm and your own personal instincts is... I'm sure it's worked in the past and there are probably some awesome actors who do that, but I think it limits you in terms of what you can do, who you can work with, and what you can bring to the room. 

# the PSYCHOLOGY of directing

UPSTAGE RECENTLY INTERVIEWED DIRECTOR IAN RICKSON AND ASSISTANT DIRECTOR SARAH CAMERON-SUNDE TO DISCOVER HOW THEY TRANSFORMED HEDDA GABLER FOR A CONTEMPORARY AUDIENCE.

## Why did you want to direct *Hedda Gabler*?

**IR:** Well, I think when you do a classic play it's not enough that it's a classic. You have to think, "Why is it purposeful and meaningful to do this play now?" I've spent a whole life only doing new plays. So I'm cautious about doing classic plays. But upon deep reflection on *Hedda Gabler*, I increasingly thought it was a very powerful, contemporary play to do because it's complex, compelling, provocative and involving of an audience. First of all, Ibsen is critiquing what we're living in now which is a culture of fear, based upon competition, based upon material wealth as validating of self. Ibsen's critique of that culture and what it does to human beings is just brilliant. I think what the play's doing in terms of its psychology is really modern. First of all, the play is really uncompromising about mortality and death. The first conversation that Hedda and her husband have is this meditation upon the yellow leaves and you feel this continual movement towards the meaning of death throughout, and indeed as we move through the play there are three deaths in quick succession in the fourth act. There are the deaths of Aunt Rina, of Løvborg, and Hedda. And I think a society that can be wrongly based upon the things I talked about earlier can try and hide death. Something about *Hedda Gabler* takes you by the scruff of the neck and makes you face death. I love this thing Saul Bellow said, "Death is the dark backing, that a mirror needs, if we are to see anything." And I find there's something about the play's encounter with death, which again is sort of a gauntlet to an audience about how to live. Part of our humanity is connected to mortality. So those things particularly, those two aspects of the play, interest me greatly. I find some other Ibsen plays much more expositional and over-plotted but there's something about the movement of *Hedda* that is orchestral, finely honed and invigorating.

## Why did you choose Christopher Shinn to do the adaptation?

**IR:** For me, it was logical thinking, "Who are the really interesting, American playwrights? And who are the interesting American playwrights who would have an affinity with Ibsen?" Having produced four of Chris

Shinn's plays at The Royal Court Theatre I had a hunch that he would be responsive to the aesthetic and psychology of Ibsen, and he was. He teaches Ibsen and he reads Ibsen all the time.

## What do you think is the fascination with Hedda? Why do we want to see this woman?

**IR:** It's a woman complacent in her own victim-hood. And I think everyone can identify with that. We think, "Ah did I self sabotage there?" We are all social beings, so like Hedda we are trying to work out how we can be in a world that has that set of values. Mary-Louise Parker has such a compelling inner life, her immersion in the complex inner truths of the character is very moving, and she has all of the dualities of Hedda. She has a brittleness, she's strong, she's has a sort of tremulous quality and yet she's very powerful. That's a key thing. What do you think?

**SCS:** She's a very tricky character to figure out. There's just a curiosity that you can think one thing about her at one moment and another thing five minutes later. I think theatre artists have a desire to go into that because that challenge is just...it's confusing and yet it makes sense. It's a challenging play to work on and that's thrilling.

## Chris Shinn said he didn't know whether the actress or you would buy into this, but he felt a lot of it had to do with her not ever accepting her father's death.

**IR:** All great plays are driven by loss, and I think that's a good reading of the play. I think Hedda hasn't probably grieved the loss of her mother which isn't even mentioned in the play and then there's the loss of her father and to a certain extent the loss of Eilert Løvborg. So she's fraught with losses that she hasn't been able to grieve, and that's a very dangerous place to be. I think she probably feels guilty, shameful about those losses. She didn't keep her father alive, she didn't yield to Løvborg, and if her mother died in childbirth she killed her mother in some way. So if you feel Hedda's pain and her capacity to love, the play works.

## How did you choose your design team and the rest of the cast? What were you looking for with both your designers and actors?

**IR:** I have the privilege as a director of thinking who are the best collaborators, “Oh there’s this lovely, young, half-Norwegian director who can assist me or there’s a set designer who I’ve worked with on *The Seagull* whose done lots of Ibsen and who I have a very good shorthand with and I know she will understand the sort of charged world of *Hedda Gabler*. And then I think that I don’t want it to feel like a polite period classic so maybe I can do some things that intervene in an embracing way. So P.J. Harvey is doing the music. Rebecca Habel, your colleague, said “What about Ann Roth for costumes?” “What about Natasha Katz for lighting?” So that was lovely and I’d like to articulate her egoless, subtle role in this.

I wanted to get actors who are truthful, who go deep, who belong in this very heightened, intense world and who are going to challenge Mary-Louise Parker, who aren’t going to be overly respectful and passive and who are going to push her onstage. That’s what Mary-Louise wants. I think about all of that. Being a director is like having a big shopping bag and going to the market and thinking, “Okay I’ve got this recipe *Hedda Gabler*, how do we make it? That’s available in the market; let’s get some of that. I could use that. We could cook it in this.” It’s thrilling.

**I know you are a week or so into the process, have you already figured out the biggest challenge of directing this play?**

**IR:** It’s very challenging emotionally and psychologically because it doesn’t relent and it keeps propelling you into visceral deep dark human material. I find it very upsetting, the play.

**Can we talk a little bit about becoming a director? Any advice you might give to a person who wants a career like you have?**

**IR:** Well, the best way of becoming a director is to direct. I think it’s great to assist. It’s fine to do courses; it’s good to go to school. But really the only thing that speaks for you is your work. And I’m a great advocate of study, learning, reading, learning wherever you can from whoever you can, but really you’ve got to find a way of getting your work on and learning through doing it and getting other people to see it so they then employ you. You need tenacity and you need resilience, and you need robustness and you need some luck because financially it’s very difficult. But the big thing you need is your passion and desire for the medium. You’ve got to love the work, the collaborative nature of it, and a real mission; that it’s an important thing to do. That’s the thing that puts the petrol in the tank alongside all the other demanding things you need. This is true still for me in my forties.

**Did you want to say something?**

**SCS:** It’s about being aware and taking advantage of an opportunity when it comes your way and saying yes a lot to things in the beginning and then also finding something that you really care about. I agree with Ian

about doing it. You have to direct. You have to work. My career started to take off when I started to find a writer who I was very passionate about bringing to the United States—who happens to be a Norwegian writer—and then being able to put my whole self into that because I cared about it so deeply and it worked. It gets attention and then there’s a niche or something that people know that you are good at and then you learn and you keep going and things change. Finding the writers and collaborators that you care about and that you work well with is so important.

**I wonder if you could talk about inspiration a little bit; what inspires you.**

**IR:** Largely from the collaborators, whoever they are; it could be a costume assistant, the actors, from the work itself. The fact that Ibsen could make this thing is inspiring. It feeds you. But I take inspiration from life; the complexities and vicissitudes of life. Talking to some teacher who is working hard or a conversation in the street is inspiring. I think that as an artist you have to be open, hungry, and curious. And that’s what inspiration comes from quite often.

**Is there anything I didn’t ask that I should have?**

**IR:** No, those were great questions.

**SCS:** I had one. I just want to touch on the importance on having an American adaptation of this play because I talk a lot about translation. I think we’re expected to understand and fully get British translations of plays and those just don’t resonate in the same way for American actors or the American audience. I think it’s incredibly exciting that Ian chose Chris Shinn to do this because I think language is the starting point of a play. I just want to commend the Roundabout for actually going for that. 



Paul Sparks, Mary-Louise Parker and Ann Reeder in *Hedda Gabler*

# the PSYCHOLOGY of Ibsen

## THE WORLD OF THE PLAY



### Henrik Ibsen

Henrik Johan Ibsen was born in Skien, Norway, on March 20, 1828. His father, Knud Ibsen, was a wealthy merchant and his mother Marichen Cornelia Martine Altenburg was a painter who enjoyed all arts. Ibsen and his family lived a very comfortable, social life until 1835 when Ibsen's father went bankrupt. Young Henrik Ibsen's dreams of becoming an artist were put on hold and at the age of fifteen he was forced to take on an apprenticeship with a pharmacist. In 1850 he set out for the city of Christiania, which is now Oslo, and tried to pursue a degree in medicine. He quickly realized that becoming a doctor was not what he wanted and instead turned to the world of the arts. He began to write for the theatre. His first play, *Catiline*, was published in 1850. In 1851 he took the post of "theater-poet" for the Bergen National Theater. With this appointment he was able to fully delve into his writing and into the world of Norwegian theatre. During this time, he was able to stage over 150 plays and became acquainted with the mechanics of professional theatre. With these new skills under his belt he was able to take on the post of artistic director of the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania. It was here that he met his wife Suzannah Daae Thørensens.

They married in 1858 and their only child, Sigurd, was born in 1859. After the Norwegian Theatre went bankrupt and his plays failed to receive the recognition deserved he decided to go abroad. He spent the next twenty-seven years traveling, living primarily in Italy and Germany. It was during this time that Henrik Ibsen wrote his most famous plays.

Ibsen believed in youth and the future rather than societal norms. His plays include "emotionally bankrupt" characters who deal with issues such as sexually transmitted diseases, unhappy marriages, and unwanted pregnancies. Ibsen's plays caused as much outrage as they did excitement. Ibsen wrote his last play, *When We Dead Awaken* in 1899. In 1900 he suffered the first of many debilitating strokes that left him with severe mental illnesses. He died on May 23, 1906.



### Henrik Ibsen and Realism

Before Henrik Ibsen, theatre of the time period were largely melodramas which were overplayed, bawdy dramas that had no depth and no inner conflict relying highly on spectacle. They usually centered on a villain dressed in black who would do some horrible thing and the perfect hero would come in and usurp the villain and save the hapless girl that the villain had stolen away. When Henrik Ibsen began writing his plays in 1850 he inspired an entire movement of theatre, one that scholars consider to be the beginnings of modernism in



### Realism

- Tried to make plays as honest to everyday life as possible.
- Did not include soliloquies or asides that were addressed to the audience
- Dialogue was written as brief and overlapping as normal speech.
- The language had a second meaning underneath.
- Playwrights did not break the “fourth wall.”
- Plays were supposed to supply a means for discussion and contemplation.
- Endings of these plays often left the plot points unresolved.
- The playwrights chose to write characters that had deep inner conflict.

theatre; this movement is called Realism.

Realism often touched on the parts of life that could be considered ugly or distasteful; topics that included things that Victorian society rarely spoke of in the privacy of their own homes, let alone in the public setting of the theatre. Henrik Ibsen embraced this view wholeheartedly and wrote all of his plays to include subject matter deemed largely inappropriate by many theatre-goers.

Most of the “heroes” of his plays dealt largely with going against the social and moral systems put forth by society. Ibsen often liked to make the audience question which characters were really in the right. Ibsen once stated, “In the good there is bad, and in the bad there is good.” Ibsen wanted his audience to walk away not sure of who really was the true hero.

### Ibsen, Women, and Victorian Values

Women in Ibsen’s plays are often used to showcase his ideas of modernity and how Victorian values are not in the best interests of anyone. At this time, moral standards were held in the highest of regard within the middle and upper classes. What people did and didn’t do was based upon the question, “Is it proper?” Women of the Victorian age (so named after Queen Victoria of England) had a very particular position in society. Women were to be seen and not heard. They were first their father’s property and after marriage their husband’s. All mention of emotions and anything dealing with sexuality was expressly forbidden. An unmarried woman needed a chaperone with her at all times to save her from being described as a soiled woman with a sordid past. Because it was deemed inappropriate for a woman to make her own money, the only way for her to be supported would be to marry. If women did not marry at a young age they were considered a lesser member of society and often became destitute unless a family member would graciously take them in. In this time period, a woman who put herself first was considered an outcast and would often not be accepted by her own family. Ibsen wrote many of his heroines as women who stood up for themselves; women who did not do what their husband or society thought was proper. Ibsen believed domesticity to be a chain around women’s necks. It stifled them and took away their right to be people; their right to live. Because of Ibsen’s resistance to the Victorian belief structure, some scholars state that Henrik Ibsen was one of the most profound feminist writers of his time.

# the PSYCHOLOGY of the Hedda

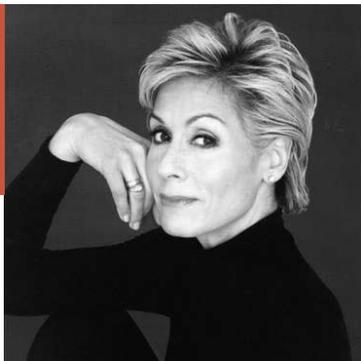
WHAT THOSE WHO HAVE PLAYED THE ROLE OF HEDDA GABLER IN THE PAST HAVE TO SAY ABOUT ONE OF THE THEATRE'S MOST ICONIC WOMEN.



**Martha Plimpton:** Hedda is “a human being who is terrified and has no tools to deal with her terror. Only a person of experience and maturity is supposed to be able to do it properly. That may be true on a certain level, but it can also make the play a little heavy.”<sup>1</sup>



**Kate Burton:** “Hedda Gabler is so much of her time. So much of what she is dealing with is being a woman in that society, being repressed in not having the opportunities that men had, not being able to follow a career. As the only child, both daughter and son, of the general, everything she loves—guns, horses—were virtually male.”<sup>3</sup>



**Judith Light:** Hedda is “a mythic and iconic figure, a woman who has a great deal of talent and nowhere to put it, who is not a mother figure and who has no grace or gentility. Every time she had a choice, she chose to go in the darker direction.”<sup>2</sup>



**Annette Bening:** “Most women would say they relate to Hedda Gabler—there’s a part of her in them. Ibsen was writing about a deep ambivalence that many women feel about domesticity. I think about myself and friends of mine—we have some of Hedda’s qualities and traits.”<sup>4</sup>

1 *ARTS IN AMERICA*; *Onstage, Hedda Gabler was anti-heroine of the year.* Stephen Kinzer. New York Times, December 26, 2001.

2 *Ibid.*

3 *Actress likens ‘Hedda’ to a female Hamlet.* Iris Fanger. The Christian Science Monitor, January 19, 2001.

4 *Discovering the Modern Ties In a Corsetted Ibsen Creation.* Bernard Weinraub. New York Times, March 14, 1999.



**Cate Blanchett:** If you don't understand the choice that she's made by marrying Tesman, then you don't really understand Hedda. There's a line where she actually has lofty ambitions to get Tesman into politics, and she says, 'Do you think he could be the prime minister?' And it's absolutely ludicrous"<sup>5</sup>



**Claire Bloom:** "I had wanted to do a modern woman and nothing could be more modern than either of these two roles I realized finally. Both Hedda and Nora [from Ibsen's *A Doll's House*] are incredibly alive and modern in spirit. They're both rebels, frustrated by circumstance and all this was long before the women's liberation movement."<sup>8</sup>



**Ingrid Bergman:** "I think that the play is outstanding and there is so much more that I would like to know about this woman. I have still not really acquired a proper grasp of her. I would like to play her for the theatre"<sup>6</sup>



**Blanche Yurka:** "I had some ideas about Hedda which were somewhat at variance with the interpretations I had seen. Almost always played as the embodiment of evil from the start, she usually became a ruthless witch, from whom Tesman would, in my opinion, have fled in terror. But I saw her rather differently: as a woman of potentially forceful character who, in another era, given an outlet for her energies, might have been a vital and entertaining member of society; moreover, one whose humour would have certainly been a distinct social asset among the sophisticates of today. But Hedda's restless energies were not viable in the society in which she lived; they festered and eventually destroyed her."<sup>9</sup>



**Janet Suzman:** "The brilliance of the character is that like Hamlet, it's a distillation of Western dissatisfactions, but unlike Shakespeare, she doesn't have huge speeches. That makes her a more mysterious voice. It's immensely private. She has great silent soliloquies, like the scene where she burns Løvborg's manuscript, in which so much of her character is revealed."<sup>7</sup>

5 *Hedda Steam*. Cate Blanchett on Ibsen's female Hamlet—a role she was dragged into 'a bit kicking and screaming'. Matt Dobkin. New York Magazine, February 19, 2006.

6 Ingrid Bergman og Alan Burgess, *Ingrid Bergman: Mitt liv*, Anne-Marie Smith (overs.), Aschehoug, Oslo 1981, s. 386.

7 *The housewife heroine*. David Bendict. The Independent (London), August 2, 1996.

8 *Claire Bloom to Appear in Ibsen Pays*. Howard Thompson. New York Times, August 21, 1970.

9 "Acting Hedda Gabler" in *Bohemian Girl: Blanche Yurka's Theatrical Life* Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1970

# the PSYCHOLOGY of adaptation

UPSTAGE RECENTLY SPOKE WITH CHRISTOPHER SHINN ABOUT HIS ADAPTATION OF *HEDDA GABLER* AND HIS AFFECTION FOR HENRIK IBSEN'S WORK.

## What made you decide to adapt *Hedda Gabler*?

I was asked and I decided to accept because Ibsen is my favorite playwright and I really relished the opportunity to convey his work in a way that was true to him but also revising it for an audience in 2009.

## Tell me a little bit about your affection for Ibsen's work.

When I was fifteen I saw a production of *The Master Builder* at Hartford Stage with Sam Waterston and Cynthia Nixon. That was in 1991 and I was really shocked by it. I'd never seen a play that dealt so forthrightly with difficult and unacceptable feelings and impulses. And then later that year we read *Hedda Gabler* out loud in my English class and similarly I was really scandalized to see such primitive emotions represented so directly. I found it threatening, subversive, and exciting. I felt that Ibsen was dramatizing things that existed that no one ever talked about. So that's really where it began for me. I remained interested in Ibsen all throughout my late teens and early twenties. But it wasn't until 2002 or 2003 that I revisited Ibsen in a really serious, deep and sustained way and I think unconsciously I was looking to deepen my own writing and to get in touch with deeper parts of myself. So I went back and began reading his prose plays chronologically. Then in 2004 or 2005, at the New School for Drama, where I teach in the MFA program, I decided to teach the plays to my graduate students in chronological order so I could show the growth of a writer, the development, the changes, the similarities, what sustained over those twelve plays. And I would say at that point, I just became much more personally affected by the honesty and uncompromising self-examination of his work. I began reading his plays repeatedly, year after year, so when I was called about adapting *Hedda* I was still in the midst of a profound engagement with Ibsen's work so the timing was really perfect.

## Do you subscribe to the belief that Ibsen is the father of modern drama?

I think Ibsen and Chekhov had such a profound impact that's still being felt today. I think a lot of major writers are following these two major writers. I think Ibsen was slightly more radical than Chekhov, so we've seen Chekhov be a little more influential in our time than

we've seen Ibsen be. But I think undoubtedly, Ibsen was an influential writer. Certainly, he was one of the two essential playwrights that impacted 20<sup>th</sup> century drama.

## Do you see your work as a translation or an adaptation? How do you define it?

To call it a translation you have to speak the language and I don't speak the language. I think both Joyce and Freud learned the language because they so loved Ibsen. They learned the language in order to read the original which I always found extraordinary. Unfortunately, I cannot say this of myself, so I'll call it an adaptation because I've had to rely on a literal translation from somebody else.

## So how do you start working on an adaptation with a play as, I'll use your word, as profound as *Hedda*?

I can tell you how I literally began. I basically tried to immerse myself in the world of the play, in Ibsen's life, and in academic and psychoanalytic writing about the play. I read probably 20 different adaptations of the play to see how other writers had done it, basically just to learn more and more about the play. I downloaded from the internet maybe 20 or 30 academic articles on Ibsen and *Hedda Gabler*. You know there's a journal that's devoted to Ibsen that's published? So I saw the current academic writing about Ibsen. I read extensive biographical material about Ibsen. I read a lot of psychoanalytic articles about Ibsen. I read the literal translation. But all that was an attempt to understand what I felt about the play. Because I felt this is not an intellectual exercise, doing an adaptation, it has to come from deep inside of you. I think the audience will perceive if this is something you did in the library or if this is something you did feeling from the depths of your soul what was happening to these characters. So everything I did before I began writing was an attempt to know how I feel about the play as deeply as possible. So that's how I prepared; that's how I began.

It sounds very extensive and I find it interesting because I read an article about you in reference to your play *Dying City* and the interviewer asked you if there was another career you ever considered and I believe you said psychoanalyst. Can we talk a little bit about *Hedda's* psychology? What do you make of her?



Well I think my job, first and foremost, as an adapter, was to create something that would allow an actress and a director to go as deep as they could and to give them as many options and as much flexibility as the text allows. His text is so open; there are so many way to interpret it. So I wanted to make sure I wasn't closing down any avenues of interpretation in what I did just because of what I felt. What I feel about Hedda is different than what I tried to do as an adapter. I thought about her primarily as someone who had never been able to face the loss of her father. There's very little in the play that we hear about her father but it seemed to me that the play was infused with the disavowed or frozen grief or mourning that had never taken place and that this fact was something that profoundly defined Hedda Gabler's psychology.

#### **Isn't there a portrait of her father in the house?**

Well Ibsen's stage directions indicate that but because no one ever refers to it in the text of the play it's certainly something the director may choose to include or exclude. But I think one very key signifier is that Hedda's married name is actually Hedda Tesman but the title of the play is *Hedda Gabler*. It's easy to overlook because it's the title and we know it and it's familiar to us but of course what's glaring about the title is that Ibsen gives her the last name of her father, not the last name of her husband, as if she's married to her father or she's never been able to actually move from the role of daughter to wife. So there's a very strong hint that Hedda's very entwined with her father. The portrait is something that is really for a director to decide whether they want it or not but the title is something that can't be altered and that issues a strong signal of how central Ibsen thought the dead father was to the play.

#### **And they refer to her as General Gabler's daughter if I remember correctly.**

Early in the play she is referred to in that way; she also refers to her father's pistols. There are little moments where we're reminded that she is the daughter of General Gabler.

#### **Are there any radical departures from what Ibsen wrote or from other adaptations that we should be aware of in your version?**

Ibsen was a writer who desperately wanted to speak to the people of his time. And so I imagine he would want an adaptation of *Hedda Gabler* to speak to an audience in America in 2009 and not to an audience in 1890's

Norway. So I felt like any changes we make that help the play feel relevant...they may be radical changes in a certain sense, but not if you look at how passionate Ibsen was about speaking to his time. So I would say anything I've done that's different from what Ibsen did was done with the intent of doing what Ibsen wanted to do-- reach his audiences, speak to them.

#### **He certainly wanted to say things to the middle class that hadn't been said before. And I would say our audience is mostly middle class. It's fascinating. I know again from an interview you did that you were acutely aware of class differences growing up so I think it's interesting that you are trying to find the spirit of what he wanted to do. Did you have to familiarize yourself with Mary-Louise's work at all?**

Well I knew her stage work very well. It was refreshing to be writing the adaptation with her in mind, knowing she'd be saying the lines, as opposed to a generic Hedda Gabler in my head or a different actress; I had a very strong sense of her. I hadn't met her so I didn't know what her thoughts about the part were. But I could imagine her saying the words so that definitely had an impact on me. You always want to write for an actor if you have the opportunity. So the rewrites that I'm doing right now in rehearsal, there's nothing wrong with the lines, how I've written them, but once you get a real actor there it sometimes works better in a slightly altered way. It just fits that particular actor better. So right now I'm making sure, is making sure the text fits the actors as well as it can. So it's a great gift to be able to make sure the adaptation fits with the actual production that we have.

#### **Christopher, I wanted to ask you two more questions. Are you inspired by any other writers? I know obviously you love the work of Ibsen, but what inspires you now?**

Well because I write for the theatre I find most of my inspiration in other playwrights, or else great thinkers of the age, philosophers and psychoanalysts. In Ibsen's time there weren't psychoanalysts but there were philosophers who were writing about the theatre world. So I find quite a lot of inspiration from those realms as well as the theatre.

#### **What kind of advice would you give to a young person, say someone from high school, who wanted to be a writer?**

My advice is always the same. You have to read extensively in all areas. That's number one. Number two, you have to work incredibly hard on your writing. You have to devote immense amounts of time and effort to it. And three, you have to take good care of yourself both physically and mentally. You can't do drugs. You can't drink to excess. Those are all hard in their own way and were a struggle for me at one time. But I know that the more I've read and the harder I've worked, the better my work has become and the more successful I've become. So that's always my advice. All three of those boil down to hard work; that's my advice. 

# the PSYCHOLOGY of design

UPSTAGE DISCUSSES THE PROCESS OF DESIGNING COSTUMES FOR FILM, THEATRE, AND HEDDA GABLER WITH DESIGNER ANNE ROTH.

## What is your process when approaching a play like *Hedda Gabler*?

I read the play several times and some notes of Ibsen about Hedda specifically. I wanted it to have an Oslo quality. So I started looking at photographs of Oslo in that period. It's a small city; I haven't been there. I tried to imagine a social strata in that period, in that kind of setting. What the lighting is. I always like to think of the music of the period and the weather of the period, the furniture. I think about what it's like when Hedda gets off the boat after a six month honeymoon and they're not rich.

I always have to figure out that when anybody gets into bed at night where do their clothes go? Are they tucked? Are they thrown on the floor? Do they get hung? There are no closets in that period. What do they do with them? Does the Judge have a maid or servant who removes them? That determines everything. Who makes them? Is there a tailor? Is there a shirt maker? Tesman has been on the road for six months, who does his laundry? If you listen to those ideas in your mind, you really can't go wrong because they are the truth.

## Is a color palette emerging?

It is. The scenery is pretty much unadorned because they have literally just moved into the house so there wouldn't be any pictures on the walls, at least I don't think so. And there wouldn't be any doilies on chairs; in fact, it's almost a bare room. And I'm not positive, but I'm pretty certain the colors of the walls are gray-green. I just did my colors around that.

## What do you make of this play? How does it affect you?

The truth is that I adore great writing. And when I say great writing I mean really good writing. I can smell a badly written play. A long time ago, a very famous actor said to me, and I simply can't tell you who, he said, "Give me Ibsen and I'll give

you a long nap." Somebody else said to me, I don't know who it was, "Hedda Gabler's the greatest; it's a great, great play and *A Doll's House* is a great, great play," and I said, and this was a long time ago, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." And then I read this version and I must have read it three times in a very short period, and I realized that it really is a wonderful, wonderful play. And I think Ian has the same feeling I have about it.

## You've been away from the theatre doing film...

I haven't returned to theatre in almost two years. I've done three or four pictures last year. I did *Mamma Mia!*, *The Reader*, *Doubt* and I did a picture called *Julie and Julia* which they are now telling me won't come out until the summer; but it's divine.

## So talk to me about the difference between stage and screen. Is there a big difference?

Yes, there's a lot of difference. My mentality is now, I would say, film. If I'm looking for the right wedding ring for Hedda I might as well not spend any time doing it because you can't see it.

## So really it's a matter of detail.

Well, yes, I would say; it's the scale.

## What advice do you give to a young person who might want to do the type of work you do?

It's two lifetimes and it's a lot of study. First of all you have to have a strong desire to put your vision on the stage. Your vision must be yours and you have to develop your own. There are ways to do that. For instance, as a child you are attracted to certain things. You find a beetle that is bronze and gold and it's dead and you fall in love with this gorgeous thing. I'm talking of myself of course. I put it in a shoebox and maybe ten weeks later you come across something else you find utterly gorgeous and you have this little box of treasures that is specifically yours and you stick it under your bed. And then you go to school and you go to California to work and you come back and you pull this thing out from under the bed and it's like a mirror of yourself. 



Helen Carey and Mary-Louise Parker in *Hedda Gabler*

# the PSYCHOLOGY of language

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## Vocabulary

**Villa**—the rural or suburban residence of a wealthy person

**Verandah**—the rural or suburban residence of a wealthy person

**Tyrol**—is a region in Western Central Europe, which included the present day Austrian state of Tyrol, the Italian region Trentino-Alto Adige/Südtirol and three communes of the Italian region Veneto.

**Colleague**—an associate in a profession or in a civil or ecclesiastical office

**Repulsive**—arousing aversion or disgust

**Ghastly**—intensely unpleasant, disagreeable, or objectionable

**Diligent**—characterized by steady, earnest, and energetic effort

**Abstract**—expressing a quality apart from an object

**Contorted**—to twist in a violent manner

**Frivolously**—lacking in seriousness

**Aptitude**—capacity for learning

**Paltry**—meager, measly

**Engrossed**—to take or engage the whole attention of

**Brenner Pass**—is a mountain pass through the Alps along the border between Italy and Austria

**Contemptuous**—manifesting, feeling, or expressing intense dislike for someone or something.

**Amicably**—neighborly, friendly

**Fisticuffs**—a fight with the fists

**Delirium**—an acute mental disturbance characterized by confused thinking and disrupted attention usually accompanied by disordered speech and hallucinations

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## Resources

Bloom, Harold, ed., *Henrik Ibsen*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2000.

Bloom, Harold, ed., *Modern Critical Views: Henrik Ibsen*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999.

Lebowitz, Naomi, *Ibsen and the Great World*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990.

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Moi, Toril, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Shaw, George Bernard, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*. New York: Dover Publications, 1904.



Peter Stormare and Mary-Louise Parker in *Hedda Gabler*

# Activities to Explore the **PSYCHOLOGY** of Hedda Gabler

## Before you see the show:

How would you define a woman's role in Norway in the 1890's?

- ♦ What is expected of women? (The World of The Play section of this study guide offers some insights about the environment of the play.)
- ♦ Think about times in your life thus far when you felt you had to compromise your sense of yourself in order to satisfy expectations placed upon you by society.
- ♦ What were those expectations?
- ♦ How did you compromise your sense of yourself?
- ♦ How does your gender affect expectations placed upon you as an individual?

## As you watch the show:

What are some of the choices the actor's make to demonstrate their character's desires?

- ♦ What does Hedda want? How can you tell?
- ♦ Why do you think Hedda moves the furniture so frequently?
- ♦ Why do you think the mirror situated the way it is on the set?

## After the show:

Revisit the conflict between the desires that were important to Hedda and the expectations and pressure she felt throughout the play.

Choose one of the following activities to complete:

- ♦ Write an essay identifying the similarities and differences between Thea and Hedda. Include how those are represented metaphorically as well as literally.
- ♦ Write a monologue from Hedda's perspective speaking to her husband about what you believe to be her dreams or desires.
- ♦ There are a number of events that occur off stage. Based on your understanding of the conflicts, desires and social restraints of the time, work in a group to write a short play that includes scenes not seen on stage.  
Example: a moment from the wedding trip, the scene between Jørgen and Løvborg after he has read the book to Tesman, the scene with the police and Løvborg.
- ♦ Create a visual rendering (a drawing, collage, or painting) that illustrates Hedda's conflict as you understand it after seeing the production.

Send your work to Roundabout, and we'll share it with the artists who created *Hedda Gabler*.

Mail to: Education Department  
Roundabout Theatre Company  
231 West 39th Street, Suite 1200  
New York, NY 10018

Or email to: [education@roundabouttheatre.org](mailto:education@roundabouttheatre.org)

Mary-Louise Parker and Paul Sparks in *Hedda Gabler*

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The Heckscher Foundation for Children  
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