

Critics' Forum
Theater
Finding the Universal in Ibsen's *A Doll House*
By Lori Yeghiayan



Question: What does a play, written in Norwegian in 1879 about a woman's journey toward personhood and freedom from repressive social, gender and class norms, have to do with the Armenian community?

Answer: The play, *A Doll House*, by 19th century Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, was recently produced by Glendale's Luna Playhouse—one of Los Angeles' only theatres founded and operated by Armenian artists—and directed by Luna Playhouse Artistic Director, Aramazd Stepanian.

The majority of Luna's audience, according to Stepanian, is Armenian.



So, why produce an Ibsen play?

“Because it’s one of the greatest plays ever written. It’s just a great play. What situations! What characters! What deep psychological insight!”

That was director Stepanian’s enthusiastic response when I asked him that question on a recent Saturday afternoon visit to Luna. We sat in the theatre—momentarily empty while the cast and crew of the upcoming *My Heart’s in the Highlands*, by William Saroyan, were on break from rehearsal—and chatted about Stepanian’s production and the play’s relevance to a contemporary audience.

A major work by one of the most influential playwrights of modern Western theatre, Ibsen’s *A Doll House* (commonly translated as *A Doll’s House*) is an early example of “realism”—a genre characterized by an invisible “fourth wall” that remains unbroken by the actors. It is as if in the midst of the characters’ lives the fourth wall of their living room were removed, allowing the audience to peer in on the action as it unfolds.

The play opens on the living room of the Helmer home and on the lives of Torvald and Nora Helmer, a young married couple with three small children and several servants. Theirs is a seemingly happy home. Husband Torvald is a bank manager, wealthy and respected; wife Nora is beautiful and devoted, cheerful in her domestic duties. Into this stasis arrive Nora’s less-privileged childhood friend Kristine Linde in search of a job and Nils Krogstad, an employee of Torvald’s at the bank—a man desperate to regain his lost status in the community. Also a key figure: the Helmers’ friend and frequent visitor, Dr.

Rank, who is in love with Nora and who, despite his money and high status in the community, is terminally ill—rotting from the inside out from an inherited disease.

All of the characters are victims of what Ibsen sees as the diseased and destructive forces of oppressive societal standards of marriage, gender and social class that deny them the freedom to develop into full human beings. The dramatic action of the play exposes the weak foundations of Nora and Torvald's marriage and propels Nora out the door in search of knowledge and her authentic self.

Though the final action of *A Doll House*—in which the main character Nora leaves her husband after eight years of marriage calling herself a “doll-wife” and their home a “play-room”—may have lost its power to shock, the play still has a lot to say to a contemporary audience. The psychological truth of the characters has made it a classic, relevant to almost any modern community – whether the view out that community's windows is the Norwegian Fjords or Glendale's Verdugo Mountains.



The Luna Playhouse production was directed with precision and depth by Stepanian and was confidently acted by a uniformly solid cast. Stepanian chose to set the play in northern Europe in the late 1950s, and Maro Parian's detailed set and costumes served the production well, especially in establishing the time period. Henrik Mansourian's lighting design also added to the realistic setting, with some nice lyrical moments, such as the rapid fade to moonlight during the love scene between Nora and Dr. Rank, as the sun sets on his life and their life-affirming relationship.

The theatre had originally planned to stage an Armenian-language version of the play to run in repertory with the English version but was not able to for various logistical reasons. It would have been interesting to see that interpretation and how Stepanian might have utilized culturally-specific archetypes that have particular resonance for an Armenian audience.

Luna Playhouse's artistic mission is not, however, limited by genre, language or culture. "We don't look at our audience as just an Armenian audience," said Stepanian. "Yes, we do Saroyan, but we also do [contemporary British playwright, Harold] Pinter and others."

"Why?" I asked.

"We do it primarily because the artists involved are interested in it."

I applaud the Luna Playhouse leadership for presenting great plays from many cultures and for offering its audience theatre that speaks to universal experience—whether the playwright is from Norway, England, Armenia or the U.S. Great drama exists to explore all aspects of the human experience: love, death, war, identity, family, class, gender, repression, freedom—most cultures and communities have experience with such issues, and each of them has a lot to teach and learn from the others.

I asked Stepanian what he thought *A Doll House* was ultimately about. He answered by referring to an exchange between Nora and her husband in the final scene of the play: "I think it's about her [Nora's] line, 'I must learn about the world.' The important realization for her is 'I have to figure out what the world is about.'"

He added, "She sees her own problem and she wants to change—which is a universal problem for everyone."

All Rights Reserved: Critics' Forum, 2008. Exclusive to the Armenian Reporter.

Lori Yeghiayan holds a Master of Fine Arts degree in Theater from the University of California, San Diego and has worked as a professional actress in television, radio, film and theatre.

You can reach her or any of the other contributors to Critics' Forum at comments@criticsforum.org. This and all other articles published in this series are available online at www.criticsforum.org. To sign up for a weekly electronic version of new articles, go to www.criticsforum.org/join. Critics' Forum is a group created to discuss issues relating to Armenian art and culture in the Diaspora.