

No, I am not referring to the new Joss Whedon show. I am referring to the Donmar Warehouse [production](#) of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, starring, amongst others, Gillian Anderson and Christopher Eccelston. She, of the *X-Files* and he of *Dr. Who*. It is all too easy to condemn these star studded productions as just gold digging by the theatres, but that is also quite often not the case at all. In this instance, we were quite well served by Ms Anderson, as Nora and Mr. Eccelston as Neil Kelman, as well as their cast-mates: Tara Fitzgerald, as Christine Lyle; Anton Lesser as Dr. Rank and Toby Stevens as Thomas.

First a word about the venue, Donmar Warehouse. In the heart of the West End, just off the 7 Dials, this is a small full thrust house, which means there is no "backstage" and the stage is surrounded on three sides by seating. I was stage right, second row, near the corner with the main bank of seats. There is a balcony, steeply raked, but this is a very intimate house. I was no more than four or five feet from the major entrances and exits of all of the major characters, and love that closeness.

It reminded me, in this way, of a performance of *Another Time*, produced by the American Jewish Theatre and starring Malcolm McDowell, which I saw with X in New York many years ago. It was wonderful to be so close to such a star that you could realise that they are no different than any other actor; they are only as good or as bad as their performance. An intimate theatre like this takes the air out of the "They're only cast for drawing power" argument – if they suck the show will suck, and there is no getting away from it.

*A Doll's House* is a taught show by any measure. Ibsen despised the gender roles of his era, and wrote unsympathetically of them here and in *Hedda Gabler*, the masterpiece for which he is most remembered. He was a wordy writer, and he wrote in his vernacular, the Victorian era vernacular of Norway. Translations of his work have often suffered the same fate as the King James Bible, in that the political and social sensibilities of the translator, or the translator's patron, can often interfere with the intent of the work. In this new version, Zinnie Harris brings us an unforgiving Ibsen, in an accessible but still period vernacular. The rendition is marvellous for these times (and resonates particularly well given the current political climate).

On, then, to the performances. Ms Anderson is highly passionate in her role as the dutiful wife of a politician. While it may be tempting to dismiss this passion as mere cover for a poorly realised portrayal, it is, in Ms Anderson's able reading, intrinsic to that character. We see, over the span of three acts, her channel this passion first one way and then another as she tries to find a way to defuse the central conflict of the drama.

That conflict is this: Nora, years ago, borrowed money from an unscrupulous source when her husband, Thomas, then a budding politician and now an MP and Cabinet Minister, had a nervous breakdown and she needed to take him abroad to shelter him from the public and press. Her husband knows nothing of this loan, would not have approved, and practically denies that this episode in his life ever happened. The lender, the now discredited former MP Neil Kelman, whose brief Thomas now holds, has decided that in order to save his own hide he must blackmail Nora over the loan he made to her under questionable circumstances. Add to this mix Christine Lyle, a schoolmate of Nora, who has fallen on hard times and prevails upon Nora to help get her a job, and serves as Nora's confidant. Also Dr. Rank, an old family friend of means who has always held a flame for Nora.

What differentiates an Ibsen drama is that the core conflict in his dramas is always going to revolve around sexual politics. In this case Thomas doesn't believe that his wife is anything more than a silly, and pretty, mouse. She is happy to let him live with this delusion, rather than let him know that they are both suited in dead people's clothes from the charity shops. Eccelston is a manic force in this piece, and I say that having seen most of his part with his back turned squarely to me (one risk of thrust staging). I did have the benefit of seeing his highest and best moment on the stage, his denouement and his salvation wrapped into one, with him and Ms Fitzgerald seated just arm's reach away. It was gut wrenching and affirming

at once. His breakdown in front of the audience was a sincere moment, and the tenderness and unyielding manner of Ms Fitzgerald's Christine was masterful as well. The two of them nearly stole the show, Ms Fitzgerald's performance as deliberate as Ms Anderson's is passionate. They represent the two diametric extreme in Ibsen's lexicon of the female soul. In the final scene, between Nora and Thomas, the husband berates his wife; he declaims her, derides her, nearly disowns her. Ms Anderson's Nora shakes and cowers under this onslaught and Thomas nearly froths at the mouth, his temples throbbing as he raises himself to his full, considerable, height. It is easy, at this moment, to wonder where is Ibsen's strong woman? We do not see her here. But then, in a moment, there comes a flash and the tables are turned:

Thomas: First and foremost you are a wife and a mother.

Nora: No, first and foremost I am myself, I am Nora!

Anderson rises to her full height and nearly sweeps Stevens off the stage as she launches into her condemnation of him. You can watch the air go out of him, and her find her full power and true centre in this captivating and miraculous three minutes of stage time. To say a chill wind blows through Donmar Warehouse in this scene would be an understatement. The performances in tonight's show were all top notch. This show, with five key roles and three supporting, leaves little room for weakness. There is none here. As for Eccleston and Anderson, tonight they were not stars, they were great actors in the company of great actors, and they all shone.

Ibsen is often referred to, in the theatre world, as the father of modern theatre, for his productions were the first to demand, and receive, realistic staging and lighting. Before Ibsen, staging relied mostly on drops and lighting consisted mainly of "limelight" spots and footlights. But Ibsen's shows had real three dimensional sets and the most modern of lighting. This emphasis on realism allowed the audience to see in the prosaic lives on stage a reflection of their own.

The British theatre, and especially the legitimate, or dramatic, stage, also has a rich tradition of realism, as I have commented before. This tradition shone here with the modest, but dominating design of Anthony Ward and the naturalistic and well motivated lighting of Hugh Vanstone. All of this under the skilled direction of Kfir Yefet.

I thought that *Duet for One*, after topping *Madame de Sade*, would stand as the best show I would see on this trip. No more, *A Doll's House* has soundly taken that seat. Tomorrow brings a matinee performance of Samuel Becket's *Waiting for Godot* starring Sir Ian McKellen and Patrick Stewart. They have a mighty high threshold to overcome.