NOTES FOR PREPARING YOUR STUDENTS:

GHOSTS by Henrik Ibsen

The attached notes were written by the dramaturge, Richard Roberts. The numbered pages will appear in the programs. You may feel free to copy them for your students.

DRAMATIC REVOLUTION

Ibsen's Ghostly Drama

BY RICHARD J ROBERTS

Henrik Ibsen was already well known as a revolutionary when his new play Ghosts was published at Christmastime in 1881. His A Doll's House had shocked Europe two years previous, with its depiction of a wife and mother of three leaving her husband. It had also thrilled the young and avant-garde audiences of the "new" theatre, with its realistic depiction of middle-class life on stage.

By the mid-nineteenth century, European theatre had become stuck in a rut. Ways of doing things which had developed for practical reasons in the days of Shakespeare and Moliere had calcified into stiff and unwieldy structures which constricted rather than freed playwrights' imaginations. The ideology of neoclassicism, based on a strict and limited interpretation of recently discovered texts of the ancient Greek theatre, offered not mere guidelines, but rigid and unbreakable rules governing everything from subject matter (nothing improper or violent was to be depicted on stage) and scenery (only the most generalized backgrounds, such as "park" or "street" or "terrace") to the number of acts (five, always) and the actors' posture (since there was no furniture on stage, there was no sitting; and one never, ever, turned one's back to the audience). It is no surprise that none of these plays has retained a place in today's repertoire of theatre classics.

There had been other reactions, of course, against these arbitrary strictures: the romantics, with their fairy tale castles and their dark and stormy nights; the advocates of melodrama, with their villains and heroes and damsels in distress; and French playwright Eugene Scribe—then wildly popular but today forgotten—who created "the well-made play," a complicated but very carefully crafted plot which, like an elaborate house of cards, aways threatened to collapse before it was neatly tied up at the last minute.

But it was Ibsen who galvanized the theatre community and ultimately created the "new" theatre, the modern theatre, the theatre which would dominate the twentieth century. Since the plays of the ancient Greeks, tragic heroes had been kings and princes who spoke poetry. Ibsen created middle-class heroes, businessmen and teachers and housewives who spoke common prose yet faced serious issues with tragic consequences. He placed his everyday heroes in everyday living rooms, with doors and windows and chairs to sit on. He read the new theories of Charles Darwin and Sigmund Freud and created characters who were affected by environment and heredity and who possessed inner lives.

Most importantly, Ibsen wrote plays that were "about" something. George Bernard Shaw joked that Scribe, with his well-made (but ideologically empty) plays, created an elaborate baby carriage with no baby; but Ibsen put the baby in the baby carriage. Ibsen used theatre as an ideological weapon. As it had not been for more than a century, Ibsen made theatre significant again.

Ghosts was at the heart of this revolution. Today, critics see Ghosts as one of history's most significant plays, a major turning point, and, as Shaw titled one of his books, "the quintessence of Ibsenism." At the time of its publication in 1881, however, the reaction was less enthusiastic.

Ibsen was a true man of the theatre, with more than a dozen years' experience at various regional theatres throughout his native Norway. Nonetheless, his early plays, such as Peer Gynt and Brand, were great epics poems, "closet dramas" intended to be quietly read in a room at home rather than performed on the stage. The plays of his middle period, on the other hand—A Doll's House and Ghosts and Hedda Gabler and the like—were written for the stage. But their controversial new style made them risky ventures for traditional theatre companies. And their extremely controversial subject matter put them off limits for all but the most progressive companies.

So while his plays were performed here and there, mostly for extremely limited runs at small theatres with enthusiastic but small audiences, Ibsen reached the vast majority of his audience through publishing his scripts. The little books were most often published in December, and among the intellectual set, the chic Christmas gift was a copy of Ibsen's new play.

When Ghosts was published, however, one newspaper stated: "The book has no place on the Christmas table of any Christian home." This sentiment was echoed by newspapers, as well as booksellers and readers across the continent: "one of the filthiest things ever written in

Scandinavia;" "the most unpleasant book we have read for a long time."

Why this storm of protest? In A Doll's House, Ibsen's Nora had realized that she was little more than the property of her husband, and that she had been raised in ignorance of the world outside her household. When she left her husband, she had been roundly denounced, especially by the clergy. So in Ghosts, Ibsen reversed the situation, showing what happens to a woman who heeds the advice of clergy and stays in an unhappy marriage. The themes of both plays—and, indeed, all Ibsen plays from this time forward—are the same: the danger in accepting conventional morality as absolute truth, the importance of overcoming the past, the need for each individual to find his own path through life.

But what made Ghosts controversial was not its thematic material but its subject matter. Adultery, illegitimate birth, incest, venerial disease, free love: all were part of the story—never mentioned directly, of course, for such subjects were strictly taboo, but nonetheless alluded to. Nowadays such subjects constitute the more tame portions of our daily soap operas. But in 1881, the mere hint of such matters was enough to cause Ibsen's book to be banned—and his message largely unnoted.

There were a few bold spirits who championed the play. One Greek scholar found that "of all the modern dramas we have read, Ghosts comes closest to classical tragedy." One critic called the play "free, brave, and dangerous;" another lauded it as "the noblest deed in Ibsen's literary career." Young people were galvanized by the play. Public readings were held in obscure, secret places. In Germany, young actors and actresses used Ghosts as an audition piece long before the ban on the play was lifted.

Ghosts received its world stage premiere in, of all places, Chicago, where it was perfomed in Norwegian with a cast of immigrant amateurs. (This production is the first known of any Ibsen play in America.) It was another year before the play was publicly performed in Europe. Eventually the play came to be recognized, not only as a historic milestone—the first great tragedy written about middle-class people in plain, everyday prose—but also as an exciting piece of theatre. Great actresses throughout the century since it was written have clamored to play the role of Mrs. Alving [see below right].

Ghosts is a powerful psychological drama, enlivened by Ibsen's sharp sense of humor and crafted with the tension and structure of a good thriller. The IRT production, in a lean, crisp adaptation by director Scott Wentworth that emphasizes the play's taut, modern structure without becoming too colloquial, offers Indiana audiences a rare opportunity to see one of history's greatest plays and to enjoy a riveting evening of powerful theatre. ★

HENRIK IBSEN • 1828-1906

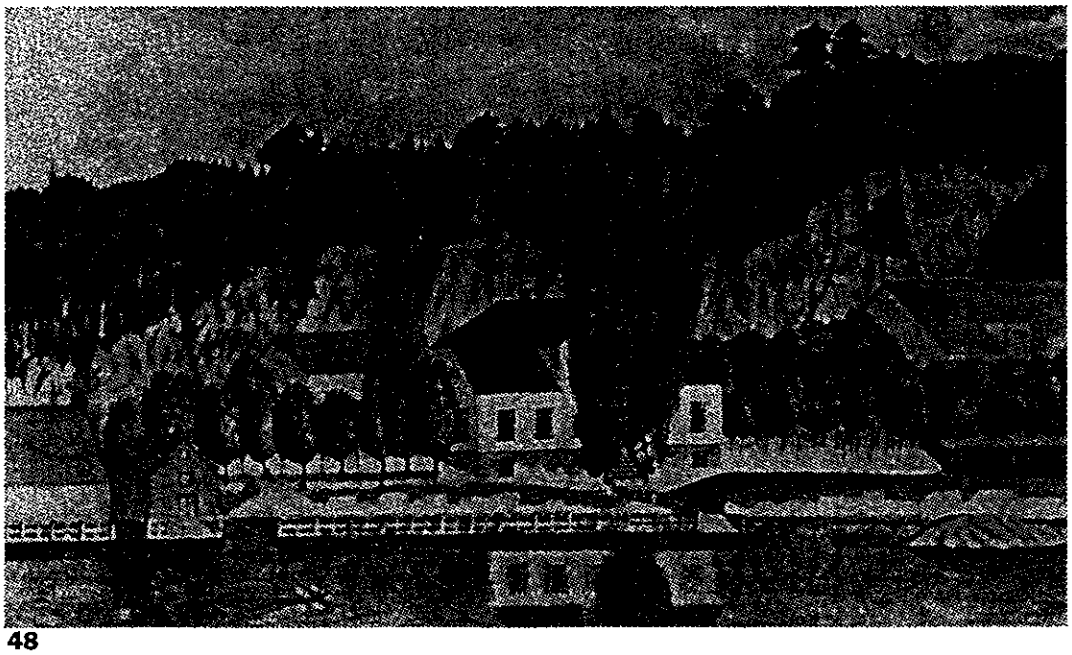
Henrik Ibsen was a man of startling contradictions. A staunch advocate of enlightened social causes, he was often found to reverse his position without warning. Although he attacked middle-class convention in his work, he himself lived a most conventional middle-class life, dressing very conservatively, investing his royalties safely, and quietly but proudly displaying the commendations and honors he had received. A passionately patriotic Norwegian, he spent much of his life in self-imposed exile, and often found himself at odds with both the conservative and the liberal factions of his native land. A renowned poet, he wrote some of the world's most significant prose dramas; yet long after he himself had established prose as the norm for modern drama, he continued to write lyric poetry. His early romantic dramas are surprisingly realistic; his most realistic plays brim with symbolism.

Today Ibsen is best known for a series of plays—*A Doll's House, Ghosts, An Enemy of the People, Hedda Gabler*—that created the modern drama as we know it. But these plays only represent the middle phase of a wide-ranging career as a dramatist. Ibsen's large playwrighting output is usually divided into three periods: the "romantic" plays, the "realistic" plays, and the "symbolist" plays. But with Ibsen these categories prove to be surprising fluid; characteristics one might logically expect to be confined to one group of works have a way of sneaking into all the plays.

Ibsen was born to a wealthy merchant family in a small town in southern Norway. When young Henrik was eight, the family lost its fortune, and the boy suddenly found himself a social outcast. A small and rather delicate child, he was picked on at school, despised by his robust father, and neglected by his religion-obsessed mother. Although he dreamed of being a painter, he focused on a more practical career in medicine; but lacking the funds for medical training, he left home and apprenticed himself to a pharmacist at the age of fifteen.

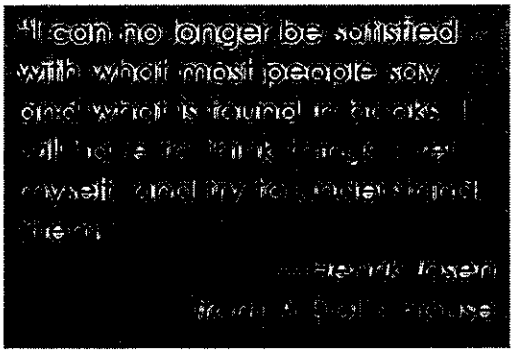
The town of Grimstad was as bleak as it

Henrik Ibsen painted this watercolor of his uncle's estate near his home town of Skien at the age of 14.

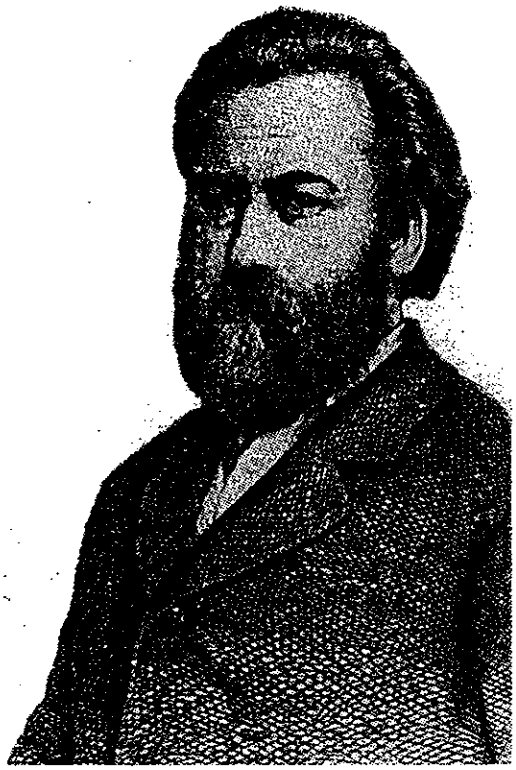


sounds, and Henrik became even more isolated. But there was a small lending library, and the education-starved boy immersed himself in literature. The seashore inspired him to grow a sailor's beard and to write poetry. Finally he found a small group of congenial friends, and together they talked radical politics and played cards and got drunk. A careless liaison with a local serving girl resulted in an illegitimate son whom Ibsen supported but otherwise ignored for many years. A few of his poems were published.

At the age of twenty Ibsen wrote his first verse drama, *Catiline*, glorifying the Roman traitor as an enemy of convention. He left Grimstad to enroll at the University of Christiania but failed to gain entrance. He wrote sarcastic articles and joined a secret revolutionary society. When the group's leaders were arrested and sentenced to prison, Ibsen turned his back on political activity for life.



After composing a poem for the opening of a new theatre in Bergen, Ibsen was invited by the theatre's founder to join the company as stage manager. He was sent to Copenhagen and Dresden to observe theatre activity abroad, and returned armed with scripts and ideas. During six years at Bergen, Ibsen put into production more than 140 plays by Scribe, Shakespeare, and others, assigning roles to the actors, supervising rehearsals—essentially performing the function of today's director (before that modern job really existed). Thus he acquired a very practical inside knowledge of how theatre works. In addition, he was required to write at



Ibsen the revolutionary, 1863.

least one new play each year; his *The Vikings of Helgeland* was considered the finest Norwegian play of its day when it was produced in 1857.

That same year Ibsen became director of the Norwegian Theatre in Christiania, and the next year he married Susannah Thoreson, a deacon's daughter from Bergen. He enjoyed the social life of Christiania, formed a society for the promotion of national culture, and neglected his playwrighting. In 1862 the theatre went bankrupt, and Ibsen became moody, drank heavily, and was often found lying in the gutter.

Eventually he pulled himself together, and his next historical drama was so successful that he was awarded a government stipend for travel. Ibsen's position as national bard seemed assured, but after a series of political disappointments Ibsen decided not to return to Norway from Rome, and he remained in self-imposed exile for 27 years.

Exile, for Ibsen, however, did not mean he forgot his homeland. His next play, *Brand*—the

"Now that Ibsen is no longer ironically aboused, and is safe in the Pantheon, his message is in worse danger of being forgotten or ignored than when he was in the pillory. Nobody now dreams of calling me a muck raveling dog because I think Ibsen a great teacher. I will not go so far as to say I wish they did; but I do say that the most effective way of shutting our mind against a great man is to take him for granted and admit he was great and have done with him. It really matters very little whether Ibsen was a great man or not: what does matter is his message and the need of it."

—George Bernard Shaw
from the preface
to the 1913 reissue of
The Quintessence of Ibsenism,
originally published in 1890

first of what we today consider his major works—was a stirring verse drama about a pastor who leads his flock to great heights against all odds. Hailed throughout Scandinavia, the play was reprinted in numerous editions, and the Norwegian parliament voted Ibsen a lifetime pension. His next play, *Peer Gynt*, is a reverse of the heroic *Brand*. A sprawling folk fantasy filled with humor and pathos, *Peer Gynt* focuses on a spineless opportunist—the birth of the modern anti-hero. Another great success in its time, *Peer Gynt* is today considered to be perhaps Ibsen's masterpiece. It is also the last play in his so-called first, or romantic, period.

From epic poetic sagas, too grand to be realized on stage and therefore intended to be read, Ibsen turned to intimate domestic dramas, designed to revolutionize drama and at the same time bring important social issues to light. Following centuries of poetic tragedies about royalty, Ibsen created the first successful prose tragedies about middle-class people. Instead of theatrically stylized settings, Ibsen's characters lived in realistic, detailed rooms, with doors and windows and furniture. Their stories reflected Ibsen's knowledge of the theories of Darwin and Freud.

Ironically, Ibsen found these new plays to be more read than produced as well, not only because their form was new and strange but also because their subject matter was often shocking. In *A Doll's House* (1879) an unhappy young wife leaves her husband. The outcry against this "immorality" was so great that two years later Ibsen wrote *Ghosts* to show the horrible consequences of a wife staying in a bad marriage. The even more violent storm of protest against *Ghosts* may have inspired Ibsen while writing *An Enemy of the People*, in which the truth-telling hero must stand alone against the lies of an entire town.

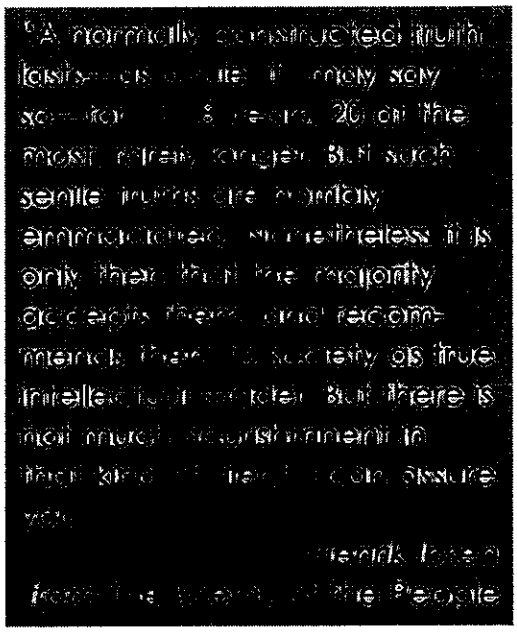
Although Ibsen's plays were scandalous, they were also hightly influential. By 1890, when Ibsen wrote *Hedda Gabler*, he was writing in part about the "new woman" he had created in his "new drama": a woman who thinks independently, a woman who seeks work of her own and a path of her own. The tragedy of *Hedda Gabler* comes when this new woman has no outlet for her new desires; when society and convention and perhaps her own cowardice force her to stifle those impulses towards individuality.

Hedda Gabler is considered the last of Ibsen's "middle" or "realistic" plays. In such plays as *The Lady from the Sea*, *The Master Builder*, and *When We Dead Awaken*, Ibsen explores more deeply the realm of symbolism, always an important element in his work. Plot, cause-and-effect structure, time, and logic become less important in these final, mysterious elegies.

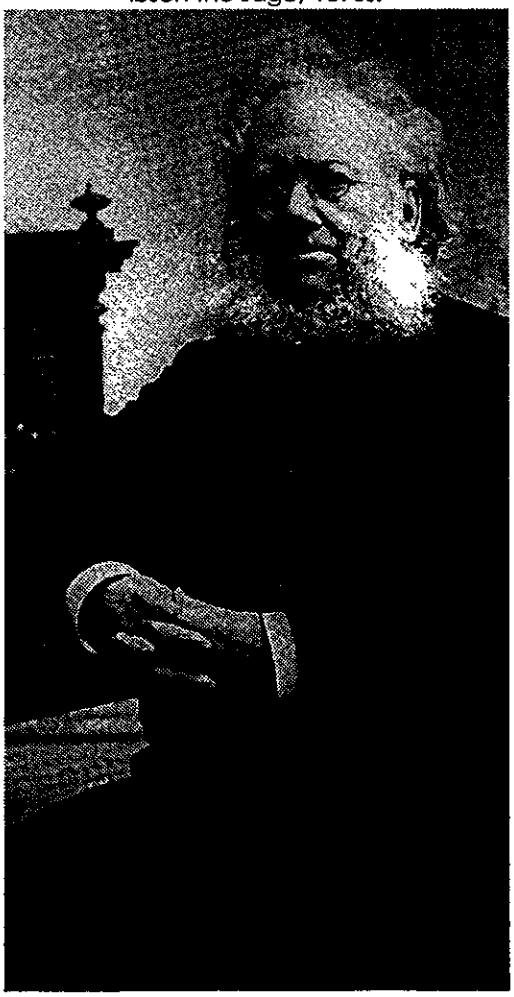
Ibsen always claimed that the only way to

understand his work was to read all of his plays, in order, as one organic whole. Scholars agree. Each play builds upon the themes of the last, or twists them into new and excitingly different shapes. The breadth of style across the full range of Ibsen's work is truly awe-inspiring. His ability to combine elements from many genres into one cohesive dramatic statement ensures that his plays are never boring or schematic.

And even if it is only the middle period of Ibsen's work that is much remembered, one can never under-estimate the importance of that group of plays in theatre history. All of twentieth-century American drama—from Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller to Sam Shepard and Landford Wilson



Ibsen the sage, 1890s.



and Wendy Wasserstein—traces its roots to Ibsen's relentless exploration of the secrets of family life. Not only has Ibsen been the basis for most serious American drama, he is still the basis for much of American episodic television: the revelation of hidden secrets—and the use of drama to focus attention on society's ills—is just as much a part of "Law & Order" or "E.R." or "The Practice" as it is *Ghosts*.

But most importantly, Ibsen's great plays make for great theatre. His mastery at the creation of suspense through the careful revelation of bits of information is unsurpassed. (This concept is another of Ibsen's contributions to modern drama. Most plays written before Ibsen reveal their facts as the events occur on stage. Ibsen returned to the practice of the ancient Greeks and perched his plays at the very end of the story, after most of the events have occured. Thus it is the carefully ordered revelation of secrets, like the revelation of clues in a mystery, that create suspense.) His careful craftsmanship, his powerful yet subtle use of symbolism, and, most importantly, his keen insight into the depths of the the human heart, make his plays not only influential classics, but ripping good plays. ★

—Richard J Roberts

EPILOGUE TO IBSEN'S *GHOSTS*
BY JAMES JOYCE

In March 1934 James Joyce saw a performance of Ghosts *in Paris. The fact that one of Captain Alving's children was a wreck and the other healthy intrigued him and inspired the following poem:*

Dear quick, whose conscience buried deep
The grim old grouser has been salving,
Permit one spectre more to peep.
I am the ghost of Captain Alving.

Silenced and smothered by my past
Like the lewd knight in dirty linen
I struggle forth to swell the cast
And air a long-suppressed opinion.

For muddling weddings into wakes
No fool could vie with Pastor Manders.
I, though a dab at ducks and drakes,
Let gooseys serve or sauce their ganders.

My spouse bore me a blighted boy,
Our slavey pupped a bouncing bitch.
Paternity, thy name is joy
When the wise sire knows which is which.

Both swear I am that self-same man
By whom their infants were begotten.
Explain, fate, if you care and can
Why one is sound and one is rotten.

Olaf may plod his stony path
And live as chastely as Susanna
Yet pick up in some Turkish bath
His *quantum est* of *Pox Romana,*

While Haakon hikes up primrose way,
Spreeing and gleeing while he goes,
To smirk upon his latter day
Without a pimple on his nose.

I give it up I am afraid
But if I loafed and found it fun
Remember how a coyclad maid
Knows how to take it out of one.

The more I dither on and drink
My midnight bowl of spirit punch
The firmlier I feel and think
Friend Manders came too oft to lunch.

Since scuttling ship Vikings like me
Reck not to whom the blame is laid,,
Y.M.C.A., V.D., T.B.,
Or Harbourmaster of Port-Said.

Blarne all and none and take to task
The harlot's lure, the swain's desire.
Heal by all means but hardly ask
Did this man sin or did his sire.

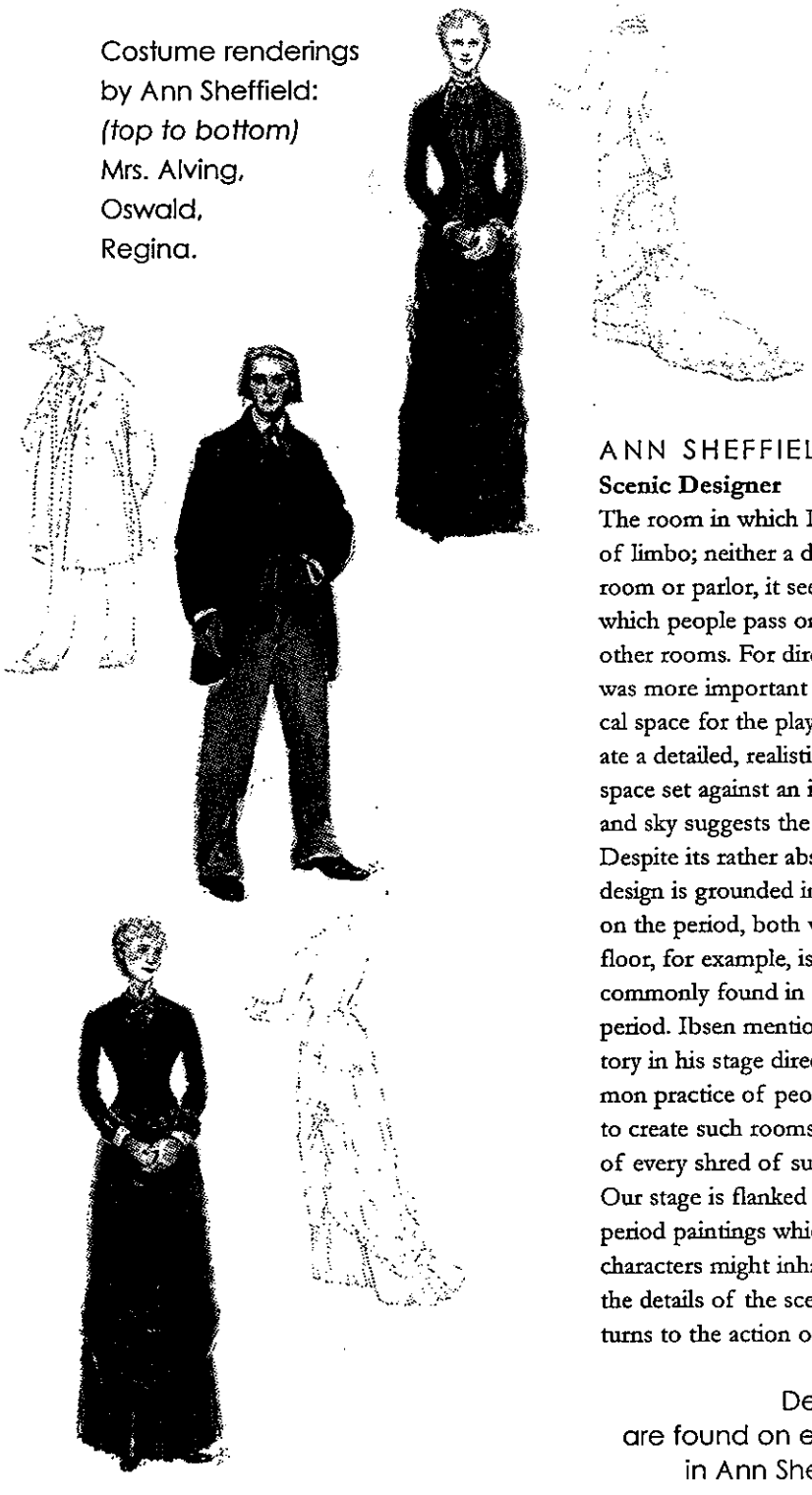
The shack's ablaze. That canting scamp,
The carpenter, has dished the parson.
Now had they kept their powder damp
Like me there would have been no arson.

Nay, more, were I not all I was,
Weak, wanton, waster out and out,
There would have been no world's applause
And damn all to write home about.

★

DESIGNERS' NOTES

Costume renderings by Ann Sheffield: *(top to bottom)* Mrs. Alving, Oswald, Regina.



ANN SHEFFIELD

Scenic Designer

The room in which Ibsen sets *Ghosts* is a kind of limbo; neither a dining room nor a living room or parlor, it seems to be a room through which people pass on the way to and from other rooms. For director Scott Wentworth it was more important to create a vibrant theatrical space for the play than to attempt to re-create a detailed, realistic setting. Our rather small space set against an immense backdrop of fjord and sky suggests the isolation of the place. Despite its rather abstract nature, however, the design is grounded in a great detail of research on the period, both visual and written. The floor, for example, is the kind of pickled wood commonly found in Norwegian homes of the period. Ibsen mentions a glass-walled conservatory in his stage directions, and it was a common practice of people in such a severe climate to create such rooms in order to take advantage of every shred of sunlight, no matter how rare. Our stage is flanked on either side by large period paintings which suggest the house these characters might inhabit. At its center, however, the details of the scenery fade, and our focus turns to the action of the characters. ★

Details from this painting are found on either side of the stage in Ann Sheffield's scenic design.

ANN SHEFFIELD

Costume Designer

In part because our setting for *Ghosts* is rather abstract, we have created very realistic clothes for the characters to wear. The color palette is carefully controlled, but period details and silhouettes are true to history. Mrs. Alving has a restrained elegance, despite a plethora of fussy detail. We have envisioned Regina more as a lady's companion rather than a maid; although she deos not wear a uniform, the simpler detailing of her dress offers a hint of the difference in station between the two women. Oswald, a painter living in Paris, wears clothing inspired by early photgraphs of the Impresssionists. ★

MICHAEL GIANETTI

Lighting Designer

Since this production marks a departure from the "normal" realistic styled interior many people might expect to find for *Ghosts,* the lighting also is intended to embrace this abstracted dream-like style, and to help you look at the play from a different perspective by emphasizing its theatricality and avoiding the domestic, melodramatic approach. I set out to capture in the lighting feelings of coldness and bleakness, as well as the desolation I find in the landscape paintings of Caspar David Friedrich. ★