

# WHEN ONE DOOR SLAMS, ANOTHER DOOR OPENS

DAN REBELLATO

Ibsen's *A Doll's House* is such a fixture in the theatrical repertoire now, it's sometimes hard to remember just how strange and challenging the play once was. And there is no clearer way of gauging the impact of this extraordinary piece of writing than the writing it has provoked: not just the endless reviews, comment pieces, books and essays that sought to explain or denounce it but the rewrites of the play, the answer-plays, the transplantations, the sequels, the parodies. They begin with Ibsen's own: in 1880, only a year after the play's first appearance and at a time when international copyright was less enforceable than now, Ibsen wrote a new ending in which Nora looks at her children and decides she cannot leave ('it is a sin against myself but I cannot leave them' *She sinks down beside the nursery door*). Reputedly the actress in a German production refused to play the original ending and Ibsen thought, if there was cultural vandalism to be done, better that he did it himself.

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The play has been transplanted, willingly and unwillingly, into new cultures. The first British production was a wholesale rewrite entitled *Breaking a Butterfly* (1884), in which Nora and Torvald have become Flossie and Humphrey and Humphrey takes the blame for the forgery



Henrik Ibsen, 1889/90

himself, Krogstad – or rather 'Dunkley' – is outwitted, and Flossie and Humphrey's marriage survives intact. There have been versions of the play transplanted to Nigeria (*Nneora* by Tracie Chimo Utoh-Ezeajugh [2002]), to Zimbabwe (*Independence Day!* by Sithokozile Zulu), to Zambia (*Forbidden Ground* by Cheela Chilala [2010]), and, most influentially, to China: *The Greatest Event in Life* by Hu Shih (1919) was a version of the play that formed part of the flowering of Chinese feminism, a movement known as 'Nora-ism'. 120 years after Ibsen felt forced to rewrite his ending, Thomas Ostermeier's production of the play for the Schaubühne remodelled that shock



by having Nora not only leave, but shoot Torvald before she does so.

The play has been moved in time. In 1970, Clare Booth Luce in *Slam the Door Softly* reimagined the last act of the play being conducted by a New York suburban couple, with Nora fuelled by the works of Betty Friedan, Kate Millett and Simone de Beauvoir. Zinnie Harris relocates the play to 1909, in the rise of suffragette militancy, and Elfriede Jelinek in *What Happened After Nora Left Her Husband?* (1979) moves the action to the 1920s and shows Nora making her way in a world experiencing the beginnings of fascism. Stef Smith in *Nora: A Doll's House* (2019) splinters Nora into three Noras whose lives play out in 1918, 1968, and 2018. Samuel Adamson in *Wife* (2019), the play you're probably just about to see, has that door slam in 1959 and lets it reverberate across the decades.

Jelinek's question – what happened next? – has animated many of the play's sequeleers. Some of the early writers see nothing but ill, like Walter Besant in his story 'The Doll's House and After' (1890) who showed Torvald and the children declining into alcoholism, criminality and suicide. Esther Vilar, in *Helmer, or A Doll's House* (1981), by contrast thinks it would have done Torvald no end of good, presenting him selflessly giving up his job to raise his children and refusing the irresponsible Nora access to them. Marie Itzerott in *Nora, or Beyond Our Strength* (1903) discloses that Nora's bid for independence goes so firmly against her submissive woman's nature that she is afflicted by a fatal nervous condition. By contrast, Ernst Brunn in *Where Did Nora Go When She Went Out?* (1968) tells us that Nora's protest against bourgeois marriage evolves into a fully revolutionary campaign against capitalism. In 1982's

short-lived musical, *A Doll's Life*, by Larry Grossman, Betty Comden and Adolph Green, Nora works in a factory, leads a strike against the conditions there, becomes the boss's mistress, then a businesswoman of her own, and eventually sets up a girl's school before returning to Torvald – who refuses to take her back.

Many writers bring Nora home. One of the first sequels was M J Bugge's *How Nora Returned Home Again* (1880), in which our heroine is visited by the ghost of her mother who left the young Nora and shows her the error of her ways. Ednah Cheney in *Nora's Return* (1890) has Nora become a nurse, which apparently teaches her the value of maternal responsibility and leads her back home. In F. Anstey's parody for *Punch* in 1891, Nora leaves to become an Ibsenite but returns immediately, because



Betty Hennings as Nora in the first performance of *A Doll's House* at The Royal Theatre in Copenhagen, 1879-1880.





Adeleide Johannessen as Nora, Bergen, 1890-1882

she hasn't got any money and the theatres are closed. In *Nora Helmer* (1982) by Tormod Skagestad, she returns the next day though sleeps in the spare room while Torvald woos her with gifts paid for by money he steals from the bank, which leads to his imprisonment and ruin. Lucas Hnath's impishly-titled *A Doll's House Part 2* (2017) has her return 15 years later, a successful novelist, to finalise the divorce. (The thought of Nora writing her own story animates many of these sequelists, including Itzerott and Skagestad. For Jelinek Nora seems aware of herself as a fiction, telling an interviewer in the first line of the play 'I'm Nora from that play by Ibsen'.)

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**THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT NORA  
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There's something about Nora that inspires people to imagine and reimagine her life, to extend it into other times and places, to rewrite or retell her story. Most importantly, it is because *A Doll's House* touched and touches one of the live rails of society in Ibsen's age and ours: the imaginative gaps, the economic and political inequalities between men and women, the unstable foundations of bourgeois marriage. The two great periods of *A Doll's House* rewrites are 1879-1918 and 1968 to the present: the two major eras of feminist activism. One of Sam Adamson's smart moves in *Wife* is beginning the play in 1959, in that gap between feminisms, when the Torvalds of the world had briefly regained the upper hand.

In tracing the way that patriarchy infantilises women, sexualises the gaze, constructs the genders through forms of violence and oppression, *A Doll's House* is the original #MeToo play. In some ways, the anti-feminist writers who refuse to let Nora leave or bring her sharply back are gaslighting her and us, forcing Nora to change her mind and making us discount the evidence of our (and Ibsen's) own eyes.

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### **A DOLL'S HOUSE IS THE ORIGINAL #METOO PLAY.**

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These rewrites also show the contradictory power of Naturalism. A Danish reviewer of the first production thundered: 'Is there one mother in a thousand, one wife in a thousand, who would do what Nora does, leave husband, children and home to first and foremost to become "a human being"? I answer firmly: No no no!' But there is a fascinating dilemma here: they want to insist that Nora is entirely implausible but she is clearly plausible enough that they can imagine



(and write) her behaving differently. The slamming door that closes the play ironically opens the play up; it may seem to us a famously decisive ending, but by the standards of nineteenth-century dramaturgy it was outrageously unresolved and invited speculation and completion. Robert, in *Wife*, demands an Act 4 and two of the first sequels – by Harald Schmidt and M J Bugge – are subtitled *The 4th Act of A Doll's House* and *The Epilogue* as if Ibsen had somehow left his play unfinished.

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## THE SLAMMING DOOR THAT CLOSES THE PLAY IRONICALLY OPENS THE PLAY UP...

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So vivid is Ibsen's world that one can imagine characters from one play stepping into another. Nora would surely have got on famously with Rebecca West from *Rosmersholm*, who would in turn have had spirited debates with Hedda Gabler. And some of the rewrites do just that. *Ibsen's Children* (1994) Catrine Telle and Ivar Tindberg put Nora's three children together with Hedvig from *The Wild Duck*, Hilde from *The Lady from the Sea*, and the eponymous *Little Eyolf* to consider the varieties of parental neglect. More spectacular was Simon Stone's *Ibsen House*, which placed characters (or echoes of characters) from *Hedda Gabler*,

*Ghosts*, *The Master Builder*, and *A Doll's House* together in a single building, a portal into a single alternative Universe where all the characters cross over. The open wounds of *A Doll's House* also mean that the play can bleed out into life, as it does in *Wife*, with its beautifully complex blurring of the lives onstage and the lives off it, its meanings resonating beyond the specifics of Nora's marriage and finding affinities in the power imbalances, deceptions, and compromises of so many relationships,

The early rewrites were a kind of traumatic grieving, for Nora's marriage, for marriage, for patriarchy, for a certain kind of theatre based on the certainty of all of these things. Oscar Wilde and his circle were similarly subject to numerous parodies, pastiches, and lampoons, but some literary historians argue that these counter-texts actually helped assimilate Wilde's new ideas and attitudes into mainstream thought. The same may be true of Naturalism, the multiple alternative Noras only helping raise the cultural profile of Ibsenism and feminism at the turn of the century.

And now, 140 years after Nora's first appearance (and disappearance), we still seem drawn to her story, more in a spirit of affirmation than denial, keen to trace her path into the future, still hearing the slam that opened so many doors.

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Company of  
*Wife* in rehearsals