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Hedda Gabler Lecture Series

On January 24th, 2009 as part of Roundabout Theatre Company's ongoing Lecture Series, Ted Sod, Dramaturg for the Education Department interviewed Patricia Denison, professor at Barnard College, followed by audience Q & A.

Ted Sod: Ibsen is sometimes considered a pioneer or “the father of modern drama”. Do you agree?

Pat Denison: That's both a commonplace and an accurate description. If you think about early 19th century drama, which is often highly melodramatic, you usually have predictable type-characters and plot-driven action. In the tradition, say, of Scribe and Sardou. Ibsen initially worked in the theater with conventional, well-made plays, where what really mattered was that predictable ending. A play would be structured with an Exposition, Complication, Crisis and Resolution. Sometimes playwrights such as Scribe and Sardou would first decide what the happy ending would be and then would write the rest of the play. You can see how remote that description is from the play that we saw on the stage today. Ibsen experimented with various dramatic conventions later in the century and wrote plays in which the world is unpredictable and characters behave in psychologically complex, unexpected ways. To paraphrase Strindberg, “no longer are the characters automatons, middle-class, predictable types, but they are hard to catch and classify. They may startle you with what they do.” I think that is why critics describe Ibsen as the playwright who created modern drama. They will sometimes describe Chekhov in a similar way.

TS: So it's true that he scandalized the Victorian middle class with his plays?

PD: If you tend to think of the Victorian Era as one that placed tremendous emphasis on public propriety, rigid standards, and social conventions, then Ibsen was a playwright who resisted and addressed those conventions. He often wrote about characters who wanted to live a life that would not have been considered proper at the time.

TS: Let's talk about Hedda. Why was she such an iconoclastic character? He wrote it in 1890...

PD: Yes.

TS: It was first produced in Munich...

PD: Right.

TS: ... in 1891. The critics had very difficult time...

PD: They certainly did.

TS: ...and yet the play has survived over a hundred years and actresses gravitate towards the role. It's the most produced play, even more than *A Doll's House*. Why is that?

PD: Ibsen created a character with multiple motives for her behavior. The challenge for an actress is how can you make sense of such a character without simplifying that character? How can you provide the audience with access to the complexity of that inner life, yet not provide any easy answers? She's an enigma; we puzzle over her inner life, what drives her. At some point in the play you think, "Ah! That's what drives her!" Five minutes later you think, "No, it's something else."

TS: She's been variously described as a monster, a narcissist, solipsistic, degenerate, perverted, but that's hard to see today, from a modern perspective; so what, from your point of view, is driving her?

PD: There's not a single answer. There's a lot of speculation, and people come at it from multiple, diverse perspectives. The obvious point might be that this is not a play entitled, "Hedda", although that is what Ibsen originally thought he would call the play. It's clearly not "Hedda Tesman", although in your program, Mary Louise Parker is described as Mrs. Hedda Tesman. I think, in part, you could say that General Gabler's daughter is very much restrained by the 19th century conventions that she has inherited. There's a history, there's a past. There are ghosts inside of her. But there's also something inside of her that wants to rebel, that wants to be something other, to live a life. What, though, are her options as a woman in that society? Just look at those three men in her life. She says she "danced herself still". She felt empty; she decided spontaneously, impulsively, to marry boring Tesman and live in this grand villa, but she didn't really want to live there. She acknowledges that she can't control her own self, yet she longs to control someone else's destiny. That would be much more problematic in the 1890's than it is now for a woman. How could you control your own destiny, when those social conventions were so constraining?

TS: And Ibsen is sort of at the end of his life here, he is still writing...

PD: Yes...

TS: He writes a few more plays. He dies in 1906.

PD: Yes.

TS: But this play is a bit of a departure for him. Some of the plays that precede this deal with social issues, as it were. But there's always this strain of psychology in behavior. All the great acting teachers teach us that it's behavior that we're opting for on the stage. Is

Ibsen a forerunner of psychoanalysis in this case, because psychoanalysis was just coming into being.

PD: The story is, of course, that Freud decided that he wanted to read this play in its original form, so he learned the language because he was intrigued by Hedda and wanted to read the original so he could have a closer understanding of her.

TS: Audiences around the time that it was first performed in America, in Britain and in Germany, they had a difficult time with it, but Ibsen had some people who were supporting him. One was George Bernard Shaw. Who were the others who took on his cause?

PD: Actually, Henry James was one who was very supportive. William Archer, also, was a critic who translated his work and brought it to England; he would be another key supporter. Edmund Gosse.

TS: Let's talk a little bit about Ibsen's influence on American playwrights who followed him. Would you say he influenced O'Neill? Miller?

PD: Most would agree that those playwrights would have been familiar with Ibsen's work. If you think of, say, *Long Day's Journey into Night*. The exploration of what is your past, your history, how does that inform you? And how does that shape your future? 20th century American playwrights investigated these kinds of issues, ones that were manifest in Ibsen's work.

TS: And Hedda today, if she existed among us...I seem to get the feeling that suicide might not be an option for a modern woman in the same predicament. That she might take anti-depressants. It's very touching, in this particular adaptation, when Hedda says, "There's nothing you can use me for?" I don't know if that's a direct quote...

PD: Yes, it's near the end. She approaches Tesman and Thea as they begin their project of putting Lovborg's manuscript notes in order. She asks if she can be of any use, if there's anything she can do. Tesman replies, "Not a thing in the world."

TS: "You can just go sit with Judge Brack."

PD: Yes... "just go over by the judge," who is now "the only show in town," the "top dog in the yard," or to borrow a phrase from another translation, "the cock of the walk." Brack delights in the power he has over Hedda now, and she finds it intolerable that someone else will control her, when she herself is so desperate to control other people's destinies.

TS (To Audience): Now it's your turn to ask some questions. Allison's going to walk up this side of the house...Any one have a question?

Question: What is your impression of the adaptation? I'm trying to remember back when I had seen another adaptation. I saw the original adaptation, I think. I found this adaptation frightening...more than I remember...

TS: There have been many, many adaptations; and many British adaptations. This is an American adaptation by Christopher Shinn, who's thirty-three years old. What do you notice about this adaptation, Pat, compared to others?

PD: I think in part the challenge for Christopher Shinn has been to make a classic play fresh. How can you get an audience to be startled by this play, perhaps in ways that the audiences were originally startled in the 1890's? You were surprised to find her very frightening, more frightening than you found her in a previous adaptation. I think it is indeed played that way; there is no question that some of the lines, and onstage images, that you might remember from other adaptations and translations are not there. That is a clear choice in this adaptation. What's our first image of Hedda? She was in a sexy, provocative pose, yes? So if you go back to one of the other adaptations are you likely to find stage directions that will say Hedda is reclined on the couch – I will be very Victorian-- semi-naked? Most likely not. Already you feel, right in the beginning, that she's incredibly restless, confined, and you know that something complicated is happening internally. She is not a happy person at this point. So, Shinn and the director, Ian Rickson, are doing things that indeed are intended to shock and provoke you. They are encouraging you to see this play afresh.

TS: I would like to add to Pat's comments because I interviewed the adaptor Christopher Shinn for our study guide, which will appear online, probably this week at our website www.roundabouttheatre.org. He's an Ibsen devotee. It was remarkable that Ian Rickson, suggested him to do the adaptation. Ian ran the Royal Court Theatre in Britain which does exclusively new work. And he had produced four of Christopher's plays there. So he thought of Christopher, knowing that Christopher was highly influenced by Ibsen's work. Christopher teaches at the New School and has his students read all of the Ibsen cannon of the prose plays as opposed to the poetic plays like *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*. He was highly affected as a teenager by a production he saw in 1991 of the *Master Builder* with Cynthia Nixon and Sam Waterston. Shinn has always believed in the power of Ibsen and Ibsen's effect on modern playwriting and he said to me, "You know I feel so lucky because usually they would go to a much older playwright." A thirty-three-year-old is considered very young in our business. He said, "I'm very lucky to be asked to this because I was chomping at the bit to do this." It was a deliberate choice to find an American to do this adaptation. There are plenty of British adaptations. They wanted an American voice because most of the cast is American. Another question?

Question: Was there a direct influence on Ibsen by Existentialism. Was he influenced by Nietzsche or others? Is there any proof of that in Ibsen's letters?

PD: Ibsen is not inclined to speak effusively and directly about his work, which is not unusual. He does speak of the importance of will and speak very directly about the

difficulty for women in this period to exercise their will; so he does address those issues of identity. He does not say anywhere to my knowledge: "I am a follower of Nietzsche."

TS: Is there anything in any of his letters about his inspiration for Hedda?

PD: There are references to characters that he based on people he had known in his life. On the other hand, he also said very explicitly that most artists have models, but models are very different than portraits. So he was drawing portraits and taking selectively from people he had known in his own life.

TS: In the research I've done, one of the books I've read said that in writing Hedda he was responding to an affair that he'd had with an eighteen-year-old Viennese girl and it was the happiest time of his life – can you imagine? -- and this is what came out of it.

PD: I'm not sure that he would describe it as an affair. He was in his sixties and there wasn't just one, there were a number of young women. If you read *The Master Builder* which came right after this, there are obvious connections to young women. But just how far he, and Ibsen scholars, can go in saying exactly what happened -- that's quite a murky area.

Question: I would just like to get a clear explanation as to why Hedda married Tesman?

TS: I don't think Hedda knows.

PD: Her ready answer was that she had danced herself to a place where she was empty and tired, and she reminds Brack: "I had a lot of admirers, but not many offers." She looks pointedly at him; he says he prefers "triangular relationships" and marriage "in the abstract." If you try to imagine Hedda's options as a woman, you don't feel that she had many. She might marry someone with a promising career. We recall that in the opening scene, Berte is told by Hedda, "You're to call him Doctor." Perhaps she hoped that she might have economic security and respectable standing in society by marrying Tesman. She even wonders whether Tesman might go into public service, but Brack just laughs and considers that possibility quite unlikely. Hedda displays aspirations for abstract "beauty," a "hunger for life," but she also yearns for a safe, respectable place in society. At a certain point, she felt she could no longer remain single; as she told Brack, her "time was up."

TS: Ibsen describes her as being twenty-nine.

PD: Yes.

TS: And so in the Victorian Era...

PD: That was a spinster.

Question: I had imagined that there had been an “old flame” tryst between Thea and Tesman at one point. Is that true?

PD: What you’re remembering is the reference to Thea as Miss Riesling, which is what Tesman called Thea when she came in, and Hedda very quickly corrects him and refers to Thea as “your old flame”. And then Tesman replies, “but that was before I met you Hedda and it was very brief.”

Question: You had mentioned that Henry James defended Ibsen. Could you talk more about how James responded to Ibsen?

PD: When Ibsen was savaged by the English press, Bernard Shaw supported him as Ted said, and James also came to Ibsen’s defense early on and acknowledged the intellectual complexity of his characters and his work. These were characters that James himself recognized having dealt, himself, with very complicated women in his novels.

Question: I believe that in *The Wild Duck* there’s a character that also commits suicide. Was there anything in Ibsen’s own life like that?

TS: But in *The Wild Duck*, it was a mistake. Gregers doesn’t really want the daughter to commit suicide. The daughter commits suicide thinking that that’s what Gregers is suggesting, but he isn’t.

PD: As far as Ibsen’s life, I don’t think that there’s a direct link to suicide. He was certainly not the first dramatist to have a woman commit suicide at the end of the play. It was not unusual for a woman to die at the end of a play because there was not a place for her in that world as it was constituted. For example in Pinero’s *The Second Mrs. Tanqueray*, the English play of 1892, Paula Tanqueray commits suicide at the end.

TS: Chekhov uses a similar angle in *The Seagull* where Treplev commits suicide. It seems like it was a convention that allowed the writer to shock us.

Question: I got the distinct impression that Hedda was with child ...was Hedda pregnant?

TS: It does seem somewhat mysterious doesn’t it, Pat?

PD: I think that your instincts are right, for there are numerous lines that support your idea: “Look at Hedda isn’t she just beautiful?” “Look how she’s filled out!” “How round and blooming.” And at those points you can see Hedda reacting; often she’s gesturing wildly, clenching her fists, moving her hands down to her stomach and up to her throat as though she’s suffocating. Toward the end, she says, “Jorgen, there’s something you should know – you may have begun to notice.” You expect that finally she may tell him, but she doesn’t finish; she says instead: “Go and ask Aunt Julie, she’s obviously the expert in this area.” That’s the moment in this production where Tesman gets down on

his knees and puts his head on her belly and her hands go into that frenzy again. By this point, there's little doubt that she's pregnant.

TS: Which makes the suicide even worse.

PD: It's a double suicide.

Question: Was she pregnant by Tesman?

PD: I don't think that's a question.

TS: As much as she seems to be repulsed by the man she marries, I think she would also not allow herself to have sex with either Brack or Lovborg.

PD: A fear of scandal haunts her.

TS: And even though she may have had real feelings for Lovborg, she couldn't marry him, because he was a social pariah. So she wouldn't allow herself to marry someone who was on the outside of society.

Question: I think there is something absolutely fascinating about Hedda. There's something evil... beyond insensitivity...she has malice.

PD: She's an immensely skillful manipulator. She's incredibly selfish; you can move her toward the demonic without much difficulty at all. As she's burning the baby, the child, the manuscript in the fire, you often have flames reflecting on her face. This is someone who will go to extremes. Then you ask yourself what is this fascination I have with this woman? Someone who is so narcissistic, who is so committed to her own world and unwilling to make a commitment to others; she is rebelling against inner and external constraints. She is a classic rebel, who pushes and pushes and leans towards the demonic.

TS: And she never gets to control the destiny of anyone other than her self. She's trying to take control, but no matter how successful she is in burning the child/manuscript, the irony is that she's trapped still. Ibsen doesn't allow her to get away with any of this. So in some ways her malice catches up with her. She's trapped between being the mistress of Brack and watching her husband create the same relationship with Thea that Thea had with Lovborg. It's untenable for her. In many ways it's sort of remarkable that this anti-heroine is on the stage in 1890 and we're still fascinated by her bad behavior. I know I am. I don't always understand why she's doing what she's doing, but I'm quite curious why she's so unhappy.

PD: She's a late-19th century woman who has transgressive desires, yet she fears acting on them.

TS: She doesn't want to be discovered. She doesn't want it to come out that she gave Lovborg the pistol. It's almost as if she wants to get away with it and knows in her soul

that she's accomplished some sort of control over other people. But nothing works out to her satisfaction.

PD: And at the end, after Hedda has shot herself in the temple, we hear Brack exclaim, "who would do such a thing!" We are left to wonder, to ask how? Why? Ibsen leaves us with the challenge of answering that question for ourselves.

TS: I'd like to take this opportunity to thank Pat for joining us today. And thank you for coming to The Roundabout. The next lecture is for *Distracted* on February 28th at the Harold and Miriam Steinberg Center for Theater and we hope to see you then. Thank you very much.