

Dollhouse
By Rebecca Gilman

A Student's Study Guide

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Award-winning playwright, Guggenheim Fellow, and author of *The Glory of Living, Spinning into Butter, Boy Gets Girl, Blue Surge, The Land of Little Horses, and My Sin and Nothing More, among others*

Rebecca Gilman has an impressive career which includes writing plays that were commissioned and originally produced by the Goodman Theater in Chicago, along with plays that premiered in New York at the Lincoln Center Theatre, as well as those that have played in regional theaters throughout the world.

Her play *Spinning into Butter* received a Joseph Jefferson Award for Best New Play, as well as the Roger L. Stevens Award from the Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays. Gilman's *Boy Gets Girl* and *The Glory of Living* also received Jefferson Awards. *Spinning into Butter* was included in Time magazine's list of Best New Plays for 1999 and has been optioned for film. *Boy Gets Girl* was named No. 1 play of the year by *Time* in 2000. *The Glory of Living* garnered two prestigious awards for Gilman: the George Devine Award and the *Evening Standard* Award for Most Promising Playwright. Named one of *Time* magazine's top 10 plays of 2001, *The Glory of Living* also was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize.

Gilman says that she loves much about being a playwright, but what she enjoys most is the collaborative nature of the theatre.

"I'm lucky in that I get to spend my time with a lot of talented, inspiring artists," she says. "Between the work of the director, actors, and designers, the end result on stage is often better than anything I imagined on the page. It's very satisfying work."

When asked where she finds the inspiration for her plays, she says that she gets ideas from many places, but primarily from her own personal experience.

"I get ideas from the newspaper, fiction, poetry, even people I see on the street," Gilman explains. "My play *Blue Surge* was inspired by a Bruce Springsteen song. I try to be open to anything and not to judge ideas one way or the other until I've had a chance to play with them. Some of what I thought were my best ideas have turned into train-wrecks of plays. Others I've had to sit with for a couple of years, but then something good comes out of it."

Gilman recently opened her adaptation of *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* at the Alliance Theatre in Atlanta. Rehearsals will soon start for her adaptation of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* at Goodman Theatre in Chicago. After that, she says she'll start writing an adaptation of Emile Zola's *Germinal*.

"All these adaptations are commissions and it's just a coincidence that they've all come at the same time, but I'm really enjoying them," she says. "After *Germinal*, I'm going to write something from scratch."

Gilman credits her education at Birmingham-Southern for her initial interest in writing for theatre.

"My senior year at Birmingham-Southern I decided to write a play for an independent study credit and the college was so supportive of my idea," she recalls. "Michael Flowers and John Tatter (English professor) were my advisors, and they were both so helpful and encouraging. The play was *The Land of Little Horses*, and when it was finished Michael Flowers offered to let me use the theatre over the summer to mount a production. I don't think that would have happened at a larger university where the competition for resources can be fierce, and the faculty doesn't have the time to become as involved with their students.

"The production turned out well and I had a blast, and then I headed up to the University of Virginia to start work on a Ph.D. in English. I was planning on teaching, but I'd had such a great experience with my play at 'Southern that I started taking playwriting courses and spent more time in the Theatre Department than I should have. Then *The Land of Little Horses* won a playwriting contest that Ole Miss once sponsored and that pretty much decided it for me. I left Virginia and went to the University of Iowa to get my MFA in playwriting, and I'm happy that I did. And I don't think the world of academia is mourning my decision either."

LH

Source: <http://www.bsc.edu/academics/arts/features/gilman.htm>

For more information on Rebecca Gilman, see the following links

<http://www.dramaticpublishing.com/gillman.html>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rebecca_Gilman

Henrik Ibsen

“Henrik Ibsen was the second of six children born into a well off merchant family in the small seaside timber port of Skien. However, his father's general store failed in 1834 and he was forced to declare bankruptcy. This traumatic event fostered a sense of uncertainty about his place in world; Ibsen even suspected that he was an illegitimate child. The poverty and poor schooling of his early years left a lasting impression on Ibsen, and Ibsen displayed a temperament that was an odd mix of shyness and belligerence.

He left school at 15 to begin work as a pharmacist's assistant in the nearby town of Grimstad. Flouting social conventions, which would become a theme throughout his life, Ibsen engaged in practical jokes, drunkenness, gambling and sex. He fathered an illegitimate child with a local maid when he was 18.

Norway had just recently gained its independence from Denmark and Henrik developed a patriotic fervor mixed with the revolutionary politics that were circulating throughout Europe since the French Revolution. In 1848, Ibsen composed his first play, *Catiline*, about a revolutionary in ancient Rome, but failed to get it produced. He moved to present day Oslo in 1850 to attend the University of Christiania where he fell in with a group of political radicals who shared his revolutionary outlook. He joined an underground revolutionary group that was broken up by the government, an experience that disabused Ibsen from political involvement for the rest of his life. Unfortunately, he failed the Greek and Mathematic portions of the entrance exam and was not admitted to the university. Luckily, he started to find success in theater: *The Burial Mound* was produced in 1850.

The following year, with the help of a famous violinist, Ibsen became a playwright in residence with the Norwegian Theater in Bergen, where he was expected to produce at least a play a year about the glories of Norwegian history. However, these historical plays were often more concerned with an individual's attempt to gain mastery over his surroundings and fight the constraints of his contemporary customs. The Ibsen would spend the next 10 years directing over 150 plays. However, the plays Ibsen wrote during this period found little success. The common consensus soon thought Ibsen would be a mediocre playwright at best.

In 1857, he married Suzannah Thoresen, a prototypical 'liberated women' that Ibsen would later criticize in some of his most famous plays. When the Norwegian Theater went bankrupt in the early 1860's, Ibsen fell into despair and turned to drink, despite having to support his family. He enjoyed success with one play, but his unemployment and despair, which echoed the experiences of Ibsen's father, drove the playwright to the point of a nervous breakdown. He petitioned the Norwegian government to supply financial support so he could travel and devote himself to writing. In 1863, the government granted Ibsen a few short-term grants to travel throughout Europe.

In 1866, while staying in Italy, Ibsen finally found his voice when he wrote *Brand*, a play of stark Kierkegaard influenced self-denial. The play, which was not produced but sold in book form, became such a success that the Norwegian government awarded the playwright a

small pension for life. The following year came *Brand's* thematic antithesis, *Peer Gynt*, a play concerning the destructive effects of overweening self-affirmation.

The Scandinavian world started to shower Ibsen with honors. Though these philosophically minded verse plays had turned Ibsen into the most prominent Scandinavian playwright in Europe by the end of the decade, Ibsen decided to start writing straightforward 'naturalistic' plays in everyday language. The first of these plays was *The Pillars of Society* in 1877, a play critical of certain aspects of contemporary Norwegian culture, shady business practices and gender inequality. The following year, the controversial contemporary domestic drama, *A Doll's House*, caused a stir throughout Europe and ushered in the age of modern Realism in theater. Ibsen, in his later years, became increasingly aloof and isolated, rarely attending social functions or cultivating friendships (which he viewed as a costly luxury). In 1891, at the age of 63, he returned to Norway where he was greeted as a national treasure. However his success did not seem to satisfy him. The plays of his later period express a sense of regret about devoting his life to art at the expense of his personal relationships (or lack thereof). He suffered a stroke in 1901 that left him debilitated until his death in 1906.”

Source: <http://www.littlebluelight.com/lblphp/intro.php?ikey=10>

For a more in-depth article on Ibsen, see the following:

<http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/ibsen.htm>

A Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen

An Overview

“*A Doll's House* was published on December 4, 1879, and first performed in Copenhagen on December 21, 1879. The work was considered a publishing event, and the play's initial printing of 8,000 copies quickly sold out. The play was so controversial that Ibsen was forced to write a second ending that he called "a barbaric outrage" to be used only when necessary. The controversy centered around Nora's decision to abandon her children, and in the second ending, she decides that the children need her more than she needs her freedom. Ibsen believed that women were best suited to be mothers and wives, but at the same time, he had an eye for injustice, and Helmer's demeaning treatment of Nora was a common problem. Although he would later be embraced by feminists, Ibsen was no champion of women's rights; he only dealt with the problem of women's rights as a facet of the realism within his play. His intention was not to solve this issue but to illuminate it. Although Ibsen's depiction of Nora realistically illustrates the issues facing women, his decision in Act III to have her abandon her marriage and children was lambasted by critics as unrealistic, since according to them, no "real" woman would ever make that choice.

That Ibsen offered no real solution to Nora's dilemma inflamed critics and readers alike who were then left to debate the ending ceaselessly. This play established a new genre of modern drama; prior to *A Doll's House*, contemporary plays were usually historical romances or contrived comedy of manners. Ibsen is known as the "father of modern drama" because he elevated theatre from entertainment to a forum for exposing social problems. Ibsen broke away from the romantic tradition with his realistic portrayals of individual characters and his focus on psychological concerns as he sought to portray the real world, especially the position of women in society.” --- <http://www.enotes.com/dollshouse/>

For more on A Doll's House, see the following links:

<http://www.gradesaver.com/classicnotes/titles/dollshouse/about.html> : Critical analysis of play and history involved

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_Doll%27s_house : deals with the history of original production in 1879, the plot, and the criticisms of the day.

Remaking a Living Doll: Notes from the Dramaturg

When Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House* opened in Copenhagen on December 21, 1879, the audience's reaction was one of shock. The challenges to archetypical marriage ideas presented within Ibsen's play affronted many play goers. The idea that a woman could reject the role society had designated for her and set off to find her own place in the world was completely alien to many, and Ibsen was forced to re-write the ending of his play for certain productions because many found the idea of a wife abandoning her husband and children to be akin to heresy. However, Ibsen considered the alternate ending of Nora staying for the sake of the children to be an injustice to his original concept for the story.

Rebecca Gilman has masterfully constructed a modern version of Ibsen's classic play. *Dollhouse* updates the story to 2004 Chicago just before Christmas. The play opens as Nora returns from another round of Christmas shopping, much to her husband's ire.

Interestingly, the problems that plagued Ibsen's Nora are still faced by Gilman's Nora only in a slightly altered form. Her fuss over Christmas decorations becomes an obsession with home décor. Her love of macaroons becomes a love of extravagantly expensive truffles. Her frantic dance of the Tarantella becomes a frenzied version of *Flashdance*. A key element that has varied little in the update is the relationship between Nora and her husband. Both Ibsen's Torvald and Gilman's Terry refer to Nora in nicknames that indicate she is a wayward child or pet. Neither husband sees her as anything other than a prize to be carried on their arm.

In Ibsen's version of the play, Dr. Rank, Torvald's best friend, commits suicide at the end of the play because he has an incurable condition. There are no physical deaths in Gilman's version. The dear doctor survives to see another day. Nevertheless, one must wonder how many

emotional deaths are suffered by the end of the final act. The choices made by all give one pause to ponder all that has been gained and lost.

Once again, audiences are presented with questions about relationships, materialism, and the consequences of a life built on lies. Not five minutes into the first scene of the play, Nora tells her first lie. Throughout the entire play, characters tell lies ranging from insignificant details that might cause a small tiff to information that could shatter their fragile world if discovered. As stated in a *Center Stage, Chicago* article by Bill Gorman, “A warning: *Dollhouse* is the kind of play that could cause a difference of opinion with your significant other.” This is not a feel good date play. The subject matter is very mature, and the writer handles it with the utmost care. This is a play to think about and discuss.

The first production of *Dollhouse* was at the Goodman Theatre in Chicago on July 18-24, 2005 (Press Release 1). It received mainly outstanding reviews. One critic commented that Dollhouse “may also turn out to be the quintessential American play of the early 21st century” (BSC Current Productions).

After 125 years, the situations faced by Ibsen’s original characters still translate to today’s stage through the efforts of Rebecca Gilman. She has crafted a play that proves Ibsen’s work is still as alive and fresh today as it was in his time.

Thanks to Ms. Gilman and the Goodman’s generosity, the Birmingham-Southern College production is the first to be mounted outside of Chicago.

For your students I have included the following links to various reviews of The Goodman’s production of *Dollhouse* (some of which I cited in the above statement). I hope that this will give you a good idea of what to expect in terms of the subject matter dealt with in the play.

<http://centerstagechicago.com/theatre/articles/dollhouse.html>

http://www.gooman-theatre.org/pr_051605DollhouseRelease.asp

<http://www.robtaonthearts.com/id402.html>

<http://www.uiowa.edu/~theatre/alumni/currentnews.htm>

<http://www.readbuzz.com/media/paper755/news/2005/07/07/ArtsEntertainment/Theatre.Review>.

Dollhouse-961331.shtml