

Spring 2-2-2018

# The Still Slamming Door: Relevance of A Doll's House in the 21st Century

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## Recommended Citation

Morris, Hope, "The Still Slamming Door: Relevance of A Doll's House in the 21st Century" (2018). *Student Scholarship - English*. 1. [http://digitalcommons.olivet.edu/engl\\_stsc/1](http://digitalcommons.olivet.edu/engl_stsc/1)

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## The Still Slamming Door: Relevance of *A Doll's House* in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Through my study of literature and theatre, I have come to recognize that true art asks more questions than it answers; it first leads to controversy and then to eventual understanding. The infamous slamming door at the end of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* has been controversial from its beginning, leaving audiences with uncertainties about the meaning of family, morality, and personal responsibility. The play tells the story of Nora Helmer, who lives as a plaything to her patronizing and controlling husband Torvald. In an effort to save her husband's life, Nora commits forgery. When this harmful secret is revealed, she recognizes the captivity she has felt in her home. To find herself, she abandons her husband, children, and society's expectations. Because of this bold action, Nora has been hailed as a feminist icon and scorned as a senseless child.

Written in 1879 when the "women's issue" was still a relatively new subject, the play was met with criticism for its radical female protagonist and her decision to abandon her marriage. In a society where a woman's primary role was one of domesticity and subservience to her husband, the ending of *A Doll's House* was disquieting to audiences. However, Ibsen's masterpiece remains just as controversial and important today. The same questions that were asked more than a century ago are asked again: Is the value of self greater than the value of family? Who is the victim, Nora or Torvald? When is it acceptable to leave an unhealthy marriage? The play explores themes that are relevant to every human being affected by the tug of society's marionette strings.

In this project my goal was to explore these universal themes in a modern context through the study, direction, and performance of *A Doll's House*. The project aimed to answer the following questions: Is *A Doll's House* still relevant to today's audiences? How was *A Doll's*

*House* perceived by audiences when it was written compared to how it is perceived by today's audiences? Can the play be successfully modernized?

I hypothesized that Ibsen's *A Doll's House* is important because it is an example of the universality of literature that endures over centuries. The play is timely as we find ourselves still in a society where the pressure of outward appearances shapes our lives. The traditional role of the domestic wife may not be required of all women today, but the pressure to perform as the primary nurturer of children and keeper of the home is present even for working women. This play gives a voice to those who have had none. Like Nora, many marginalized groups of people are told to suppress their true selves to conform to the standards set by the powerful.

Additionally, my project breathed new life into a piece of classic literature that is studied by students on Olivet's campus. It offered another opportunity to familiarize students with a classic play while encouraging them to apply literature to their present world. The play also presented an opportunity for Olivet's actors to delve into an academically and emotionally challenging play. This project incorporated the skills of literary analysis and research I have learned for my English major. It also utilized my knowledge of directing and studying plays that I have learned from my theatre minor. Studying and directing this drama blended these two passions to create meaningful and intentional theatre.

This report of the project is divided into five sections. The review of literature includes the academic study of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, translated by Frank McGuinness, and reputable secondary sources. My study of the resources explored the historical and social context of the play in connection to the social context of today. I applied reception theory to my study by analyzing reviews of the play's early and contemporary performances and by comparing the way the audiences received the production to answer the question of relevancy today.

Following this review of literature is the section of methodology which details my work with the typical steps of a director in preparation for a show. This included analysis of the essential plot elements that form a well-made play: exposition, point of attack, rising action, complication, climax, falling action, denouement, foreshadowing, reversal, and discovery. In addition, I included my creative concept statement that conveys through imagery and metaphors my direction for the realized production of the play. This statement influenced my choices for set design, costuming, lighting, music, blocking, and casting. Through the process, I used this statement to help those working with me to understand my vision for bringing the text to life.

Additionally, the methodology section shows my ground plan for the play that provided multiple playing areas as well as compositional diversity through levels and diagonals. The action of the play is confined to a single room of the Helmer's home, thus the ground plan catered to the practical furnishings of a parlor or sitting room. The play was performed on an "alley stage," in which the audience was on two sides of the playing area. This choice was made to create a feeling of intimacy with the action onstage as if the audience were sitting in the home watching the story unfold. The audience peering into the home symbolized the constant judgment of society that looms over the family. This ground plan was used to create a prompt book which organized the blocking of the show.

The play was set in the present so that the questions of modern relevance and application could be answered. To answer these questions and give the community of Olivet a chance to ask their own, I directed a fully realized production of *A Doll's House* in the fall semester of 2017. The play was produced by Green Room, Olivet's theatre club, which provided funds for any production costs, including, but not limited to, media, costuming, and set.

The next section of my paper details the results of the performances. Collecting the results of the performance was no easy task. I prepared a survey for audience members to complete after seeing the play. This survey was the data I collected to answer the questions presented at the beginning of this introduction about the modern relevancy of the play. Audience members were offered a treat in return for their responses to ensure maximum participation. This data was collected and analyzed to write the results and discussion section of the paper.

In the discussion section of my paper, I considered the data gathered from the reactions of my actors' journals and audience members' surveys to conclude whether *A Doll's House* is still relevant to today's audiences. I also included actor and audience member responses from the talkbacks held after each performance. Finally, I added my personal realizations, answers, and conclusions based on a journal I kept throughout the process to record my growth as a director and reviewer of texts.

The phrase "art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it" is famously attributed to Bertolt Brecht. As Brecht reminds us, theatre challenges us whether we sit in the audience, stand on the stage, or study the text. Good plays force us to confront difficult questions about ourselves and our world. *A Doll's House* is a prime example of a play whose universal questions have lasted over a century. The study and direction of this play offered an opportunity for students to recognize the power of classic literature to challenge our present society. This play is timely, relevant, and important for today's audiences. Ibsen's masterpiece makes us recognize that we, in Nora's words, are all "human being, no less than you" (Act 3, Scene 1).

## Review of Literature

Ibsen's play has been studied by directors, actors, literary scholars, and feminist critics since its release in 1879. When addressing this play in the context of both directing it and studying it, I let many articles, books, and journals guide my study of the play. From a theatrical standpoint, I benefited from character studies as well as analysis of symbols, plot, and themes that have been emphasized in previous productions. In approaching my project's research question of whether the play remains relevant, the texts that I found most helpful were reviews of previous productions and articles about the history of the play and its themes. The analysis of major themes through time and the study of reception theory were dominant components to accomplishing this project.

The most important piece of literature to address in preparation for this project was obviously the text itself. There are thirty-one English translations and adaptations of Ibsen's masterpiece. I read through about seven different scripts before deciding to use Frank McGuinness's adaptation. I chose this text because it is one of the most recent adaptations available for performance; thus, the language is much more understandable to a 2017 audience. Many translations or adaptations of *A Doll's House* use lofty language and are relatively wordy to the modern reader. McGuinness's adaptation minimizes this problem significantly by changing archaic Victorian colloquialisms and diction to fit a more modern context. This adaptation not only assists audiences in understanding the texts but also helps the actors to relate better to their lines, thus eliciting more effective delivery.

As a director, I consulted texts that instructed me on both how to direct in general and how to direct this play specifically. *The Director's Craft* by Katie Mitchell guided me in the audition and rehearsal planning process. For instance, the book presented the idea of a facts and questions

sheet, which helped me conduct research and personal planning necessary to engage with the text. Mitchell's book assisted me in crafting a thorough understanding of the contemporary setting of the play.

Other texts helped me analyze the play and its characters, so that I could form my vision from multiple perspectives and coach my actors. Ben Brantley's article, "A Caged Wife, Desperately Spinning Her Wheel" (2014), reviews a 2014 production of *A Doll's House* directed by Carrie Cracknell. Brantley describes the production as suspenseful and panicked. He indicates that it was the intense fear displayed by the actress who played Nora that drew the audience in, making a well-known story impactful and new. This article helped me to know that the elements of fear were important to emphasize through the acting in my own production.

Daniel Brooks's article, "Infection: The Motivating Factor Behind Nora's Flight in *A Doll House*" (2013) argues that Nora leaves Torvald's home because she is afraid of infecting her children with a "moral disease." Based on Torvald and Rank's criticisms of Krogstad, Nora, who has committed forgery herself, believes that she too will poison her children. I introduced this perspective to the actress playing Nora, so that she could understand the many factors that led Nora to leave her home and children. This helped me to lead her to empathize with the character, thus creating a more truthful performance.

In the article, "Who Knew Torvald Was Such a Sweet Fellow?" (2015), Laura Collins-Hughes reviews a 2015 performance of *A Doll's House* directed by Ingmar Bergman that emphasizes Torvald rather than Nora as the victim. Rather than the demeaning and controlling man usually portrayed, Torvald is presented as a decent man with high morals. In contrast, the production's interpretation of Nora is one of a shallow and cruel woman. In Collins-Hughes's opinion, Bergman's interpretation ignores major themes and destroys the power of Nora's major

flight. This review was useful for coaching actors as it provides information on how an actor can create a sympathetic portrayal of Torvald. My goal was to make all the characters of the play redeemable, including Torvald. Bergman helped me remind the actor playing Torvald that his character meant well and is not a villain.

In his analysis of *A Doll's House* (2004), David B. Drake highlights the importance of the hide-and-seek game as a symbol in the play. According to him, the game represents the constant hiding that Nora does in her marriage, from hiding her opinions to hiding her secrets. Drake also notes the symbolism of the scene in which Krogstad finds Nora in a game of hide-and-seek. In the scene, Krogstad pulls her out of her hiding literally and metaphorically by threatening to expose her crime. This article helped me to recognize the importance of including the hide-and-seek game with the children and provided me with ideas for symbolic blocking for the performance.

In Paul Rosefeldt's article, "Ibsen's *A Doll House*," the recurring theme of the damage an absent or careless father can cause is explored. He begins with Mrs. Linde's father, whose absence leads her to rush into a loveless marriage to save her brothers and mother. This perspective was useful in helping the actress playing Mrs. Linde to develop a deeper understanding of her character's backstory. Rosefeldt also mentions Anne Marie's husband, who abandoned his own child, forcing his wife to work as a servant. Though this is an assumption, rather than a fact indicated in the text, sharing this with the actress playing Anne Marie helped her to add dynamic emotional layers to her character. Likewise, this article helped the entire cast understand the mindset of the characters in relation to fathers. In the play, Torvald mentions with disgust that Krogstad will infect his sons with his "moral sickness," while accusing Nora of living like her careless father. This knowledge influenced both Nora and Torvald's portrayals.



Lastly, Dr. Rank's father's moral sickness transfers into literal sickness as Dr. Rank dies from inherited syphilis. Understanding the weight of his illness was essential in creating the character of Dr. Rank.

In Ann Shanahan's article "Playing House: Staging Experiments About Women in Domestic Space" (2013), she describes experimental 2012 performances of a series of plays about women, specifically *A Doll's House*. These performances are set in a house, rather than a proscenium stage. According to Shanahan, this venue changes the understanding of the performance for both the actors and the audience by encapsulating the restrictiveness of the home. She indicates that viewers also note that it helps the audience of the play relate to the text in a modern context. This article presents an original way to consider staging the performance. While I decided to use a traditional theatre venue for my performances, this article did influence my decision to set the audience onstage with the actors in an alley stage formation. I hoped to draw the audience into the plot by placing them close to the action and to create a symbolic atmosphere of society peering into the Helmers' home.

To answer the question of the relevancy of the play in a modern context, I first analyzed the play's reception through history. In Mary Christian's article, "Performing Marriage: *A Doll's House* and Its Reconstructions in Fin-de-Siecle London" (2015), she discusses the theatrical importance of Ibsen's play. She argues that *A Doll's House* was a significant step in the direction of theatrical Realism because it breaks the archetype of the happy marriage. This new element of Realism was not met without controversy, however. Many theatres in London began to change the ending of the play to fit the standards of this time. In their change, Nora returned at the end of the play to her husband. This is one example of many negative reactions to the ending of Ibsen's play.

In Ross Ian Coombes's dissertation titled *A Reception Study of "A Doll's House" by Henrik Ibsen from 1879 to 1994* (1995), he thoroughly analyzes the reactions of audiences and critics in Western countries since its first performance. He explains that in most European countries, excluding France, the play was met with both violent opposition and wild praise. Many critics condemned Nora's flight as irrational, immoral, and illogical. In fact, a large number of productions demanded a changed ending where Nora returned to her husband and children. Germany was especially opposed to the collapse of the institution of marriage implied in the play because it contradicted the conservative beliefs of the majority. Some critics claimed that Nora's transformation was too sudden, and others ignored Ibsen's theme of independence entirely, suggesting logical solutions to Nora's problem. In England and America, however, early productions of the play were received with praise for their strides in unraveling the traditional restrictiveness of marriage and gender roles. The heated discussion that this play incited around Europe and America in Ibsen's time shows the relevance and importance of the play in its early days after first publication in 1879. Likewise, Joan Templeton's article, "The *Doll House* Backlash: Criticism, Feminism, and Ibsen" (1989), examines and engages in the long-held arguments of critics since this first performance.

Coombes's article details reception of the play in chronological sections: 1879 to 1919, 1920 to 1939, 1940 to 1949, 1950 to 1969, and 1970 to 1994. I chose to focus my research on the earliest and the most recent sections of reception. From 1970 to 1994, the primary source of critical engagement with the play was America and England. In this time period, discussions of the play continued to emphasize the feminist movement. However, the radical feminism of the previous period began to diminish into an inclusive brand of feminism which no longer deems men but society itself as monsters. This new feminism encourages men to participate in the

discussion with women as they all seek to find a solution to sexism. In accordance with this, many critics of this era point out that Torvald is not the villain in this play, but rather society is. In addition, Coombes notes that this time period is known for its “me” culture. Because the individual is the primary focus, self-realization is essential for evoking audience sympathy. Thus, the final scene fits closely with the beliefs of this era. Overall, his analysis of more recent responses shows that the text is still relevant and engaging to modern audiences.

Everett Evans’s review (2013) of Rebecca Gilman’s 2010 modern-day adaptation of *A Doll’s House*, simply called *Dollhouse*, shows that the play is relevant even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The adaptation is set in a modern Chicago condo and modernizes the context of the play, while keeping the same themes and situations. According to Evans, this play adds new levels of relatability to each character, yet stays true to Ibsen’s work, helping the audience to relate more clearly to its issues. Relating the play to contemporary issues shows how many things about society have not truly changed since Ibsen’s time, especially concerning gender roles and marital restrictiveness. This article argues that the play is not only still relevant, but is, in fact, timely.

Another article (2010) by Sylvaine Gold reviews a 2010 performance of *A Doll’s House* in a contemporary setting. In Gold’s review of Gordon Edelstein’s production of *A Doll’s House*, she argues that the 19<sup>th</sup> century setting of the play has long alienated the audience from the impact of the action, though the plot and themes themselves are still relevant. Edelstein’s adaptation presents the action in a modern suburban home. According to Gold, this contemporary setting brings the controversy back to the play by relating it to the audience’s own society and relationships. Modern adaptations and settings such as these help audiences to recognize the relevance and importance of Ibsen’s themes in our lives today.

The information gleaned from these articles, books, and reviews all contribute to successfully set up my analysis of the relevance of *A Doll's House*. Many articles and books gave me helpful information on creating an effective modern context to the production. In addition, these articles assisted me in recognizing important themes and character traits to emphasize with my actors. Reviews of early and recent productions of *A Doll's House* aided in my study of reception theory to assess the play's timeliness.

## Methodology

This project required the unique blending of traditional play directing and experimental data collection. The basic steps used to direct a theatrical endeavor include casting, blocking, running rehearsals, costuming, and stage design. These steps were supplemented with the collection of oral feedback and journals from the cast and surveys and from the audience, as well as extensive research of scholarly articles concerning the play.

### I. Selecting a Translation

*A Doll's House* has an extensive number of English translations to choose from when planning a production of Ibsen's play. My original selection for the text was Rolf Fjelde's translation (1978). I enjoyed the poetic nature of the language as well as the particular diction used for some of the most powerful lines in the final act. However, after experimenting with this script in a directing class, I decided a more modern adaptation would be needed. In the experimental scene, the actors struggled to memorize and understand the wordy and antiquated phrasing contained in Fjelde's script. Additionally, the lofty language clashed with the modern setting I envisioned. Thus, my search for a text resumed. After reading many other options, I came across Frank McGuinness's 1996 adaptation of the play. In this adaptation, the language was more modern and casual than other translations I had read. The phrasing more closely fit the natural pattern of speech we use today. My one reservation about the text was the use of the title, *A Doll's House*. There are two different interpretations of the title of the play: *A Doll House* and *A Doll's House*. Each has specific implications, and I prefer the title *A Doll House* because it implies that everyone in the house is a doll: Nora, Torvald, and the children. However, I found McGuinness's *A Doll's House* to be the most appropriate adaptation for my production, regardless of the title.

## II. Funding

Any theatrical production requires funds to produce. Lighting effects, costumes, props, and programs all cost money. To fund this show, I petitioned the theatre club on Olivet's campus, Green Room, to add the show to their annual agenda. They agreed to provide \$1,000-\$1,500. In return, they received any profits made from the show. (See Appendix A for complete budget.)

## III. Play Analysis

Before beginning any of the practical work with the play, I did a well-made play analysis. This exercise helped me identify major elements of the play that I wished to emphasize. This process also helped me determine my climactic moment, though some variation occurred as the production developed. I made a list of facts I knew about the setting and characters of the play then a list of unanswered questions I had. I also analyzed the climax of the play by labeling the "beats" which are important shifts in the action of the scene. Lastly, I chose action verbs to give each line of dialogue to aid in my ability to communicate with my actors. (See Appendix B for well-made play analysis.)

## IV. Casting

The casting process began with advertising an open casting call to Olivet students. I sent out emails to the Green Room members and advertised with posters. I held auditions for multiple hours over two nights. All of those auditioning were given a form to list their contact information, schedule conflicts, and previous theatre experience. Additionally, there was a short essay question. (See Appendix C for sample audition form.) The audition consisted of cold readings from the script in which the actor was asked to read a scene without preparation.

I had many more women come to the audition than men. In fact, I ended up having to cast every man who auditioned to fill the roles. Luckily, all who auditioned were talented. Casting the

female roles was more difficult than casting the male roles. Many talented women auditioned. At the callbacks, which were held the second night, I called back six women for Nora and four women for Mrs. Linde. To narrow the choices, I asked the women to read some of the more emotionally challenging scenes and analyzed their ability to express emotional vulnerability. I also had them read with the male actors I had cast in order to gauge their chemistry. My decision for Mrs. Linde was not difficult. While many talented women read for her, Emily Curtis was a clear choice because of the maturity and control she brought to the role. Choosing Nora was a little more complex. I wanted to be sure to pick the right person because it is such an iconic role. By the end of the callback, I had narrowed it down to two women, and eventually gave the role to Case Koerner. Case was a very talented and reliable actress with whom I had worked before. Her interpretation of Nora was different than I had originally envisioned, but this difference was actually better than the idea in my head, because it was very honest and human. Also, it was clear in the audition that Case was working very hard to find a place of emotional vulnerability that worked for the role. For these reasons, I cast Case as Nora. I could see that she was dedicated to working hard on this challenging role.

Shane Trail, the man I cast as Torvald, was an obvious choice to me. He was, in my judgment, the strongest male actor in the theatre department at Olivet at the time. I had seen him in many other shows and was confident of his ability to take on the challenge of interpreting Torvald. The man I cast as Dr. Rank, Josh Bumgardner, was a pleasant surprise to me. I had seen good work from him before, but I was still caught off guard with how much I liked his interpretation of Dr. Rank. Rather than being a brooding force onstage, Josh made him a good-natured and affable character. The actor I was least impressed with was my original Krogstad. However, when it was time for rehearsals to begin, he had moved away. When a second audition

was held, I cast Sam Durnil as Krogstad. Sam brought a unique, redeemable, and lovable quality to Krogstad. He did well being threatening, but he also created sympathy for Krogstad.

Additionally, he had very good chemistry with Emily.

For Helene, I cast Abby Colbert. I had taken classes with her and knew I enjoyed working with her, so I definitely wanted her to be involved. I cast Hannah Young as Anne-Marie because she captured the motherly essence I was looking for. Also, she is a hard worker who is extremely dedicated to the theatre department. It was important to me to have her on my team. After I sent out the cast list, we had a read-through with the new team.

In addition to this, I needed a crew. First, I contacted Erin Gurley, a stage manager with whom I had worked previously. Due to schedule conflicts, she was unable to commit to being the full-time stage manager but agreed to teach two younger students, Abriella Caravette and McKenna Christian, the job responsibilities. I decided to invite Mackenzie Mehaffey, who had auditioned brilliantly for Nora, to be the assistant director. In addition, I asked McKayla Zorn to work as a production assistant. (See Appendix D for the list of crew responsibilities.)

#### V. Creative Concept

I crafted a metaphor statement that helped my cast and I visualize my goals for the play. (See Appendix E for creative concept.)

#### VI. Journals

To collect the data I needed to prove that this play is still relevant in 2017, I encouraged my cast to write five journal entries during the span of the production. One needed to be written before rehearsals began and another after the production had ended. These journals allowed the cast and crew to write their thoughts and feelings about the characters and the text. I asked them to pay attention to new discoveries they made during rehearsals and to write these in their journals.



There were a few goals I had hoped to achieve with these journals. I wanted to ensure that the actors were engaging with the text and to see, as 21st century actors, whether or not they could relate to the plot and characters. (See Appendix F for journals.)

## VII. Workshopping

Before I began the official rehearsals, I spent time workshopping some scenes with my lead actors. Our meetings included extensive character exploration through discussion. We examined the relationships between each of the characters and built backstories for them. For instance, we established that Kristine and Nora met through a high school “sister” pairing program. Nora and Torvald met through her father’s business ventures that required Torvald’s presence as a lawyer. After building these stories, I asked the actors to perform the scene without specific blocking to demonstrate what felt natural to them onstage. Next, I asked them to take the lines and paraphrase them in a way that helped them better understand what they were saying. The workshopping was very helpful to me to recognize and to work with the actor’s natural instincts. These exercises aided me in the blocking process by building on their natural movements. Additionally, it helped the actors to better understand the play and interpret their characters accordingly. One of our workshopping days included a field trip to Naperville, IL, the town in which I set our modernized version. We visited locations in the town that resembled places the Helmers would spend their lives in our imagined setting. This helped the actors to visualize their home and better connect to the world of the play.

## VIII. Blocking

I did all of my blocking on paper in my prompt book. The work was done by drawing arrows indicating movement onstage and numbering them on the corresponding line of dialogue. (See

Appendix G for original paper blocking.) After completing the paper blocking, we began rehearsals to give the actors their directions. Throughout these rehearsals, my paper blocking changed until the desired product was achieved.

#### IX. Rehearsals

After we finished blocking the production, our rehearsals consisted of running the play each night. Some nights we focused on one specific act, while others we ran the whole show. Occasionally, I would take an entire rehearsal to focus on one specific scene that needed more work. These rehearsals helped the cast to memorize their lines and blocking as well as develop the emotions of the characters they were playing. It helped me to try new things with blocking, symbolism, and emotional coaching of my actors.

#### X. Lighting

Lighting design for this production was relatively simple. I hired Olivet's media department to design it. (See cue stack in Appendix H.)

#### XI. Set and Venue

I decided to do the play in the round, meaning the audience is on all four sides of the stage. I made this choice because I wanted to create the intimate effect of the audience peering into the home as society does. However, after we moved onto the stage, I realized that this original plan did not create good sight lines for the entire audience. Thus, I eliminated the two smaller sides and did an alley stage instead. I wanted to keep the set realistic and simple, like a modern drawing room. My ground plan consisted of a desk, a desk chair, a sofa, two armchairs, a bookshelf, a mirror, a coat rack, a dining table, and four dining table chairs. (See Appendix I for pictures of the original ground plan and final set.)

## XII. Costuming

The costumes for this play were generally provided by the actors themselves, though some had to be bought. Nora's costumes fell into the color scheme of dark red and black. She wore cheerful Christmas dresses in Acts I and II. In Act III, she began the scene in a fisher girl costume that stayed within the dark red scheme, but also included a white dress. After her transformation of character in Act III, her costume transformed as well. Rather than the childish fisher girl dress, she wore a mature pair of black slacks with a black turtleneck. Mrs. Linde's costumes were neutral colors and grew in formality as the play continued. The men wore suits through the entire play, though the suits were more formal in Act III after the party. (See Appendix J for full list and photos of costumes.)

## XIII. Props

I collected the props from the Olivet theatre department's resources, as well as purchasing a few things with my budget. (See Appendix K for completed prop list.)

## XIV. Marketing

Marketing for this show was headed by my assistant director Mackenzie. She used the resources of Olivet's Associated Student Council to produce posters and other promotional materials. We placed these posters around town and campus. Additionally, she used social media to promote the show. I worked with professors in the English department to offer incentive to their students to see the production.

## XV. Audience Feedback

Since this project relied heavily on audience feedback, I asked the production assistant McKayla to focus on this task specifically. First, I created a survey for each audience member's program. This survey included informed consent documentation. Incentive to participate in the survey was

offered through cookies and hot cocoa in the lobby after the performance. Those who turned in the survey received a treat. Audience feedback was also gathered at the talk backs following the show. The cast came back and sat onstage, and the audience was allowed to ask them questions about the play. My purpose with the surveys and the talk-back were to see whether or not the audience could identify with the themes of the play. (See Appendix L for the collected surveys.)

## Results

The play ran December 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> in Kresge Auditorium at the Larsen Fine Arts Center on Olivet Nazarene University's campus. Over three performances, approximately three hundred audience members were in attendance.

Reception of the play was collected through surveys and talkbacks after each performance. The surveys were distributed as inserts in the playbill, and each audience member was given one before the show began. It consisted of three questions:

1. Though written in 1879, we set our play in 2017. Is *A Doll's House* still relevant in a modern setting? Please answer why or why not.
2. Do you believe the play explores current issues? If so, what issues does it address?
3. Can you as a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience member personally relate to any of the characters or situations in the play? If so, please specify.

Audience members were also asked to sign an informed consent document that allowed their answers to be used anonymously in this project. The document read:

This play is presented in conjunction with Hope Morris's departmental honors project which studies the reception of *A Doll's House* in a modern context. Collections of these surveys and journals aim to answer the question, "Is Henrik Ibsen's 1879 play, *A Doll's House*, still relevant in 2017?"

Participation in this survey is voluntary and not required. All feedback and results will be kept confidential and anonymous. The risks to participate in this study are minimal, and your participation will aid in the development of further knowledge about this play and its role in today's world.

## I. Survey Results

Throughout the three performances, ninety-three completed surveys were collected. Each question prompted a more detailed and complex answer; however, I divided the negative and positive responses to each question to gather quantitative evidence. To the first question, eighty-seven people responded yes, the play is still relevant. Five responded no, the play is no longer relevant. To the second question, ninety people responded yes, the play does explore current issues. Two responded no, the play does not explore current issues. To the third question, seventy-five people responded yes, they could relate to the characters or situations in the play. Eighteen responded no, they could not relate to the characters or situations in the play. Many audience members listed specific characters they could relate to. Nora was listed thirty-nine times; Kristine, eleven times; Torvald, nine times; Dr. Rank one time; the messenger two; and the children two.

Many interesting and revealing quotations from the audience response surveys were helpful in analyzing the play's reception. A sample of answers to each question are listed below. None of these quotations have been edited from their original format. The numbers in parenthesis are the numbers allotted to the original surveys.

Question 1: "Though written in 1879, we set our play in 2017. Is *A Doll's House* still relevant in a modern setting? Please answer why or why not."

"It's domestic abuse" (3).

"It is relevant in a modern setting because the busyness of the modern couple in the professional years foster surface-level relationships" (10).

"Not really, because I feel the roles of husband and wife are not the same" (13).

"Many of the themes feel dated and rigid in execution" (14).

“The language is not like 2017 language and I think that takes away from the modern setting” (19).

“It shows dominance and submissiveness in the house, how the power imbalance might also not be as imbalanced as appearances show” (22).

“As long as emotional abuse, manipulation, and gas lighting are still a thing that happens, *A Doll’s House* will be relevant” (25).

“I think it can be because some people feel like women shouldn’t handle “important things”” (32).

“It can still occur in today’s age. Women often try to please people to maintain or keep peace in relationships” (55).

“It think the motive of the play is relevant as it applies to all oppressed peoples, this day in age and in the future” (63).

“I think changing the setting changes the themes of the original play. The women’s role is drastically different in the 21<sup>st</sup> century” (64).

“It is relevant to modern setting because I think it shows that people hide themselves in their own masks, afraid people won’t understand why they feel insecure and do tasks of love. Humanity means to acknowledge our imperfections” (69).

“Nora signed away on things carelessly, and it makes me think about a lot of students and their student loans” (70).

“The play explores themes of truth and stagnancy, ignorance, pride, and hypocrisy and greed and repression. These themes are relevant no matter the setting” (79).

“Yes, I believe it is possible for people today to live their lives as sponges—soaking up everyone else’s humanity, but never creating any of their own—and it must stop” (81).

Question 2: “Do you believe the play explores current issues? If so, what issues does it address?”

“With what is happening in the news with politicians seems similar with holding onto lies and exposure to the truth” (2).

“We still want people to think everything is good/positive/perfect although we all know that perfection is not the human condition” (4).

“It explores women’s body image” (5).

“Dominant males still rule over parts of our society—this play challenges the idea of men being in charge” (12).

“It still addresses issues like forgery, but the dominant husband issue is not as big of an issue today compared to 1879” (19).

“I think it does because it explores the theme of fate and the consequences of past mistakes” (20).

“It still challenges the roles of gender in the house and society” (22).

“It explores issues such as woman’s worth and place in the family. Still people believe that women should only be in submission to God and their husbands—unfortunately. Also, women’s consent to sexual relations” (25).

“It explores how women need to be treated more like humans and not like a “doll.” It also addresses break ups and suicide” (39).

“Sexism and mental health being downplayed is still an issue” (53).

“It was a bit strange that the banker cared that she has signed it since nowadays women can sign contracts” (58).

“The original play, yes. The “modern” version, not so much” (64).



Question 3:

“The expectation of the wife to take care of all “wifely” duties” (1).

“Divorce is on the rise” (3).

“Nora because I stick around people that are toxic to me even though I know I should leave” (9).

“I can relate to Kristine in the sense that she has the pressure to be a hardworking woman to independently provide for herself” (17).

“I can relate to Dr. Rank’s unrequited feelings of love for Nora and Krogstad’s feelings of betrayal due to Mrs. Linde” (20).

“Nora, I’m a stay at home mom of two, and so borrowing money in my situation is much the same as hers” (27).

“Nora, because I have been in a similar relationship. Christine, because I found the joy in love regardless of my past” (36).

“Nora hit home with me a lot about trying to appeal to other people while thinking “this is me and it makes me happy!” while underneath is a different story” (40).

“I came from an abusive household and some scenes really hit home when Nora and Torvald were interacting” (50).

“Yes, struggle in the work place how men get paid a little more just because they are male” (76).

“Nora afraid of poisoning her children and getting honest about herself and with her husband” (83).

“There have been situations where I haven’t been told everything because of my age or gender, and it was frustrating” (84).

“The children that are left behind because I have close friends that are living in broken homes” (86).

“I related to Nora when she was talking about being her parent’s doll. I feel like many people just take on their parents’ views because they don’t want to discover their own” (92).

## II. Audience Talkbacks

The next aspect of audience reception was the talkbacks following each of the shows. Over all, 28 people attended, and in these talkbacks, I briefly described my project, then opened the floor to the audience to ask me or the actors any question they liked. Generally, the feedback was positive. Many people praised the actors’ performances. Some asked them questions about their preparatory work. The actors responded with thoughtful and thorough answers. Many audience members said the modern setting was well-done and intriguing, but a small number expressed that the tension between the formal language of Ibsen’s day and the modern setting was “strange.” One audience member remarked that the lofty language helped her to pay closer attention to the story and created a more universal feeling. Many of the actors expressed their own difficulties navigating the intense characters and difficult language, but most agreed that the result was successful.

## III. Journal Entries

The other major portion of my evidence was found in the journals kept by the actors and crew members of the play. They were encouraged to write five journal entries over the course of the play. In these journals, they could include personal discoveries, character study, critical analysis, or anything else that seemed relevant. The purpose was to gauge the engagement of modern young people with the text. In the final journal, actors and crew members were asked to specifically answer whether or not they believed the play was successfully modernized, still relevant, and applicable to their lives. Out of ten actors/crew members, nine responded positively

to all three questions. One responded that she did not believe the play could be modernized and was no longer relevant.

Pertinent quotations from these journals include the following. None of these entries have been edited from their original format.

Nora's Journals:

“Very little of what I say in this play feels natural. It is heightened English, so I say things like "daren't" and "rubbish." It is beautifully written, don't get me wrong, but it is not very natural feeling. What makes this even harder, I believe, is the fact that this play is set in 2017. I am talking like this...but it's present day. I cannot characterize myself as a mid-1800s Norwegian house-wife who talks like this, which makes more sense with the character. But I am supposed to be a 26 year-old woman living in Naperville, IL, talking like this. It was much, much harder to make a connection with that for me. But I suppose that is the beauty of theatre. Things that you wouldn't think make sense together, actually work. And work in a new way to bring a story to life” (Journal 2).

“Ultimately, Nora is a fascinating human. Interacting with her in a present day light was hard...But ultimately we did it... the struggles she had back then as a woman may be different from the ones she deals with present-day, but the point is she still has struggles.” (Journal 2).

“2017 Dr. Rank is an entirely different experience than 1879 Dr. Rank. The strengths and motivations of Kristine are totally different now than they would be 138 years ago. Nora being so attached to her husband now implies different things than it would have back then.” (Journal 2)

“Society still traps people today...When it comes to the relationships, very little has changed since the original play date. Though it is different, the gravity of Nora leaving still resonates today. On one hand, she is leaving behind her family, specifically her children... On the other, she is taking a stand for herself, knowing she is at the moment an incomplete human, and that she cannot have healthy relationships until she has built herself up. This is still a really important idea today, where people, especially mothers, often only find their identities in their family and their children...As far as being a modern-day actor doing this show, I did not struggle too much. At the core, these are still emotions and worries humans have every day. There were a couple times I had to tell myself “don’t think about it too much.” Such as the gravity of forgery, as I do not think today it would be a crime worth giving one’s life for. Also Nora’s idea of divorce, in the third act, when she tells Torvald that if she walks out, he does not have to go to court. And yes, the language was a big, big obstacle at first. For a while it felt like I did not even know what I was saying...I also think some of the medical/legal talk in this would need to be updated...You can still see an unhealthy dynamic between husband and wife. A one-sided love between a woman and her friend. A struggle with whether or not she is a good influence on her kids. A woman deciding she would do anything to protect her husband and then finding out he does not reciprocate that dedication. A woman trapped in her husband and society’s expectations of her. A man trapped by how society has taught him to view women” (Journal 5).

Torvald’s Journals:

“We all have times in which we catch ourselves profiling and labeling others based upon our perception of who they are, be it socioeconomically or otherwise. In this light, I find Torvald to

actually be a fairly relatable character, if only as a mirror in which we can see ourselves, in a way, at our worst” (Journal 1).

“In a change of my original perception of Torvald, I am no longer convinced that he didn’t truly love Nora as she suggests in Act III, nor do I believe that he is an antagonist. Torvald is just as much a victim (for lack of a better word) of his society as Nora is” (Torvald, Journal 4).

“I can say that I certainly believe *A Doll’s House* is still relevant to audiences in 2017. I had my doubts about this before, but after hearing what audiences had to say in the Q&A sessions after each performance, I see that my initial assessment was mistaken. Although the play may not be as scandalous to modern audiences as it was in Ibsen’s time, they were still able to connect with it and were engaged by the story and its characters...As an actor in 2017, it wasn’t as difficult as I thought it would be to relate to the play. The concepts and themes exhibited in the show are all still ideas that we in the 21<sup>st</sup> century struggle with, just in different ways and in a different context than those who saw the show in the 19<sup>th</sup> century...As for modernizing the show, I think that it can be done successfully, but there is a catch: The language of the play, the “old English” so-to-speak, should remain as much intact as possible. The language used in the play is powerful, not just in the words themselves, but in the structure of how the words are said. This may be especially true for modern audiences, seeing as how they are being presented with a different way of speaking than they are used to, which in turn might help them to truly appreciate the fact that this is a story written long before their time and yet is still relevant in theme. I think that changing too much of the text may lessen the impact the story has on audiences. Whether a director chooses to set the play as a period piece or in a modern setting, the text, for the greatest impact, should remain mostly unaltered” (Journal 5).

Kristine's Journals:

“Kristine wants to be a wife, a mother, and a homemaker because she has a secure self-identity and she knows what she wants, and she wants to be everything that society is telling her and Nora that they have to be” (Journal 3).

“Personally, I think it is, because of the fact that it shows us that people and their decisions are never strictly black or white... I think that because of the ways that Ibsen wrote his characters, they will always be relatable in some way to someone. Because these characters show raw humanity, they will never be completely unrelatable...I think that Ibsen has written a play that will always be able to be ‘modernized’. I think that because of the topics and themes that he uses in A Doll’s House, that it will always be relevant and always be important to learn and study” (Journal 5).

Dr. Rank's Journals:

“One of the biggest connections I see between Rank and I is the connection of unrequited love” (Journal 1).

Krogstad's Journals:

“Recently in the news, there have been countless women coming forward with their stories of being victims to sexual harassment. It has been eye-opening to see how vile men, and some women, have taken advantage of their power and sexually abused women and men, not only for Hollywood, the Olympics, everyday work areas, etc., but also for me. In fact, I had never really understood the fear women have with doing the most mundane things, like walking to the gas

station alone at night. I've done that dozens of times, it's even nice and relaxing for me. Not for women though...with the "Me Too" Movement...For men, we don't typically understand how fearful women can get when the threat is the opposite sex, especially in an unhealthy marriage (Journal 4).

"Yes, it's relevant in this time, not just in this year. While there are areas in the play that make a lot more sense when placed in the time era it was written for, the overall plot and theme still make an impact on the audience. Everyone can relate to a character in this act, whether it's Krogstad's troubled past and need to survive in a world that gives nothing to you, or Dr. Rank's depression with his constant reminder that he can never have what will truly make him happy, or Nora's blind acceptance of being trapped in her own home, in her marriage, in her "bird cage"...All in all, this play can be set in the time it was made for or be transported to our century, and it'll still be impactful for those viewing, those portraying, and those directing" (Journal 5).

"Can this play be successfully modernized? I would say it can be. For example, look no further than our portrayal of it. Hope took the modernized version, updated a few things but kept the majority of the wordy English, and gave her actors the feeling of a modern high-class citizen. She successfully made it relevant to the audience, yet made sure to keep the feeling of the previous century's way of speaking. So yes, I think it can be modernized, as does the majority of those who viewed it" (Journal 5).

Anne Marie's Journals:

"Nora is not a monster for leaving her children, she's a human. She has needs as a person that she cannot let fall by the wayside because then she would never be healthy. This play has a lot to teach people, I think. It makes us wonder how we can be a whole person if we give up the parts of us that makes us who we are just to keep everything together" (Journal 3).

"Not only that, I see quite a bit of Nora in myself. I have recently had an experience where I had to make a choice to leave a big part of my life behind. I left people who I cared about and who cared about me, but I realized we were becoming strangers to one another the way Torvald became a stranger to Nora" (Journal 3).

"I think a Doll's House can apply to 2017... I think Nora's treatment and oblivion to certain things is very present in a lot of women nowadays as it was back then... There is still the trophy wife stereotype, the beautiful woman who should be seen and not heard, the airheaded model whose vacant personality adds to her attractiveness. Even in this "progressive" time women are still often seen as the lesser sex, and they have to fight tooth and nail just to be seen as equal...the way Nora leaves her family is still impactful to viewers nowadays just as it was back then. Society still has expectations of women when it comes to families. Women are not supposed to just walk out on their families and if they do they are supposed to at least fight to keep their children. Leaving altogether just is not something that happens. Also, back in the day the problem was that if a woman left the protection of her husband she would not be able to support herself. Well, I think the same is true now for Nora. She has limited education, she married young so she went straight from the comfort of her father's house to her husband's...If



she could barely support herself how could she support her children?...When I think of this play I don't think of it as a dusty old story that no longer applies. I think about how it shows that humanity is timeless, people have struggled with the same things since the beginning of time, they just didn't always know what to call it" (Journal 5).

Helene's Journal:

"For me, reading something and seeing something performed in front of you are completely different. Just by reading something, I cannot get the full feeling that a character has in a moment of crisis" (Journal 1).

"When it comes to the question of whether this play can be set in a modern time, I believe it can. Yes, the language can be awkward, and hard to follow, but it still an amazing story. To make it seem more modern, there are things that will have to be changed. We did try our best to make the language still seem modern, and make it sound believable, but there were still moments when it just sounded slightly off...It can be hard to believe that this story is modern. Nowadays, women have more of say in what they want. To me, it is really hard to believe that this certain situation can happen in a modern household... This is a beautiful story, yet it does not go along with what we believe in this culture. If any woman were to see this in a modern setting, it would infuriate them, because it goes everything against what most women think...However, the same situation does not hold as much weight as it did during the 1870s, because we have grown so much as a culture...I do not believe that it can have the same impact in a modern setting." (Journal 5).

Messenger's Journal:

“It is a given that the theme of respecting each other and seeing everyone as valuable is relevant to today even though the situation may not reflect an issue going on in this era...Over time I personally related to this theme through my constant battle trying to find people who understand who I am...With these universal themes in mind, this leads to the question of whether or not this play can be successfully translated to the 21st century. My answer is that it already has. During our first Questions & Answers session, many people expressed the feelings they had inside them while watching us perform the modern adaptation. It is safe to say that we were successful in bringing a new perspective to an ‘outdated’ play” (Journal 3).

Assistant Director's Journal:

“I was sent into the world, and no longer lived in the fragile bubble my parents locked me inside during my childhood. Now I have popped the bubble, and can stretch my arms to explore the different facets of life, and what it means to truly live, much like Nora chooses to do at the end of the play” (Journal 1).

“I love how they wear modern clothing and perform modern tasks such as taking selfies, texting, and take prescription pills while using Ibsen's language” (Journal 3).

Stage Manager's Journal:

“I've never related to Nora in this entire time until tonight. Tonight it hit me that Nora has hidden herself so much that she does not even know who she is...I began to dress like the other people dressed and like what other people liked. Just so that I would be accepted. I didn't mind

doing it, but there was always something off. I couldn't figure it out. Why didn't it feel right? Trying to fit in is a lot of work. Nora's been doing that her whole life. I can only imagine how tired she felt after she realized it" (Journal 3).

"Society today is all about the individual and staying true to yourself. When Nora reaches that self-discovery at the end, we see her begin this journey to find who she really is. To be honest, it was hard for me to see how this play is truly relevant to today, but I see it now. It truly is something glorious" (Journal 5).

Finally, I recorded my own thoughts and feelings towards the text in journal entries kept during the rehearsal process.

Director's Journals:

"Now that I'm...closely studying the text, I'm like in awe of how modern this play can be. There are questions about marriage, mental illness, feminism, abuse, motherhood, morality...the list goes on" (Journal 1).

"I am a little nervous about the lofty language. Today Case told me she feels uncomfortable with some of the phrasing and is having trouble memorizing her lines because of it. She also told me that she is having trouble overlooking the inconsistencies with the modern setting like going to Italy for health reasons. Hopefully with a consistent backstory this will be fixed" (Journal 2).

“My decision to have Nora contemplate suicide with the pills onstage was a good choice. It makes her struggle more relatable to modern audiences. I could even see myself within her struggle tonight. As a person who struggles with depression, it really hit home” (Journal 3).

“I feel very confident in my choice to set the play in 2017. Ibsen’s text allows so much room to meet us where we are at. For instance, I added a Victoria’s Secret bag for Torvald’s line, ‘What lurks in this particular parcel?’ and I added the idea that he is controlling her weight when he tells her not to eat macarons (‘You look rather devious today.’) Sometimes I even forget that this play was written in 1879. It feels like it was made for my cast and this setting” (Journal 4).

“I am a pastor’s kid...there is also the down side of constantly feeling that you are under a microscope. Everyone has a standard set for you to meet. People who know you and those who don’t. I played the part for years. Smiling at the right time, wearing the right clothes, and saying the right things. I began to adopt these standards others had for me as my own personal standard. I held myself to an impossible level of excellence. Failure was not an option. But the truth is, we fail. As humans, we are destined to fail again and again and again and again. Not allowing ourselves or others to fail is taking away a person’s humanity. Like Torvald does to Nora, and Nora does to herself. When I try to let go of the standards I hold myself to, and I try to treat myself like a human being, I allow myself room to grow into who I am. This person I am is not perfect. In fact, she is completely the opposite of perfect. But she is human. She is flawed, but she is real. She is honest. When Nora has everything taken away from her, when she is stripped of her mask and left alone, she is weak. But in seeing her weakness for the first time, she is capable of finally becoming strong” (Journal 5).

“I don’t think he likes that I set it in 2017...He told me that the language made the play sound ‘untruthful’” (Journal 6).

“I am worried other professors who also teach the play may not like the modern setting either” (Journal 7).

“The audience had very positive responses about the actors’ work and about the modern setting. People seemed amazed with the things I added!” (Journal 8).

“People are so controlled by society still today, both men and women. The desperation to maintain the appearance of perfection is as present now as it was in 1879. We can definitely see this through social media, and the efforts to portray the #nofilter #blessed picture perfect life. Likewise, the patriarchy is still strong all over the world. This play shows how the patriarchy negatively affects both men and women. It doesn’t demonize the man as the monster or demean, but shows that society is the monster. Most importantly, the play explores the complexities of relationships and learning to treat others as human, which will always be relevant” (Journal 9).

“I feel like a lot of my childhood and adolescence I was living my life by an unrealistic standard of perfection with an intense fear of letting anyone see me fail. This play shows how this façade can be shattered in a moment. It reveals that what is underneath is even more beautiful. Also I can relate to feeling the need to “perform” to please the people around me” (Journal 9).

“I think I could have made some small changes to language or found a more modern adaptation, but overall, yes, this play fit so well into a modern setting because its themes are still so relevant. Most importantly, the actors and I BELIEVED in its reality, so it became real in a modern setting” (Journal 9).

## Discussion

I began this project with the hypothesis that *A Doll's House* is still relevant in today's society and can be successfully modernized. The results of the surveys, journals, and talkbacks were enlightening, and the majority affirmed my hypothesis. Setting the play in 2017 was a risk, and not all who saw it liked the interpretation. However, most of those who saw the production praised its emotional depth and relatability to current issues. Regardless of the results, all of the feedback helped me learn more about literature, theatre, and humanity.

### I. Language

The biggest complaint I heard was about the clash between the elevated language and the modern setting. Some words used to describe it were “strange” and “untruthful.” However, others said that the language kept Ibsen's original purpose intact and proposed a universality to the play. One audience member explained that to her, the older language with the more modern setting created the atmosphere that the play almost had no setting all, but was timeless. This resonated profoundly with her. Keeping the elevated language of the translation did help remind the audience that the themes of the play were true both in Ibsen's time and now. By maintaining the tone of original text, the play pushed audiences to evaluate the modern adaptation in light of the 1879 world. This allows the audience to analyze the growth and changes between the two eras as well as the similarities. We often see Shakespeare's plays set in a variety of eras with the same goal in mind. Engaging in this kind of analysis creates a more complete experience with the text for audience members. The actress playing Nora explained that though she had much difficulty navigating the text at first, she later appreciated the unique interpretation our version offered. However, if I was to do the play again, I would make minor changes (adding contractions, for example) to the script to eliminate some of this language barrier.

One concern mentioned by a few audience members, but primarily the actors, is the inconsistencies of the text with modern situations. For instance, a woman is now able to sign for a loan without her husband's or father's permission. Another example would be the concept that divorce can happen without going to court. To remain consistent with Ibsen's plot, the actors and audience were both required to draw upon the suspension of disbelief to allow that a situation like this could occur in present day America. It seems that these obstacles were more prevalent for the actors than for the audience, however. At the talkbacks, the actress playing Nora revealed that she used modern ideas to supplement these inconsistencies in her mind. The example she gave was imagining the "copy work" Nora does as painting.

## II. Themes

Beyond the restrictions of the language, there were very few people who believed that the themes of the play were no longer relevant. A few surveys and one journal expressed that they believed that women no longer faced the same struggles as they did in 1879, thus the play could not address contemporary issues. An overwhelming majority, however, believed that the play did address modern concerns about marriage, honesty, and gender roles, many of which audience members could personally relate to. The emotional reactions of the audience during the productions made this particularly apparent. The surveys revealed that many audience members related to the themes of domestic abuse (verbal, physical, and sexual), suicide, and feeling trapped in gender roles. As can be seen in the news today with the #MeToo movement, discussion of mental health, and a surge in fourth wave feminism, many of these important themes are extremely prevalent in today's world.

What was most effective about the modernization of this play was my choice as a director to emphasize Ibsen's subtexts that relate to current issues. It is obviously implied in the play that



Nora is contemplating suicide. I emphasized this in the play by including moments when Nora holds pills in her hand considering overdosing to kill herself. This is not written in the script, but I took Ibsen's subtext and accentuated it with a modern means of suicide. Another example of emphasis on modern issues in my production is the scene at the beginning of Act III when Torvald sexually harasses Nora. In Ibsen's text, Torvald is drunk and speaking suggestively to Nora, but the stage directions do not specify any physical contact. However, in a modern setting, these sexual lines make more sense when accompanied with blocking that suggests he intends to take advantage of her despite her protests. By emphasizing this, many audience members could relate to a woman's right to repel sexual advances. A current issue that I also decided to address in my interpretation of Ibsen's text is the pressure on women to maintain a perfect body image. When Torvald restricts Nora's diet and bans macarons, we are told that he worries about her teeth. In a modern setting, however, this control resonates more profoundly with current issues if he is managing her weight. Based on comments from the survey results, this directing choice effectively related to women today.

My goal for the play was to create the story of a family unraveling, which is a theme we can all relate to, whether in our own family or not. At the beginning of the process, I came to the play with an agenda: to expose the patriarchy and promote female independence. I thought, "What could be more relevant than feminism?" As I studied and directed this play, I realized that, while the patriarchy is a factor of society's oppression, this play is much more complex than that. Through rehearsals, my original agenda faded, and I was reminded that all people are humans impacted by society's demands. The man is not the villain, nor is the woman. My thoughts on the play began to shift. My thoughts are summarized in this Director's Note from the playbill:

“I’m a human being, no less than you. Or at least I will try to become one.”

Nora’s line from Act III of Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* has resonated with me since the moment I read it. It provokes me to ask the question: “What does it mean to be human?” As my professors have taught me in my time at Olivet, this is one of the most important questions we can ask ourselves. So here I am: senior year, final project. I’ll take a swing at answering it.

To be human means to live in shades of gray. So little in the world is black and white. Humans are rarely all good or all bad. It isn’t as easy as that. We cannot be defined simply. We do not fit into the world’s archetypes. When we don’t acknowledge the intricacies of each person, we are robbing them of their humanity. Torvald does this to Nora by refusing to recognize her complexity and forcing her to play a role in his big performance of perfection. We do this to ourselves by attempting to live up to impossible standards to hide our true insecurities, failures, complications, dreams, and desires.

As you watch this play, I ask you to allow yourself and those in your world to be human. Listen to someone else’s story and really see them, not your preconceived version of them. Let yourself fail and then keep trying. Our pure, raw humanity is all we can offer on this Earth. And as broken and messy as it is, humanity surely is beautiful.

*A Doll’s House* was written in 1879, but I chose to set the play in 2017 to remind us that the root of many of our issues today remains the same as before. When people disregard each other’s humanity, doors open for destruction. Yet when we embrace our own humanity and recognize others as human, too, we open a door to “a glorious thing,” to progress and unity.

### III. Universality

I believe this play is still relevant today because it unmask humanity. Though some situations may vary and some means of expression have changed, the essential themes stay the same. All humans deserve to be seen as human, and this truth means leaving room for both faults and triumphs. It means facing the truth of gray areas within relationships. My production aimed to show the complexities of the characters and to destroy the stereotypes they carried. This was generally successful, but there were some complaints about the character Torvald. One audience member commented that he seemed like the “bad guy” through the whole play, a perception which made sympathy with him difficult until the very end. The final scene of the play brought humanity to him, but I wish I had integrated more complexity to his character sooner in the play.

A factor that is essential to understand in order to humanize Torvald’s actions is his fear of a destroyed reputation. This could have been communicated more clearly in the acting, but is still a difficult concept for our society to grasp. In our time, respectability and reputation are less important than in Ibsen’s age. It is a challenge for modern audiences to understand the great fear that Torvald has of losing his respectability in society, thus making him more difficult to relate to and easier to demonize. A change in the trajectory of the acting could have accentuated this fear sooner to make the character more human.

Many other audience members found Torvald both relatable and easy to sympathize with. The actor was highly praised for making such a difficult character so redeemable. Perhaps the most telling response to Torvald’s humanity is the actor’s own response. At the beginning of the rehearsal process, Shane disliked Torvald and deemed him both misogynistic and selfish. By the time we reached talkbacks, he made it clear that he saw Torvald as a human being, not a monster. He explained his process of relating to the character. I think this transformation of

perception of the person working most closely with the character shows that our play's Torvald did show humanity.

As the results of this project show, great literature spans the test of time. Classics that resonated with people in past centuries still resonate with readers today. *A Doll's House* is one of these works of literature. Its themes of family, honesty, and respect for others and ourselves are as important in 2017 as they were in 1879. By setting the play in 2017, I was able to ask actors and audiences to directly relate the play to their 21<sup>st</sup> century lives. Modern questions about gender roles and marriage arose that mirrored the same questions asked by Ibsen's original audiences. Through my work with *A Doll's House*, I have determined that the play is relevant to modern audiences and can successfully be modernized. Though there are areas that could have been approached differently for a more complete final "modern" product, the play resonated profoundly with many audience members. Just as it did in Ibsen's day, this play has inspired important discussions among audience members, actors, and crew. Nora's final slam of the door is, in fact, the opening of a door for our own reflections and conversations about the text. Perhaps these reflections will inspire honesty, healing, and humanity to be renewed in relationships. Regardless, it is clear that Nora's fateful door slam is still echoing today.

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