

■ A tale of two Scandinavian playwrights

Henrik Ibsen and August Strindberg

By John Bechtel, Freelance culture and travel writer

August Strindberg and Henrik Ibsen, arguably Scandinavia's most celebrated playwrights, could not have been more different. Strindberg was Swedish, and twenty years younger than Ibsen, who was Norwegian but wrote his plays in Danish, the language of the Danish-Norwegian kingdom of the time. They both held high hopes of a Nobel Prize for Literature that never came. The courage of these two playwrights to challenge assumptions and directly speak to issues of their day was the beginning of a tradition that considers a play art rather than entertainment.

August Strindberg and Henrik Ibsen hated each other, and they sustained this enmity throughout their careers. Apart from professional jealousy, the



Henrik Ibsen



August Strindberg

problem began over a profound difference in their perceptions of women. Not perceptions of specific women, as with Frédéric Chopin and Franz Liszt, two famous composers (and neighbors in Paris) who were both enamored of the same woman, French author George Sand (the pen name for Amantine Dupin).

No, our two playwrights were passionate advocates of diverse opinions about the roles of all women in a just society, and they dedicated their lives to writing plays to make their respective points. As you read what follows, bear in mind that these events took place almost 150 years ago, and whether you agree with one or the other, or neither of them, you could conclude that both of them were characters themselves in a much more significant play, the play of life. We also have our bit parts in this play, and the great conversation goes on.

The personal experiences and histories of these two playwrights worked their way into their writing, and in both cases, they rarely bothered to mask the fact that the characters in their dramas were based on members of their families, their friends, and people they resented or disliked. Today authors and playwrights go out of their way to disclaim any relationship between their fictional characters and real people they know, to avoid lawsuits.

As we look at the plays of these two authors, we do well to separate their opinions and content from the style or manner in which they present them.. This isn't easy, just as it wasn't for the two of them in their time. They were not generous in their evaluations of

each other, even engaging in name calling. Then, as now, name calling or labeling does not contribute to the learning experience.

August Strindberg

Strindberg was born in 1849. His mother was a barmaid and his father a businessman, and August knew poverty intimately..As many as ten people shared his three-room home. His mother died when he was thirteen. Strindberg surely never forgot being brought into a world where he was not wanted, nor could he forget the fear and hunger—the two terrible memories of his childhood. The poverty he knew was not a minor and temporary loss of status in the community, but a real empty belly.

He dropped out of school, and a failed young actor, he attempted suicide by opium. Instead of dying, the ensuing hallucinations of childhood memories inspired him, and he wrote his first play a few days later.

He wrote some short pieces under the rubric *Married*, with unyielding and realistic perspectives on matrimony. These stories created quite a stir in polite society, and Strindberg's publisher was sued. Strindberg took the publisher's place as the defendant in the case, which of course improved his popularity with the younger members of society. He won his case, but more importantly, he had discovered the theme of his life's work: the constant battle for power between the sexes. In his best productions, his male and female protagonists find themselves trapped by their intense physical desire for each other and a simultaneous and perverse desire to



August Strindberg at home in his study.

destroy each other..Scripts for a Judge Judy show before its time?

Strindberg was married and divorced three times, and fathered six children. During the 1880s and 1890s, he traveled extensively outside of Sweden, living in France, Germany, Switzerland, and Denmark.

The influence of Nietzsche on Strindberg

Nietzsche was an early influence in Strindberg's life, and with whom he exchanged a few letters. Like Ibsen, Strindberg was an adherent of the Realism genre in literature, depicting fictional characters in situations that could happen to real people in the natural physical world. Unlike Ibsen, Strindberg was more of a tragedian than a reformer.

During much of his life, he experienced bouts of mental illness during which he made notes of his

behavior as if he were the laboratory rat under observation. There were occasions when he was unsure if he was experiencing real life or as one of the protagonists in his plays. He continued to write about the alienated modern man, hypocritical class divisions in society, and the battle of the sexes until his death in 1912 at the age of 63. In all, he wrote 50 volumes of plays, poems, political and social commentary.

The father of modern Swedish literature

Strindberg's novel *The Red Room*, is considered by many to be Sweden's first. Many artists have cited Strindberg as critical to their development as writers, and Eugene O'Neill, a winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, dedicated much of his acceptance speech to Strindberg, referring to him as "that greatest genius of all modern dramatists."

(Continued on page 00)

(Continued from page 00)

Henrik Ibsen

Henrik Ibsen was born to an affluent family in Skien, Norway in 1828. His was one of the most patrician families in town. When Henrik was seven years old, his father experienced an extreme reversal in business fortunes, and the family had to move (temporarily) to a summer home at the outside of town. Eventually, they moved again to a larger home in the city owned by a member of the extended family who was a wealthy banker and ship owner. Young Henrik never forgot the change in his immediate family's circumstances, and later he often wrote about the effect of poverty on family relations.

Henrik's sister Hedvig wrote about the effect on their mother: "She was a quiet, lovable woman, the soul of the house, everything to her husband and children. She sacrificed herself time and time again. There was no bitterness or reproach in her." The role model and memory of his uncomplaining mother doubtlessly inspired much in Ibsen's plays, although he was ambivalent about feminism. He despaired of the fact that one of society's most revered institutions, that of marriage, was unable to deliver on its promise due to the selfishness of the participants, and therefore the promise of equality before the law was an empty promise and not the harbinger of a new millennium of marital bliss.

Child Support and Marriage (in that order)

At the age of 18, Henrik fathered a son named Hans Jacob through a liaison with a local girl. Henrik paid "child support" for the next 14 years, even though he never met his son. Henrik applied at the University of Christiania (later Oslo) but failed the entrance exams. He worked in a theater in Bergen for several years, learning the production side of the profession hands-on.

In 1858 Henrik married Suzannah Thoresen, and the following year she gave birth to the only son of their 48-year marriage.

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Young Henrik Ibsen, above, and wife Suzannah, left, had one son, Sigurd—an only child, below, who became a lawyer, author and statesman, and who served as Prime Minister of Norway in Stockholm from 1903 to 1905. He played a central role in the dissolution of the union between Norway and Sweden in 1905.

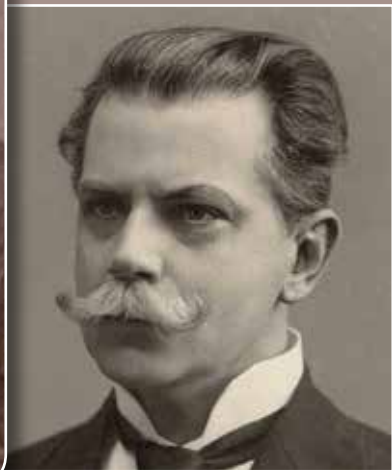


PHOTO: OSLO MUSEUM

They were perceived by some as an unhappy marriage, perhaps because they argued so much. But Suzannah not only cooked, cleaned, sewed, nursed, and kept the house for her husband, but she also had a keen intellect and was not shy about expressing it.

Depression, money, and criticism

Often borrowing money to make ends meet, Henrik was frequently depressed in the early years. Many of Ibsen's plays dealt with sexuality, and his willingness to deal with such controversial issues brought him notoriety and criticism of his works.

The influence of Kierkegaard on Ibsen

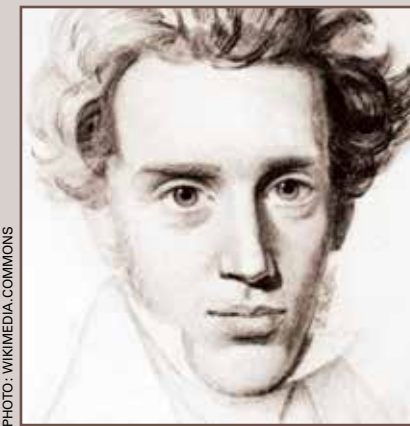


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Portrait of Soren Kierkegaard

The Danish philosopher, theologian, and poet Soren Kierkegaard exerted a significant impact on the young Ibsen. Kierkegaard is considered the first existentialist, even though he never used the term. He proposed that every individual, not society or religion, is solely responsible for giving meaning to life and living it passionately, sincerely, authentically. In Kierkegaard's view, one's purpose in life is not acquired by revelation, but that human beings, through their consciousness, create their values and determine a meaning to their life.

Some of Kierkegaard's famous quotes are:

"People demand freedom of speech as a compensation for the freedom of thought which they seldom use."

"Old age realizes the dreams of youth: look at Dean Swift; in his youth, he built an asylum for the insane, in his old age he was himself an inmate."



PHOTO: BRAINCREESE.CO.UK

Actor Henrik Klausen in Peer Gynt - at Christiania Theater, in Norway, 1876.

Peer Gynt

Kierkegaard's influence is evident in *Peer Gynt*, one of his early successful plays that were first performed in 1876 and continued to be one of his most often performed oeuvres. At various times in concert, on stage, or in silent movies, it has starred Edward G. Robinson, Laurence Olivier, Charlton Heston, Christopher Plummer, and innumerable others in various languages. Edvard Grieg provided some of the music.

Scandinavian audiences, expecting theater to model strict moral codes and the utmost propriety, found some of Ibsen's performances risqué, even scandalous. Ibsen's later work examined the tensions and currents beneath the surface, revealing a sleazy underbelly to human existence that everyone preferred to ignore.

Norwegians were also often hostile to Ibsen's content, so he exiled himself to Germany, primarily to Dresden and Munich, where he achieved resounding acclaim. He eventually returned to Norway because he missed the fjords and the sea, and once Germany had welcomed him, Scandinavia became more receptive.

After 27 years of self-imposed exile, however, Ibsen never again felt himself at home in Norway. He loved Norway but was unforgiving of his country's early rejection of him. Near the end of his life, he was mollified by becoming a Norwegian national hero.

The Peer Gynt Festival

Since 1967 Norwegians at Vinstra in the Gudbrandsdalen valley celebrate Henrik Ibsen and *Peer Gynt* with an annual festival. This is one of Norway's largest cultural festivals and is recognized by the Norwegian Government as a leading institution for presenting culture in nature.

Ibsen is widely regarded as the most important playwright since Shakespeare, and he is the most often performed after Shakespeare. He was

(Continued on page 00)

(Continued from page 00)

considered multiple times for the Nobel Prize in Literature, and he influenced other playwrights and novelists such as Miroslav Krleža, Oscar Wilde, Arthur Miller, James Joyce, Eugene O'Neill, and George Bernard Shaw. Although Ibsen was never awarded the Nobel Prize himself, the last two of his acolytes listed here were.

Ibsen used the problem play as a device to stimulate debate about contentious social issues.

The problem play is a straightforward, structural device that introduces a contemporary social issue, as a problem—in the moral dilemmas of a central character. Debates among the characters about these contentious social issues are an essential component of the play.

Ibsen made extensive use of this device to confront topics of women's rights; greed; the role of women in marriage, the family, and society; incest; even sexually transmitted diseases. Because of his pioneering this form of play, he was imitated by other playwrights such as George Bernard Shaw, Anton Chekov, and August Strindberg, all of whom expanded upon it.

It was the shocking nature of the issues Ibsen selected for his plays that stirred controversy and public outcry in Scandinavia. His audiences weren't ready for that kind of open debate. Ibsen's goal was to highlight human tragedy, situations where a character couldn't move forward or backward but seemed locked in an untenable position.

Why the hostility?

The two playwrights held opposing viewpoints on the proper role of women in society. Strindberg hated Ibsen for idealizing women; for putting them on a pedestal. Strindberg did not think women were powerless but manifested their power in different ways than men did. Men either sought to dominate or were afraid of

their women; or sought to dominate *because* they were afraid of their women. Strindberg thought women were conniving and manipulative, even evil.

Even though Strindberg was the more prolific writer, Ibsen was more financially successful. Ibsen kept a photo of Strindberg above his desk to remind him of who he hated. They resented and envied each other's successes.

They may have been competing observers, looking at different sides of the same coin, challenging the status quo and stirring up the complacent Scandinavians. They were both keen to expose hypocrisy in society, and they were both naturalists, pointing out the perverse parts of nature that exist in all humans. They were both committed to portraying life as it was, or at least as they had experienced it.

Plays of both artists were banned in Europe; Strindberg's play *Miss Julie*, written in 1888, was not produced in Sweden until 1906, and the ban on it in England was not lifted until 1932. Incidentally, this is the first play in which sex is separated from love.

Strindberg was more direct and explicit about sexual matters; Ibsen was more cautious and reserved. Strindberg was brutally realistic about the passions at play in human interaction; the love, hate, fury, and desire in both brief encounters and long-term relationships. They were the Ying and Yang of sexuality; Ibsen captured the heat, tension, and uncertainties of the pre-sexual encounter; Strindberg escorts us



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***A Doll's House* premiered at the Royal Theatre in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1879. In 2006, the centennial of Ibsen's death, it was the world's most performed play that year.**

Left: Emma Cunniffe (Nora Helmer) and Ken Bradshaw (Torvald Helmer).



PHOTO: BRIAN SIANO

***A Doll's House* dress rehearsal: Jennifer Summerfield and Carl Guarneri.**

through the charred embers of the post-coital relationship. The plays of both men confront issues that are still relevant today.

In Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, he creates the lead female character Nora in the stereotyped passive housewife role. Her dependency on her husband and submissiveness are an essential part of the play's overall message. Strindberg in his drama *The Father* takes the opposite viewpoint; the female protagonist Laura completely dominates her husband in everything.

A Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen

To all appearances Nora and Torvald are happily married. He is a successful banker.

Nora once privately borrowed a large sum of money so that her husband could recuperate from a life-threatening illness, and she had been quietly paying it back in small installments by saving from her household allowance.

Torvald infantilizes his wife and condescendingly calls her his doll and pet names. Torvald's first act upon being promoted is to fire a man who was once disgraced for having forged his signature on a document. This man, Nils Krogstad, is the person from whom Nora has borrowed her money.

Nora reveals that she forged her father's signature to get the money. Krogstad threatens to expose Nora for having committed the same crime for which he had been punished. Nora pleads with Torvald for leniency with regard to Krogstad, but Torvald dismisses her arguments as immature.

When Torvald discovers that Nora has forged her father's name, he is angry and feels she has damaged his reputation. He dismisses the fact that she did this to save his life. At the end of the play, Nora cannot forgive Torvald for his self-centeredness and finds the prospect of continued intimacy with him insufferable. She leaves him to become an independent woman.

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(Continued from page 00)

Brief Analysis of *A Doll's House*

This play attempts to capture the traditional 19th-century views of men as the breadwinners and women as the caretakers. Ibsen cleverly portrays Nora's dependency on Torvald by her acceptance of his patronizing her with demeaning nicknames and her eagerness for money. To get what she wants, Nora feigns subordination and plays the game. From the text of the play:

"NORA. Yes, whatever you say, Torvald.

TORVALD. Now, now, the little lark's wings mustn't droop. Come on, don't be a sulky squirrel. (Taking out his wallet) Nora, guess what I have here.

NORA. (Turning quickly). Money!"

Again from the text of the play, Torvald's outburst when he fears that he will be disgraced as a banker and in the community by what his wife has done:

"Now you've wrecked all my happiness- ruined my whole future. I am in a cheap little grafter's hands; he can do anything he wants with me, ask for anything, play with me like a puppet. I'll be swept down miserably into the depths on account of a featherbrained woman."

Torvald reveals his hypocrisy. He fears the same treatment from Krogstad that he has been giving his wife throughout their marriage. His hypocrisy demonstrates the inferior puppet status of a wife to her husband, a consistent theme throughout the play and Ibsen's work in general.

The Father by August Strindberg

This play is about a fight for possession of a child between a father and mother. The father, a cavalry captain, is an intellectual, a freethinker, and a man of ideas. His wife is narrow, selfish, and lethal when angry.

From the text:

"THE CAPTAIN: This house is full of women who all want to have their say about the child. My mother-in-law wants to make a Spiritualist of her. Laura wants her to be an artist; the governess wants her to be a Methodist, old Margret a Baptist, and the servant-

girls want her to join the Salvation Army! It won't do to try to make a soul in patches like that. I, who have the chief right to try to form her character, am constantly opposed in my efforts. And that's why I have decided to send her away from home."

The father doesn't want to rescue the daughter to make her an image of himself, but because he wants her to experience genuine self-esteem, empowered to make her own choices. From the text:

"THE CAPTAIN: I don't want to be a procurer for my daughter and educate her exclusively for matrimony, for then if she were left unmarried she might have bitter days. On the other hand, I don't want to influence her toward a career that requires a long course of training which would be entirely thrown away if she should marry. I want her to be a teacher. If she remains unmarried, she will be able to support herself, and at any rate, she wouldn't be any worse off than the poor school-masters who have to share their salaries with a family. If she marries, she can use her knowledge in the education of her children."

Brief Analysis of *The Father*

In this play, the father focuses on the development of the child, and the mother is obsessed with the possession of the child. The battle is joined, and the mother fights with everything at her disposal. She plants doubts in the Captain's mind that he is not, in fact, the biological father of the child. She seeks to drive her husband mad, and through various intrigues persuades others, including a doctor, that he is insane. It destroys the Captain, and he dies, and as she bids him farewell:

"You have fulfilled your function as an unfortunate necessary father and breadwinner. You are not needed any longer, and you must go."

As Emma Goldman explained in her analysis, published in "The Social Significance of the Modern Drama", Boston, 1914:

"*The Father* contains two basic truths. Motherhood, much praised, poetized, and hailed as a wonderful thing, is in reality very often the greatest deterrent influence in the life



PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA.ORG

Copenhagen 1918: *The Father* cast, Peter Fjelstrup (The Captain) and Thilda Fønss (Bertha), his daughter.

of the child.

"Because it is not primarily concerned with the potentialities of character and growth of the child; on the contrary, it is interested chiefly in the birth-giver—that is, the mother. Therefore, the mother is the most subjective, self-centered and conservative obstacle. She binds the child to herself with a thousand threads which never grant sufficient freedom for mental and spiritual expansion. It is not necessary to be as bitter as Strindberg to realize this. There are of course exceptional mothers who continue to grow the child. But the average mother is like the hen with her brood, forever fretting about her chicks if they venture a step away from the coop. The mother enslaves with kindness—a bondage harder to bear and more difficult to escape than the brutal fist of the father.

"Strindberg himself experienced it, and nearly everyone who has ever attempted to outgrow the soul strings of the mother."

The Father was twice produced on Broadway, once in 1912 and again in 1949, when it starred Grace Kelly.

Interestingly, *The Father* and *A Doll's House* are occasionally produced one after the other in the same theatre for purposes of contrast of content and style. The debate about life's oldest battlefield stirs passionate discussion as much now as ever.