

grounding ibsen

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By Michael Feingold

Ivo van Hove's blunt, stripped-down staging takes a wild Hedda into unknown territory

The best thing, for me, about Ivo van Hove's production of Hedda Gabler is that it reaffirms the depth and truth of Ibsen's great play. It doesn't do this in a way that gives me, personally, great satisfaction, but that's not the point. What matters is that van Hove and his cast—particularly Elizabeth Marvel, in a stunning performance as Hedda—have clearly come to the play in sincere respect, passionately determined to understand it so that they can make it live again in our time. That they accomplish their purpose—for you leave the theater struck by what a great play Hedda is and wanting to discuss every aspect of it—proves both their sincerity and the depth of their understanding. This is not merely another dismissive Eurotrash “deconstruction” of a familiar text, engineered to show off the director's defiant cleverness. I was on leave from reviewing when van Hove staged his notorious Streetcar-in-the-bathtub, but having suffered through his productions of More Stately Mansions and Alice in Bed, I came in skeptical. Those events showed me only that he was willing, like most directors, to take unfair advantage of fourth-rate material better left unstaged. They didn't seem to guarantee a reasoned approach to the power that still resides in Ibsen's Hedda.

That power is notoriously tricky to unleash, because it lies buried deep in the characters. Ibsen is the tragic poet of modern neurosis, and Hedda is one of his most notable cases, an emotionally disturbed young woman whose violent impulses are hemmed in under an iron corset of upper-middle-class urban respectability. Raised by a military father and no mother, she might have done well as a Viking princess; the normal activities of a college-town wife and mother mean nothing to her. Some have viewed her as an unawakened proto-feminist, but Hedda's only feeling toward other women is jealous resentment. She has married an easily dominated man, whom she despises, because she could not dominate the only man she ever seems to have desired. Although pregnant, she neurotically brushes away all impulses of maternal affection; only the idea of destruction arouses her tender feelings. It is possible to regard Hedda as

unremittingly evil, a Hard-Hearted Hannah out to lure men to their doom; the only flaw in this view is the extent to which Hedda's destructiveness is visibly aimed at herself.

Ibsen's narrative shows how social circumstances trap and ultimately doom Hedda. Van Hove's approach is to lay bare the story's underlying mechanism. His grandest gesture is, literally, to do away with the stage, which has been removed from New York Theatre Workshop, at a cost that must equal what the newlywed Tesmans spent to purchase the priciest house in town. The shockingly bare space is ringed with patchy drywall. Marvel's Hedda is onstage virtually throughout. Though containing only a few pieces of unmatched, tacky furniture (including a small portable TV), this updated Tesman household is nevertheless blessed with two standard 19th-century bourgeois appurtenances, a piano and a maid. The former, at the foot of which Hedda is huddled when we come in, is never played, only plonked on or pounded; the latter (Elzbieta Czyzewska) serves mainly to announce new arrivals, visible on the video intercom in the wall, near which she sits like a guard dog, chain-smoking and leading an inexplicably ferocious emotional life of her own.

"Inexplicably ferocious," in fact, would be an accurate description of the emotional life with which van Hove has invested each of the performances. There are no blandly one-dimensional nice people being earnest in pretty 19th-century costumes, as happens when a traditional production of Hedda is dully staged. Here everyone is sullen, each in a different tonal range, except when screeching in fury. Mary Beth Peil's Aunt Julia stalks the stage like a forbidding hawk in search of prey; Jason Butler Harnar, as her coddled nephew, George, slouches around barefoot or sulks, muttering, on the couch when not throwing infantile tantrums. Glenn Fitzgerald's Eilert is a brash, unstable swaggerer, Judge Brack (John Douglas Thompson), a towering, glowering bully who shows his power over Hedda by drooling tomato juice onto her face. Most intriguing of all, aside from Marvel, is Ana Reeder's restless, guilt-stricken Thea.

That these performances should have impressed themselves on me so emphatically indicates the accuracy with which van Hove has worked, since virtually nothing done onstage in this production has any literal resemblance to the action of Hedda Gabler. Van Hove's daring has been to take a play that is entirely about repression and insist on having all its feelings emerge unrepressed. He has a point: 115 years after Hedda's premiere, we've learned to read most of repression's secrets. The issue is whether stripping the play bare like this leaves anything to move and gratify the audience. With a play of Hedda's richness, the answer is clearly yes. The one thing missing is the quality of play, which is

built into the naturalistic details of the production Ibsen imagined. This is not a reactionary demand for dreary stagings that replicate Ibsen's expectations: The greatest Hedda I've ever seen (by Andrea Breth for Berlin's Theater am Halleschen Ufer) was the hypernaturalistic antithesis of van Hove's. Yet it lacked a Hedda as powerful and nuanced as Marvel's. Clearly, Ibsen's truth lies in the meaning, not in the style. How far you can go from the style without losing the meaning is a different matter.