

A Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen directed by Kerina Deas
Stagecraft Theatre, Gryphon Theatre, 22 Ghuznee Street, Wellington until 26 February 2011
Reviewed by Ewen Coleman, 23 February 2011

Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Stagecraft Theatre's current play at the Gryphon Theatre, has always been considered a ground-breaking play, not only in the way he criticises the traditional roles of men and women in marriage but he was one of the first playwrights to move away from the romanticism of many plays of the time with his accurate portrayal of unexceptional people and their everyday lives. His writing was considered the beginning of realism in the theatre.

The Helmers are supposedly your everyday average married couple with two children preparing for Christmas but it is soon obvious that not all is well in the household. There are underlying tensions caused by the wife Nora's actions in fraudulently obtaining a loan to pay for her husband's medical treatment, and the way Torvald, her husband, treats Krogstad, one of his bank employees. Thus begins a process of self-discovery for Nora as she realises that her husband is self centred and only thinking of himself and his position when he discovers what Nora has done. This brings Nora to the realisation that their eight-year marriage has been a sham and like her father before Torvald, she, Nora, has been nothing but a plaything, a doll to these men. Her defiance against Torvald's protestations and her walking out to be alone to find herself, and the famous door slam as the final action in the play has been the catch cry of feminists the world over. But the play is much wider than just about the role of women in marriage and women's rights. It is about human rights in general and Ibsen very cleverly includes Mrs Linde, Nora's sad and lonely widowed friend who finds happiness in marrying the villain Krogstad, as a foil showing that independence is as much a state of mind as one of circumstance.

The large and demanding role of Nora has been cherished by actresses throughout the years and the play stands or falls on the portrayal of this central character and her gradual metamorphosis from a child-like doll to a free spirited adult human being. Kerina Deas has assembled a strong cast for her production, none more so than Gabrielle Stewart in this demanding role of Nora. The energy and confidence of the performance, although almost too much at the beginning causing the actor to gable and become inaudible, portrayed perfectly the doll-like, songbird qualities of the character. Yet as the play developed flashes of an inner strength were revealed till the end when Nora decides to leave, which was shown with pain yet determination. The long wait for the strange sounding door slam however was somewhat anticlimactic. As the husband Torvald, Vere Hampson-Tindale is every bit the patronising husband who genuinely thinks wives are subservient to their husbands. There is great chemistry between his Torvald and Stewart's Nora, especially at the beginning as he treats her as his plaything, his twittering lark. But his anger at the end, when Nora confronts him with her decision to leave, was almost too much, there needed to be more bewilderment than anger. Torvald is a spineless pathetic creature yet Hampson-Tindal's anger gave Torvald strength. While slow to warm into the character, Francesa Emms' Christina did come across as genuinely believing that her match with Krogstad was right for her. And as Krogstad Chris O'Grady was severity personified. That he was the wronged party was obvious from the outset and his confrontations with Nora gave real dramatic tension to the production.

While the acting was first-rate other aspects of the production were less so, the set of vertical brown wooden slats looking like a Norwegian sauna, somewhat puzzling although the brown theme throughout, the Christmas presents wrapped in brown paper and the authentically-styled costumes in various earthy hues may have some underlying symbolism of austerity and baseness, and while playing real actions against a stylised setting can often work in this case they jarred. The lighting was also questionable, blinding spotlights on the audience, so strong they couldn't even read the programme, were unnecessary and at the climax of the play, when the audiences focus should be on the rising tension between Nora and Torvald, they are distracted by a set of silly fairy lights

twinkling across the back wall. These anomalies aside, this is a fine, well-crafted production of a piece of classic theatre.