

# Post-Perestroika Receptions in Staging Ibsen

Margarita Odesskaya

**Abstract** The last ten years have displayed a growth of interest in the plays of Ibsen in Russia, with a great number of performances, both in the main cities and in the provinces. I will consider two Moscow stagings—by Sergey Kutasov (*Pillars of Society*) and Migdaus Karbauskis (*Hedda Gabler*). Also, I will review two St. Petersburg productions: *Hedda Gabler* directed by Vladislav Pazi, and Michael Bychkov's *Nora*; and two provincial productions directed by Vladimir Ageev. I try to present the picture of new interpretations Ibsen's drama on Russian modern stage.

**Key words** Russian; modern; productions; different approaches

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Once the famous actress Olga Knipper—Chekhova rather accurately defined Russian theatre attitudes toward the plays of Henrik Ibsen: they attract and repel at the same time. Ibsen unites a naturalistic sketch of the bourgeois life at the end of the nineteenth century and a symbolic interpretation of each turn of his characters' path into a fantastical amalgam. But directors poorly handled this union. In the Soviet time, Ibsen was not staged often in Russia. Because in the theatre which was subject to ideological tasks, there was no room for "atypical" family conflicts. Soviet viewers were offered heroes who served the interests of the society, did their civic duty.<sup>1</sup>

It should be stated that the last ten years have displayed a growth of interest in the plays of Ibsen in Russia, with a great number of performances, both in the main cities and in the provinces. As before, Ibsen's plays are very attractive and, at the same time, difficult to understand for Russian directors and audience. It is indicative that like a hundred years ago the plays *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler*, which focus on vivid types of freedom-loving and emancipated heroines, remain in the greatest demand for the Russian stage. It is symptomatic that the young directors: Nina Chusova, Migdaugas Karbauskis, and Irina Keruchenko all presented *Hedda Gabler* in Moscow. All three were thesis projects. I will consider two stagings by Migdaus Karbauskis in Moscow and Vladislav Pazi in St. Petersburg.

## *Hedda Gabler*

Migdaugas Karbauskis's staging in the Moscow Theatre-Studio of Petr Fomenko (2004) looks, at first sight, very conservative and traditional. The director and actors have rather succeeded in recreating the bourgeois spirit of a respectable house. Patriarchal and antiquated nature seen with sympathy and slight irony by the director shines through the gestures, manners, motions, and intonations of Aunt Julle and the

maid Bertha. The artist Vladimir Maximov has created modernist style scenery of the Tesmans new house, which is close to the original play. We remember Ibsen's description: "There is a spacious, beautifully and tastefully furnished sitting-room, the decor has kept in dark colors". Such details of Ibsen's scenery as the oval table, small round table, soft armchairs, poufs, and carpets make the sitting-room cozy. The scenery design by the artist Maximov rhymes vertical lines of columns with vertical strips of wallpaper of the two rooms symmetrically located in the back part of the stage. The vertical lines contrast with the roundness of the dark sofas. The house interior contrast of softness and roundness with vertical straightness repeats itself metonymically in the exterior of the heroes, the Tesmans. The Hedda figure is slim, graceful, elongated, and almost incorporeal in a long tight dress of the modernist style. While Jurgen, on the contrary, is a good-natured, stout, and big-bellied man, a bumpkin.

It looks as if contrast is the main principle in the Karbauskis performance. This is the basis of an interpretation of this complicated and contradictory play of Ibsen and rather ambiguous character of the heroine whose motivation is difficult to trace logically. Beautiful, elegant, and ironical Hedda is set off against all. Her gestures and motions show decadence, boredom, and grace. She smokes a cigarette in a long holder, lazily moves along the stage, and laughs openly over the weaknesses of the people surrounding her. However she reigns over Lilliputians and stands against an army of mice. The director obviously has arranged the heroine with absolutely vaudevillian characters to find a logical motivation for Hedda's behavior, her conflict with the world, and a kind of misanthropy. Coming home after a stag night, Hedda's husband bares his belly not only to his wife but also to the audience: the belly falls out of a rich red corset squeezing his flabby body. The comically accentuated physical unattractiveness of Tesman offends Hedda's esthetic feelings, which are fixed on beauty and perfection. The audience has quite a limited choice in responding to the scene of the fool's striptease. The other two male characters match Tesman well. The assessor Brack embodies sexism. His somewhat vulgar manners and lustful glances like Don Juan can't help but to provoke derision from the proud and emancipated Hedda. And finally, clever and extraordinary Lovborg, who has once managed to stir Hedda's heart and now evokes if not love, then at least jealousy, is comical from his first appearance on the stage. His character is intentionally simplified; he looks like a clerk who buries himself away in his work. Having been provoked by Hedda, he who tries deliberately to stick to society's rules appears suddenly tousled and in a dirty coat after the stag night. And the demoniac heroine practically forcedly thrusts a pistol as a present into the hands of Lovborg, who misses the point of what he's expected to do while she explains with a parting wish to have a beautiful death. In order to emphasize the insignificance of the men surrounding Hedda, Karbauskis dresses all of them in the same suits in one of the scenes and Bertha gives them all the same scarves. This simplification of the male characters allows the director to explain to the audience that Hedda should love nobody, because she really has nobody to love. In Karbauskis vision, the problem resides not in Hedda, but in the faceless vulgar society around her. However what to do with the last scene of the play? How to motivate her wish to

go off gracefully by shooting herself in the temple? The director suggests his solution.

The performance has a cyclic composition. It starts with a spectacular scene. In twilight, Hedda is sitting in a semi-circle of sofas, isolating her private space from the other world, with her back to the hall. She's playing with pistols and is aiming with the sound of the gramophone. In this gramophone, Hedda will burn a manuscript of the genius, a child of Thea and Lovborg. In the last scene of the performance, Hedda sits down with her back to the audience again. The semi-circles of sofas are put together and she is sitting inside. The circle has closed. Hedda sets a pistol against her temple in a picturesque and decadent manner. The shot rings out. Hedda falls down and disappears in the circle behind the sofas. A puff of smoke rises over the sofas. At this moment Tesman comes in, patters: "Shot! Right in the temple! Just think!", and quickly leaves for the other room where he and Thea try to reconstruct the manuscript. In a moment, Hedda gets up, smoking a cigarette as before and walking lazily with an air of boredom leaves the scene. The whole play is being dissipated as a cigarette smoke. Nothing changes, everything goes on as before preserving just monotonous boredom. Possibly, the director, who justly viewed Hedda's suicide as illogical, wanted to say that.

It is difficult for a contemporary audience to understand the behavior of Ibsen's characters, their decadence, hyper-aestheticism and narcissism, their noble aspirations and hovering over the world, their pathetic motions and poses, their thirst to rule human fates outside of the historical environment. The Karbauskis performance recreates a world of philistines, but this world is only the tip of the iceberg in the plays of Ibsen. Besides that, *Hedda Gabler* belongs to the late period of Ibsen's creative activity and tolerates neither such a simplification in interpreting the conflict nor a comic one-sided reading of the characters.

The staging of *Hedda Gabler* by Vladislav Pazi, Maria Bryantseva's scenery designs, and Vladimir Bychkovsky's incidental music together with the characters created by the actors transfer us into the atmosphere of the *fin de siècle* epoch. Vladislav Pazi's staging is noted for its high aesthetic culture and rather scrupulous reading of the text of Ibsen's plays. The audience are impressed with the cultural traits of the settings.

The whole performance is considerably constructed. One is plunged into the cold and poetic world of Ibsen's beauty from the very first minutes of the performance a semi-transparent tulle curtain with softly falling, light, whirling snow projected onto it. The pictures change: the quietly falling snow becomes a gusty snowstorm, then waves rise dangerously, sigh, and hit against a shore, large seagulls like those from Hitchcock fly straight at the audience. And due to the brilliant work of the light artist, Yevgeny Ginzburg, wavy curtains that serve as a part of the interior of the Tesman house turn into a severe and well-shaped contour of mountains, which will change color during the performance. The curtain rises to reveal a light, aesthetic construction of the house of the newly married Tesmans. This is a Crystal Palace or the Snow Queen's palace wherein fragile open-work partitions are made of white plastic and glass and look exquisitely beautiful, while at the same time somewhat decorative and flimsy. This contributes to a feeling of temporal, ephemeral existence. Spiral

glass stairs go up to the skies, to infinity. In just such an airy house filled with delicate and graceful flowers lives Hedda, who herself is a flower of evil, a woman that absorbs scents, sounds, gestures of decadence. One even forgets that Ibsen describes furniture of dark colors. Here everything is white and plastic.

The artist and director have carefully thought over the color symbols. Color has its own score in the performance. Blue, the color of waves and its shades from pale blue, light grey, and lilac down to black, will explode alarmingly with red at the end of the performance. Against the pastel background of soft lilac-pink and pale blue flowers decorating Hedda's house, a graceful red bouquet will appear. Thea brings it. The bouquet embodies the first sparks of rivalry, jealousy, which this naive, somewhat funny simpleton has excited by accident in the soul of the passionate, easily inflamed, but outwardly cold and ironical Hedda. This Hedda is erotic and gifted with soft, creeping motions of a flexible cat and enveloping intonations of voice that can cast a spell even on Thea. The scene wherein Hedda is worming a secret of the heart out of the artless Thea is played as a stylization of female vicious sensuality with the Japanese motive that decorative imaging is characteristic of symbolists. Hedda in a pink-pale blue kimono lies languidly by Thea's feet playing with a peacock's feather, lets down Thea's beautiful hair, pours alcohol out to her friend, and proposes to Thea that they drink to "Brudershaft" She instills the poison of her caressing voice inside the girl.

The color red will repeat itself in an autumn bouquet and leaves at the door open to the garden. But behind the open door there is the blackness of the chasm which Hedda suggests that Accessor Brack should enter, thus tempting him and aiming at him as if fighting an erotic duel with this cynical provincial Mephistopheles. Proud Hedda stands high above all, she climbs the stairs, and reigns against a background of mountains like a Nietzschean diabolic goddess of the modernist epoch. The color red first alarmingly lights up the mountains and then inflames as a fire in the tall column of the white chimney where Hedda has thrown the Lovborg manuscript to have revenge on the silly Thea, to crush and destroy her former lover, a genius. Thus she settles scores with her romantic past. The rising fire is the climax of the performance. The color red will burn into a bouquet of autumn leaves, which Hedda will clasp to herself in the last scene before the suicide shown symbolically as her stepping upstairs.

The staging of Vladimir Pazi is a performance of the single heroine who's in the center of the play. Thus, the conflict between a brilliant, strong personality and society, through which the play is frequently interpreted, has been rubbed out. Other characters are rather relevant to their roles. Each actor's work is interesting in its own way. Tesman is an absent-minded scientist, alienated from everything that happens in real life. Thea in her absurd costume looks cranky and resembles Tesman. Aunt Julle is a good-hearted fat woman whom Hedda slightly scares, she somewhat resembles a housekeeper. Parts of Lovborg and Brack have been a bit muffled; these characters just serve as background for Hedda. The actress Elena Pisarenko has managed to transfer the whole scale of complicated feelings of her heroine: she is arrogant, haughty, ironic, vulnerable, nervous, passionate, jealous, erotic, crafty, cool as a

queen, cruel as a demon while as a romantic she aspires to belong to higher world.

### *Pillars of Society*

Sergei Kutasov has interpreted Ibsen's play *The Pillars of Society* (which he staged in Ruben Simonov's Moscow Dramatic Theater in 2006) as a political allegory, a pamphlet. The director has tried to realize in his staging the idea that it is always impossible to remain an upright politician in a corrupted society. Kutasov's staging contains direct allusions to the Soviet political elite and present-day supreme power. The performance has been mounted in the black-white color-spectrum (the artist Svetlana Logofet).

The stage is black. Behind a transparent curtain, men in black official suits stand, a loud-speaker voice and a storm of applause sound. The men come out to the proscenium and utter demagogic speeches interrupted by applause that resembles the Soviet tradition of supreme authorities addressing the people. The curtain rises. The stage is in the shade. All the small stage is stuffed with stacks of grey bags and barrels. Claustrophobic atmosphere is being built up.

Except for the "Fathers" of the town, all other characters are dressed in light linen. They speak of America, the family is afraid of arrival of American relatives. Supreme authorities, Karsten and his surrounding are introduced as a corrupted power. Rummel and Sandstad represent a couple of Karsten's security guards resembling "new Russians", friends of the mob. The security guards keep the Mayor of the town under control. One of them is playing menacingly with a spade. Karsten is carrying bags all the time and stacking them at his doors in the background. Obviously, these motions show his hard, even dirty work on creating his reputation. Lona, arrived from America, tells that the house smells rotten and needs ventilation. Really, the house stuffed with bags resembles a kind of Soviet vegetable store.

In Act Two, the stage is changed after Karsten talks with Lona. Karsten stands on the proscenium; a transparent net separates the back part of the stage. Everything is arranged as if the bags have served as bricks to wall off Bernick. The stage resembles a prison. Karsten Bernick finds himself in the center of a self-introspection that tells his conscience is awaking. He is separated from Lona by the netting wall. Bernick is rushing about the stage. Suddenly the stage is enveloped with smoke and Rorlund looking like a devil appears. Karsten asks his advice on whether it is right to make human sacrifices to a community for its welfare. Rorlund turns abruptly and his spectacles flash out a red light, thus strengthening a demonic effect. Rorlund says that sacrifices are possible. Bernick has become aware of his own dark past and his ungodly rise to the top of power. His conscience tortures the Mayor stuck in the evil. His eyes have opened. The stage looks even more like a prison where Rummel and Sandstad work as jailers. They beat Karsten, bend his arms and forbid him to tell and do what he wants. They put obstacles in the way of his possible repentance. One brings the news that the ship "The Indian Girl" with Karsten's son, Olaf, aboard has sailed. In the background, behind the netting curtain, there appear characters in white shirts, in shrouds. They all, including Karsten's small son, have died when the rotten vessel sank. The supreme authorities come onto the proscenium. Karsten tries

to repent but the “Fathers” of the town press hard upon him. A speech delivered by Bernick is muffled with a storm of applause as in the first scene.

The director has taken out of Ibsen’s play and accentuated just one motif of the political impotence of a leader in a corrupted state. The director uses the play as a mythological model, which, in his opinion, illustrates political processes taking place both in the Soviet and the post-Soviet state machine. This idea has made Sergei Kutsov change the denouement of Ibsen’s play. A happy ending with spiritual discernment and revival to a new life, which is important to Ibsen, is impossible for the journalistically one-sided version of Sergei Kutasov.

### *Nora*

The play *The Doll’s House*—staged by Michael Bychkov at the St. Petersburg Bely Theater on the small stage in the Fyodor Dostoevsky Museum in 2003—is a joint Russian-Norwegian project. It is evident that the problems of women’s emancipation shown by Ibsen using the Helmers as a case of point seem somewhat melodramatic and archaic to the director. That is why Michael Bychkov’s interpretation concentrates on form and style, rather than the idea of the play. The director looks at the heroes and developments of the play as something distant from him, with irony and affection of a modern man. Michael Bychkov considers the Ibsen play as a kind of a palimpsest taking off the parchment cultural layers of the past times. That is why Bychkov’s staging unites the styles of Meyerhold’s theater and silent films. The director accents stylization. This is the principle the modern Russian director uses when staging Ibsen. We feel as if we were really present at a performance in the doll’s house. We see the doors of another doll’s house, a toy theater, open as in Hoffman’s story “*The Nutcracker*”. Actors are made up like silent film stars—Astaire Nielsen (Marina Solopchenko) and a kind of Rudolf Valentino, a fatal jeune premier, (Alexander Bargman) who appears on the stage with pomaded dark hair, dark eyelids and a beauty mark on the cheek. Krogstad (Valery Kukareshin) is a classical demoniac character of the silent films in the style of Konrad Feudt. Mrs. Linde (Svetlana Pismichenko) is also a cliché character of the silent films. Inside the refined sets made by the artist Emil Kapelyush: screens in the modernist style, a flowing down gown of Nora, thin lathes of a China teahouse resembling a bird cage, the heroes play a melodrama under the live music of a ballroom pianist (the composer and performer Valery Piguzov). They pose in a simplified and artificial manner as jeune premiers, tender husband and wife: they roll up their eyes, bend their arms, and modulate voice in a relevant way. One can see that the play’s name *Doll’s House* sounds out significantly in the interpretation of Michael Bychkov. Everything in this world is as fragile and insecure as a doll’s house. Everything is play and pretense. In the last scenes of the performance, when Torvald gets to know about his wife’s forgery and goes into hysterics, the changed Nora who has turned from a doll, squirrel into a human being puts on a black coat and sitting in the “China house” as in the cage quietly tells Torvald how wrong they were living. Then she goes upstairs and dissolves in the dark. Torvald is left caged in the house. The last scene is made in the same decorative manner, but without the simplification and melodrama of silent films. The performance of Michael

Bychkov is featured with high aesthetical culture and light and graceful actualizing of the eternal themes of classical drama.

### **Ibsen in province**

The Ibsen plays staged by Moscow director Vladimir Ageev are impossible now to see in the theater, they are on kept on amateur video shot by the director. However these stagings are worth looking at. First of all, Ageev's choice of the Ibsen symbolic plays: *Lady from the Sea* and *When We, the Dead, Are Being Aroused*, all hadn't been staged in Russia for a hundred years. These plays are not only difficult for a mass reader or audience to understand, but for a director to adapt for the stage. Ibsen was one of the first dramatists of the modernist epoch who changed the philosophy of the plot. Long philosophical dialogues turning into monologues, which manifest ideas of freedom, art, creation, and love, break the traditional structure of the Aristotle drama and make the plot of a play static and difficult to adapt for the stage.

Vladimir Ageev as a director belongs to the conceptual theater. His stagings approach philosophic and symbolic dramatic art and destroy the traditional, psychological theater. Ibsen's plays in the theater of Ageev are staged as play-dreams. Unreal and phantasmagoric images from the world of a fairytale, myth, and dream revive on the stage. When interpreting a play, Ageev constructs the artistic world by the principle of semantic binary oppositions. A blending of grotesque and symbol goes through the structure of the Ageev performances *Lady from the Sea* and *When We, the Dead, Are Being Aroused*. A sick community in the performance *Lady from the Sea* is set off against Ellide who has absorbed the free elements of the sea, poetic fantasy, and a dream. To depict the sick community of fiord dwellers the director uses allegoric images. The teacher Arnholm is practically a Chekhov character, a man in the shell, "thin, frail, and ill." Lyndstrand is a butterfly-man, and Wangel who binds Ellide's freedom with a noose moves along the stage in a wheelchair. A poetic fantasy, a dream of the sea maid Ellide about an omnipresent and free foreign sailor with the symbolic name of Freeman is materialized on the stage into a mighty fantastic image. In the background, the immense figure of a mythological horned sea creature, a frantic director and musician, becomes visible though the haze. This is both a demoniac figure of dark elemental forces, fairytale trolls unconsciously living in the Ibsen's characters, and an inspirer of dreamy, poetic, and musical images, a director of the symbolic world orchestra.

As Ellide's husband Wangel has given her freedom of choice he gets up out of the wheelchair while she having chosen Wangel finds herself in the wheelchair now and, what is more, a picture frame falls down upon her from the top. The dream has vanished into thin air. The story of the picture, which is being painted by the artists Ballested at the beginning of the play about a half-dead sea maid who is lost in the skerries, is becoming a reality.

Having considered some new stagings of Ibsen's plays in Russia, I would like to note that the Norwegian dramatist is becoming relevant again for the contemporary Russian audience. Directors have different approaches to interpreting the heritage of the great master. One can see in these performances a whole spectrum of the modern

theater's points of view to classical drama. The spectrum covers neo-traditionalism, drama adapted for the actual issues of Russian life, neo-symbolism, and postmodernist stylization as a reactivation of a classic work seen through the prism of cultural associations.

**【 Note 】**

1. More details see: Margarita Odesskaya, "Hedda Gabler: Life in Time," *Ibsen and Russian Culture, Ibsen Conference in St. Petersburg Oct. 1 - 4, 2003*. Ed. Knut Brynhildsvoll (Oslo: University of Oslo, 2005) 85-96.

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