

hedda gabler

Variety, September 20, 2004

By Robert Hofler

A New York Theater Workshop presentation of the play by Henrik Ibsen in a translation by Christopher Hampton. Directed by Ivo van Hove.

Berte - Elzbieta Czyzewska

Eilert Lovborg - Glenn Fitzgerald

George Tesman - Jason Butler Harner

Hedda Gabler - Elizabeth Marvel

Aunt Julia - Mary Beth Peil

Mrs. Elvsted - Ana Reeder

Judge Brack - John Douglas Thompson

What would have happened to Blanche duBois if Stanley Kowalski had shut up and let her marry Mitch? If you squint real hard at the New York Theater Workshop's current production, director Ivo van Hove answers that question in his startling, riveting new revival of "Hedda Gabler." At the risk of putting the bathtub before the bustle, the Blanche connection offers a pretty eccentric take on Henrik Ibsen's most discontented newlywed. But then, van Hove has made his reputation with revivals that run 180 degrees away from your average, typical interpretation of classic text. Five years ago, he staged "A Streetcar Named Desire" in a bathtub at NYTW. Elizabeth Marvel was his headstrong, sopping-wet Blanche. Curiously, Marvel's Hedda appears to be a more delicate hot-house flower than her Blanche, and she's even quicker to employ girlish wiles to win a point or protect an inner, vulnerable voice.

In recent years, Hedda Gablers like Glenda Jackson and Kate Burton have tended to enter spitting bullets with no apparent need for the old man's pistols. In Ingmar Bergman's acclaimed red-box production from the 1970s, Maggie Smith lurched into a series of violent dry-heaves before uttering one word.

Marvel is slower to burn, giving herself a much more languid build to the character's tragedy. In the beginning, we see her practicing the piano, badly, with a series of musical passages that never lead up to a whole composition. (A soundtrack repeats these snippets throughout the production.) Since so much of

“Hedda Gabler” has to do with how art gets created, Hedda at the piano is a most appropriate image to start the drama. Cursed with too much taste and not enough talent, she has the courage only to destroy.

Unlike other Heddas, Marvel’s bride doesn’t appear trapped in her new apartment when we first meet her after a long honeymoon with the boorish George Tesman (Jason Butler Harner). Rather, she has simply sold-out, not even aware she has compromised herself until her husband’s new high-paying job is thrown into jeopardy by unlikely competition from his old rival and Hedda’s true love, Eilert Lovborg (Glenn Fitzgerald).

Who knows? If the economy had picked up, this Hedda might have been content to laze away her days redecorating, taking in a Broadway matinee or, better yet, boffing one of her old boyfriends, Eilert and Judge Brack (John Douglas Thompson) included. When she complains to them about her deadbeat husband, it’s less about her telling them the truth than putting out feelers.

Who will ever forget Marvel’s nosedive into the “Streetcar” bathtub after receiving Stanley’s birthday gift of a one-way ticket back to Laurel? Five years later, Marvel shows Hedda’s frustration by staple-gunning the welcome-home bouquets to the dry-board walls of her new apartment. (Any New Yorker will feel right at home, but Jan Versweyveld’s empty shell of a set is an acoustical nightmare.)

Van Hove has been acclaimed, and trashed, for placing a play’s subtext downstage. It’s certainly not all that much a stretch to have Hedda and her men physically tear into each other when, for instance, the Judge starts making coy metaphors about threesomes in cramped compartments on the Metroliner. Outside a college production, “Hedda Gabler” has rarely been cast younger, sexier.

Marvel first appears in a knock-off of Elizabeth Taylor’s slip in “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof,” then graduates to something a little less confining for the play’s second half. This Hedda has definitely chosen to get it on with three lookers, and in Thompson’s Brack, she even scores the physical and vocal swagger of Clark Gable. For a moment, it’s as if the Judge, by way of Culver City, has recycled the Rhett Butler speech on Scarlett O’Hara’s talent for marrying the wrong men.

In contrast, Glenn Fitzgerald’s Lovborg is more enigma than man. Van Hove’s real knack for directing actors, however, is with the theater’s male ciphers. In “Streetcar,” he provided Blanche with a no-win situation by turning Mitch into a psychotic momma’s boy. With “Hedda Gabler,” the dramatic problem has always been the character of George. Early in the play, Ibsen offers a disclaimer when he

puts the words in Hedda's mouth: "You're probably wondering why I married him."

It's a question people have been asking for over 100 years. As played by Butler Harner, Hedda's new husband sports the requisite hair gel and three-day beard, and there can be little doubt his Gucci belt sports as many notches as Hedda's. There's even some intriguing intimations of what really motivates his worship/jealousy of the truly talented writer Eilert, whom everybody wants to lay. (Well, maybe not the Judge, but then who knows why he's always throwing bachelor parties.) Tesman isn't so much weak as he is an arrogant prick, which has its appeal for Marvel's passive and ultimately masochistic Hedda. Compared to her final humiliation with the Judge's can of Orange Crush, the self-inflicted gun shot is almost an anticlimax.

Christopher Hampton has loaded his translation of Ibsen's text with lots of contempo slang. Oddly enough, "hat" gets changed to "sweater," but "veranda" and "slippers" remain untouched. Under the circumstances, "porch" and "flip-flops" would not have sounded out of place.

Production design, Jan Versweyveld; costumes, Kevin Guyer; dramaturg, Bart Van den Eynde; production stage management, Martha Ronaldson; assistant stage management, Amy McCraney. Opened Sept. 21, 2004. Reviewed Sept. 19. Running time: 2 HOURS, 30 MIN.