

**“THE MERITS AND DEMERITS OF IBSEN’S GREAT PLAY”: THE
RECEPTION OF THE NOVELTY THEATRE COMPANY MATINÉE
PERFORMANCE *A DOLL’S HOUSE*, THEATRE ROYAL, BRIGHTON
ENGLAND, JUNE 20TH 1889**

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On June 23 1889 *The Brighton Herald* reported on two performative events that would enliven Brighton England’s cultural life that year. The first was the visit of the Novelty Theatre Company and the matinée performance of a professional production of Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, translated into English by the Scot, William Archer. This gave the Brighton audience an opportunity to see for themselves the play by “the Norwegian dramatist whose writings are now making a stir in England and America” (*The Brighton Herald* 23 June 1889). The same edition of the newspaper in its Local and Provincial News column announced Dr Fridtjof Nansen’s talk to the Royal Geographical Society in London: “The eminent explorer whose journey across Greenland has recently been fully described. Among other things he will exhibit the ski, or snow-shoes, on which he performed the journey across Greenland (...) and we understand that he has been invited to visit Brighton by Mr. Edward Crane, F.G.S. whose guest he was a year or two ago” (*Brighton Herald* June 23 1889). The juxtaposition of these two men in a provincial newspaper provides interesting insights into the “respectable” world of the last quarter of the 19th century. The snowshoes used by Nansen in his 1888 journey across Greenland were emblematic, encompassing male endurance and fortitude but also constructing an image of the heroic 19th century male. Nansen’s compatriot Ibsen had created another hero in his play *A Doll’s House* in the unlikely character of Nora struggling with the constraints of Victorian womanhood. Her actions and the play’s dialogue were unsettling for the audience. The unconventionality of her character and the play itself would divide audiences and theatre critics into Ibsenite’s and Anti Ibsenite’s.

With these announcements serving as a cultural and social backdrop, this article will construct the reception of Henrik Ibsen’s play *A Doll’s House* at a matinée performance in the Theatre Royal Brighton, England, Thursday afternoon June 20 1889. The article will use resources from the Brighton Archives, specifically *The Brighton Examiner*, *The Brighton Times*, *The Argus* and *The Brighton Herald* that covered the performance in specialized theatre columns. This performance of *A Doll’s House* is significant because firstly, the Brighton matinée would be the only performance of the original Novelty Theatre Company’s three-week production “as translated by William Archer from Ibsen’s Scandinavian original” (*Brighton Examiner* June 21 1889) mounted outside London. Secondly, I have been unable to find any references in the literature about this matinée performance and its reception by a provincial audience. This is due, I believe, to the overwhelmingly critical observations of London newspaper critics that have dominated the discourse.

A matinée performance of *A Doll's House* in the provinces: The Novelty Theatre Company at the Theatre Royal Brighton

Why did *A Doll's House* supported by the entire company from the Novelty Theatre London travel down to Brighton? By 1880, Brighton on the south coast of England had a population of 100,000 people, making it the largest seaside resort in Britain. With its close proximity to London and easy access by train, it was a fashionably cosmopolitan town with its beach and promenade, and a Theatre Royal established in 1807 under its first Royal Patron, George IV. In the years that followed, the Theatre Royal Brighton became an important regional theatre. By 1867, The Theatre Royal was under the sole management of Ellen Elizabeth Nye Chart, a former actress who took over the theatre's management upon her husband's death. By the last quarter of the 19th century it was not unusual for women to be actor-managers. In fact, in the production of *A Doll's House* that played the boards in Brighton that June, Janet Achurch was cast as Nora while at the same time managing the Novelty Company together with her business partner and future husband, Charles Charrington.

Maintaining the high standards of The Theatre Royal Brighton but also improving on them, Nye Chart was an astute businessperson, who was well connected in British theatre circles. Her respected theatre attracted most of the leading actors of the period, and Brighton audiences enjoyed a constantly changing repertoire of the usual run of romantic costume dramas, melodramas and social comedies, as well as pantomimes that typified British commercial playhouses of the period. By the 1880s, Mrs. Nye Chart introduced a policy of inviting visiting touring companies from London's West End to her theatre, and by 1883 she initiated the appearance of touring companies from London at single afternoon matinées. Arriving by train for a "morning performance" starting at 2 P.M., a matinée relied on the punctuality of the London to Brighton and South Coast Railway that could whisk a company back to London in time for an evening performance (Dale. 1980. 44). Brighton audiences in June 1889, for example enjoyed a matinée of Gilbert and Sullivan's opera *The Yeoman of the Guard* performed by the D'Doyly Carte Opera Company, accompanied by a full orchestra, as well as a "morning performance" of C. Haddon Chambers "great Haymarket drama" *Captain Swift* mounted by H. Beerbohm Tree's Company (*Brighton Herald* 23 June 1889). The most daring and remarkable of these matinées was of course *A Doll's House*. Nye Chart capitalized on the play being good at the box office, but she was also taking risks inviting The Novelty Theatre Company to Brighton.

Considered unfashionable, this run down London theatre had a reputation for constantly changing its name and management (Davis, 2007, 81). This state of affairs was reflected in the variety and quality of companies that played its boards but in June 1889 the quality of the Novelty Theatre Company was not under question. This company introduced Ibsen to the English public, mounting twenty- seven performances of *A Doll's House* with a star cast that included Janet Achurch cast as Nora and Herbert Waring as the husband Thorvald Helmer. Charles Charrington was cast as Dr Rank, the Scottish actor Royce Carleton played Krogstad and Gertrude Warden was cast as Mrs.

Linden. Before its arrival in Brighton, the production had quickly gained notoriety, after hostile opening night reviews in the *Times of London* and by Clement Scott, the influential London theatre reviewer for *The Daily Telegraph*, which at the time was England's largest daily newspaper. Scott was the first critic to use the term Ibsenites in his review of the London premier, thereby establishing a schism in theatre audiences between supporters and detractors of the "new drama". In light of this controversy, Nye Chart's decision also risked alienating middle class, respectable patrons who might disapprove of the plays subject matter.

Within two weeks of its British premier on 7th June, Nye Chart brought the Novelty Company to her Theatre Royal on Thursday June 20 1889 confident that there would be interest in the play by a discerning Brighton audience. Of the towns four newspapers only two comprehensively reviewed the actual performance, *The Brighton Examiner* and *The Brighton Herald*. A third newspaper, *The Argus*, provided extensive pre-publicity for the performance. A fourth newspaper, *The Brighton Times*, on June 21 1889 notes that the matinee occurred and praised the "pleasing and well sustained" acting of the Company. Although it may seem that opponents of the "new drama" had an influential voice in one local newspaper, *The Brighton Examiner*, two newspapers *The Argus* and *The Brighton Herald* cautiously championed the play in their representation of the matinée performance to their readership. The intersection between local newspapers and their readership captures, therefore, the social and cultural pre-occupations of the audience who attended the performance.

"A different kind of melodrama": Critical reception in local newspapers

The Brighton Examiner

The unnamed theatre critic in *The Brighton Examiner* was a detractor of the "new drama". In a 33 centimeter, or 12-inch column under the headline "Public Amusements The Theatre", the newspapers readership was given a lengthy review of the matinée. Echoing the London review of Clement Scott's slavishly, the article begins by noting:

As a novelty, the piece may be taken for a single dose. *A Doll's House* is to utterly Ibsen-ish to hold the stage. As a curiosity the piece is worth seeing, but hardly we take it, for more than once. *A Doll's House* as translated by William Archer from Ibsen's Scandinavian original, is a mysterious and puzzling play, and we confess to not liking the presentation of man's unnatural spurning, and a woman of unnatural creation (*Brighton Examiner* June 21 1889).

A lengthy plot summary followed interspersed with commentary that reinforced the reviewer's hostile and often sarcastic point of view: "If Mr. Archer expects this to be a take on human nature, we fancy playgoers will scarcely support the idea". The play was according to this critic simply "a dissertation on religion, and duty and moral responsibility, and the lessons of life generally". Nora is no longer a wife and mother, she is a "human being". His choice of descriptive adjectives in the following extract left

no doubt that the focus of this critic's ire is the character Nora; "a part we can hardly consider congenial to the tastes of playgoers today". The review continues:

She sings, she dances, she skips, she even whistles. She tells us later that she has not been happy. She has been only merry- a curious quibble of the authors, and not surprising from Nora's lips, seeing that Ibsen has made his heroine an unconscionable little liar, who lies about small things and great. (...) She gives back her wedding ring to the husband, and with cold-blooded insolence she quits her home, her husband and her children, refusing to pass another night under the roof of a stranger (*Brighton Examiner* June 21 1889).

This review suggests that a provincial theatre critic in a local newspaper was keenly aware of his own audience and perceived himself as an arbiter of taste and morality. Focusing attention on the character of Nora, this theatre critic riles against her behaviour. The impact of her decision to leave her husband and family was incomprehensible, even reprehensible to this critic. Accordingly, *A Doll's House* was "Not a very wholesome play" although it was "very well acted". To confirm his own negative opinions, the theatre critic ended his review by documenting the reactions of the audience watching the play:

The reception of the piece was peculiar- anon (or, at once) with laughter, applause, then tittering. *A Doll's House* is, as above remarked, a dramatic curiosity- and it is eccentric (*Brighton Examiner* June 21 1889).

Since the reviewer had already concluded earlier that "*A Doll's House* will, we opine, hardly succeed", this subjective assessment of audience reception firmly reinforces the hegemonic cultural and societal attitudes held by this critic.

There are as suggested above numerous alternative perspectives on the reception of the play in the entertainment columns of *The Argus* and *The Brighton Herald*. The unsigned coverage in these newspapers, by "contributors", left little doubt about the potentially transgressive nature of the play's themes and content, while at the same time acknowledging its significance. The sympathetic but also critical coverage in these newspapers provided their readership with details of the controversy. In this instance, readers of the newspapers were given agency to self-select, in deed, they were encouraged to attend the performance. In doing so they could compare their response to the London theatre critics. The reception by these provincial critics of the Brighton production was much more nuanced than at first might be assumed if judged solely by the comments of *The Brighton Examiner*. *The Argus* and the two reviews in *The Brighton Herald*, therefore offer an instance when the generally held opinion that Ibsen's initial reception in England was hostile can be challenged. Unpacking the evidence in these newspapers suggests several points.

The Argus: Topic of the Day

Firstly, these critics capitalized on the controversy surrounding the production. The pre-publicity comments in the "Topic of the Day" in *The Argus*, Brighton's daily evening newspaper, still conveys the excitement generated by the pending visit of the theatre company:

"The battle of the Ibsenites and the anti-Ibsenites continues, and leading pens are taking part on either side. Hard words are being thrown about (...) It might be safely said that in the history of the modern drama no such controversy has arisen in the world of theatrical critics as has raged over the production at the Novelty Theatre of Mr. William Archer's version of Heinrich Ibsen's great play *A Doll's House*. (...) All may agree over works of mediocrity; mere cleverness appeals to everybody; but it is only works of genius that give rise to these fierce contentions. Local playgoers will have tomorrow the chance of deciding for themselves as to the merits and demerits of Ibsen's great play, as the entire Novelty Company are visiting Brighton to appear at the matinee under the direction of Mr. Charles Charrington and Miss Janet Achurch as Nora Helmer (*The Argus* 19 June 1889).

Not simply content with reprinting reviews, or parroting the London critics who so "severely ridiculed the play", *The Argus* actively solicited patrons and promoted the performance.

The Brighton Herald

The Saturday edition of *The Brighton Herald*, under the banner "The Brighton Theatre", ran two lengthy columns curiously subtitled "Henrik Ibsen's "In A Doll's House." These offered insights into the provincial culture of theatre and audiences' reception. The comments of the first contributor noted that: "A play of strange and striking interest was performed on Thursday afternoon (...) by Ibsen, the Norwegian dramatist whose writings are now beginning, if they have not already begun, a stir in England and America". Acknowledging that the play as "it was first produced in this country a fortnight ago (...) had been severely ridiculed by the London critic" but that should not lead the community to condemn Nye Charts's managerial talents:

It is creditable to the enterprise of the Theatre that so early an opportunity should have been taken to bring this dramatic curiosity to Brighton, and we are sorry that the audience was not larger. Those who stayed away missed a remarkable performance of a remarkable play that left behind it a feeling of bewilderment and something of that mental exhaustion which sometimes follows the hearing of a Beethoven symphony. Rarely has so strange a play been seen on the Brighton stage- still more rarely has a play left the audience so undecided as to whether they should make haste to laugh, or whether they should hail the advent of a new prophet, a revolutionist of ideas, a regenerator of society.

The tone of this review is sympathetically nuanced. "We are sorry that the audience was not larger," remarks the critic. This comment regarding the audience size, however, needs to be put into a context. The Theatre Royal Brighton was a medium size theatre by the standard of the day with a seating capacity of 1,900 (Robinson.16). The statement by this contributor only suggests that it was not a full house for the matinée.

Additionally, the commentator in *The Brighton Herald* acknowledged the importance of Chart's decision to bring "this dramatic curiosity" to Brighton, since it allowed local playgoers to experience for themselves "a play of strange and striking interest" that was "comparable in its complexity to a Beethoven symphony". The term curiosity had common currency in the 19th century. It designated something that was outside the ordinary, but interesting on account of its novelty, or strangeness. The play, like a Beethoven symphony, was a mixture of styles and pacing, and it was intellectually demanding. The review suggests insightfully that like the music of Beethoven, Ibsen's drama signalled a possible change in subject matter and a new direction in form and content. Reinforcing and extending this assessment of Ibsen as more than a Scandinavian phenomenon, the commentator made reference to Ibsen's "distinguished American contemporary, the poet Walt Whitman, a writer to whom for the moment Ibsen bears a resemblance." Whitman, having "rejected the ordinary forms of public poetic expression" has deftly been turned into a culturally progressive ally of Ibsen. Like Beethoven in music and Whitman in poetry, Ibsen was acknowledged as a major transformative figure in drama. Additionally, the first commentator situated Ibsen in a broader context of European and trans-Atlantic cultures. This assessment assumes a sophisticated play going and newspaper reading audience. On the other hand, patrons of Nye Chart's Theatre Royal were comfortable with a steady diet of 19th century theatrical spectacle and sentimental domestic drama's. But it was *A Doll's House* that would shift dramatic precedents:

It is a play for people who like to think, and, therefore, not a play which ordinary playgoers will be satisfied with. They may submit to an abandonment of traditional usage, but they are not prepared for a philosophy of an advanced kind being hurled at them. As it were, until the mind wearies.

This commentator also directed the readership's attention to the play's "unconventionality" and the mimetic aspects of the performance:

It's strange array of characters cast in a mould the like of which no dramatist probably has been bold enough to use before. One looked in vain for a glimpse of innocence to relieve the monotony of tarnished respectability or idols of feet of clay."

This perspective enabled the critic to avoid concentrating solely upon the character of Nora. "She is not spotless," he remarked but she is part of Ibsen's insights into human nature: "His characters are drawn from life as it is- not from the human nature distorted

in the mirage of the footlights." In this review the focus is not upon a transgressive female but rather a cast of dysfunctional characters who "tell us unaccustomed truths in an unaccustomed way, making us ask whether our social system is as perfect as we could wish it."

Audience reception: Nora as an unconventional heroine

This comment sets the tone for additional remarks that offer further insights into audience reception of the drama and its "curious array of characters all more or less repellent". Both the commentator and the audience understood that such "an impressive piece of work" demanded extraordinary performance skills from the Novelty Theatre Company. So rather than rejecting *A Doll's House* out of hand, at the "close of the piece" it was met with "respectful rather than delighted admiration". But the reception of the acting of the Company, as distinct from the play, was "cordial and well deserved." The review concludes with this clearly defined distinction that emphasizes the realistic quality of the production:

The severely trying part of Nora was enacted with remarkable ability by Miss Janet Achurch and the other parts were admirably filled by Herbert Warring as the husband, Charles Charrington as Dr Rank and Royce Carleton as Krogstad. So far as the acting went, the piece, in fact, was presented in a style which gave full effect to its strange, repellent, and yet fascinating interest.

The second unnamed contributor in *The Brighton Herald* strongly endorsed "a most interesting performance". Echoing and expanding on the comments of the previous reviewer, this lively exchange was interesting fodder for the newspaper's readership. The commentator began with the assertion that the Novelty Theater production had "excited an unusual amount of comment, and the general verdict seems to have been that the piece was not suited to a British audience." The drama's unsuitability was "because the conclusion was perceived as "unhappy, unexpected and too intellectual in its motive". The term "motive" is significant. The reviewer understood that Ibsen was exploring social and cultural themes that included "the theory (of) a woman's proper sphere". Middle class audiences, however, would find that this subject could "hardly be discussed dramatically", and this commentator concluded: "Ibsen has certainly thrown the entire work into a thoroughly dramatic form, and various points are most effective." This commentator focuses attention on the production of the play while at the same time applauding the manner in which the subject matter is revealed, not simply through plot, but through its performance.

The tone of these comments suggests that reviewer and audience faced similar difficulties understanding the complexities of this new drama. The commentator consequently situates his discussion initially from the perspective of the audience grappling with the implications of Nora as an unequal object treated by her husband "at best as a doll to be played with". While "possibly correct", the commentator notes: "one cannot suppose that she would immediately abandon her husband and children, as the

heroine of *A Doll's House* does at the conclusion of the play." Strikingly, the commentator then explains rhetorically the plausible reasons for Nora's actions and does this by emphasizing the transformative nature of performance and the ability of actors to turn actions into larger truths:

A great actress could hardly desire a finer part than the heroine, Nora Helmer, at one moment romping with her children, and the next entreating the mercy of a scoundrel who has her in his power, afterwards when in the full rush of mental struggle and excitement having to dance a tarantella, and finally displaying the author's psychological views of marriage, unflinchingly laying bare the selfishness of husbands, and unrelentingly leaving her home and her adored children. It is a part to tax the highest powers in domestic drama, and it is very great praise to say that Janet Achurch was satisfactory in her impersonation. She has to be on stage during the whole of the first two acts, and the second act in particular is both mentally and physically most trying. She was ably seconded by Herbert Waring, who was highly successful as the husband, Torvald Helmer. Perhaps he was a little too restrained and tame in the final scene, when his wife abandons him, but that is the only point at which one could take exception in his otherwise excellent performance.

The review therefore acknowledges that patrons of The Theatre Royal matinée performance were witnessing something new with performances from actors that were not only demanding but also "realistic". The preceding passage explored thoroughly the character of Nora with an assessment of Achurch's performance that called attention to a role that required the utmost theatrical intensity. "Unflinchingly" exposing the inner psychological motivation of this character enabled Achurch to explore the intellectual issues that Ibsen's drama raised for the audience. The passage also carefully delineates and captures her stage movements at times "romping" and "dancing" and finally "leaving her beloved children". Her expressive skills, conveyed through her facial expressions and gestures convey: "the full rush of mental struggle and excitement", "entreating", and "unrelentingly" displaying the balance of her emotions but also "the author's psychological views of marriage". The descriptors used suggest that Achurch the actor had convincingly become the character, Nora. Within the context of the plot, Achurch's acting had a transformative power that forced the audience to hold off its disbelief in this character.

Other members of the Novelty Theatre Company ably supported Achurch. The villain of the story was "efficiently played" by Royce Carleton. Charles Charrington had "an interesting part in Dr. Rank, whose father's dissipated life has entailed incurable disease upon him". And Herbert Waring who "seconded" Achurch played Torvald Helmer. The commentator reiterated a perspective on the transformative effects of performance in comments regarding the character of Torvald Helmer, Nora's husband. Herbert Waring's performance was "a little too restrained and tame in the final scene". This critique suggests that by the final act the commentator and the audience were fully

engaged in the realistic dialogue of the characters, Nora and Torvald. Consequently, Ibsen's "refreshing unconventionality in the ending" was not problematic. It was perfectly plausible to this commentator:

Anything plainer than the end is impossible to conceive; the heroine declares her intention of immediately leaving the house, then puts on her hat and mantle, returns her husband's wedding ring, takes his ring from his finger, walks out and shuts the door behind her, while he soliloquizes as to his future while the curtain falls.

The Brighton Herald commentator did not question Nora's morality, nor found her actions incomprehensible: "All that is surely plain enough, yet some critics complain that they were left in the doubt as to whether the heroine meant to go away or change her mood and stop at home." The answer to her behavior, the reviewer continued, was embedded in the play's ending which demonstrated the implications of Ibsen's theory. Accordingly, the commentator did not reject the performance out of hand, nor did the audience, which "was unusually attentive and critical, and thoroughly appreciated the performance".

This article has argued that the matinée performance of *A Doll's House* at the Theatre Royal Brighton prompted a lively series of theatre reviews in local newspapers. These reviews capture the controversy and provide a more detailed perspective of the reception of Ibsen's drama in England and the division of critic and audiences alike into Ibsenite's and Anti Ibsenite's. Several Brighton newspapers were signalling the significance of Ibsen as a dramatist who was already influencing the direction that British and American drama would take. These critics argued convincingly in support of the "curiosity" even though they were seeing the same production of the drama so heatedly ridiculed by many London critics. Significantly, at least two newspapers document the reaction of critics and an audience at the Theatre Royal Brighton who appear to appreciate that they were watching a matinée performance of a remarkable drama that would set new standards in the theatre.

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Summary

"Merits and Demerits of Ibsen's great play": The Reception of a performance of *A Doll's House* by the Novelty Theatre Company at The Theatre Royal Brighton England June 20th 1889.

This article discusses the reception of a matinée performance of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* on June 20th 1889 at The Theatre Royal Brighton England. This would be the only performance mounted outside London of the original Novelty Theatre Company's three week production in English as translated by William Archer.

Resources from the Brighton Archives which have not been examined before are used, including theatre reviews from local newspapers: *The Brighton Herald*, *The Brighton Examine*, *The Brighton Times*, and *The Argus*. Coverage of the performance in these newspapers illustrates how the battle between supporters and detractors of Ibsen's drama continued outside London. Their reviews of the matinée offer valuable insights into the reception of *A Doll's House*, not only by theatre critics but a specific audience on a particular English provincial, The Theatre Royal Brighton.

Such newspaper accounts allow us to get a much more detailed perspective on Ibsen and the intellectual issues that his drama raised for a provincial audience in Brighton England. The article examines in detail positive responses to Ibsen's play and the social issues that both shocked and fascinated his audience.

Keywords

A Doll's House, Critical reception, Performativity, Novelty Theatre Company, Theatre Royal Brighton England