

Knock, Knock. Nora's At The Door Again

I had a fair amount of trepidation about “A Doll’s House, Part 2.” Doesn’t Nora deserve to live on in our imagination rather than have someone – playwright Lucas Hnath – come along and fill in the blanks? The shock of closing the door behind her is all that was needed to be said as Nora’s decision to leave her husband and children signaled a new beginning for women in the Western world, no longer servants to their husbands or slaves to stultifying definitions of housewifery.

But Hnath and the Huntington quickly made believers of me in a sparkling production of his smart play, which stays true to the tone and substance of Henrik Ibsen’s classic while bringing the issues he’s talking about headlong into the 21st Century, complete with contemporary colloquialisms. And, no small measure, adding a hearty sense of humor and earthiness.

Nora, as we might expect, has gone from the mouse that roared in “A Doll’s House” to a full-throated lioness in “Part 2.” It turns out, 15 years later, Torvald never filed for divorce and Nora (Mary Beth Fisher) can’t really get on with her life without one. With fling after fling as well as literary success behind her, she’s unapologetic about leaving her family, even her three children. Which hardly makes her a hero as she’s confronted with her selfishness by servant Anne Marie (Nancy E. Carroll), her husband Torvald (John Judd) and her daughter Emmy (Nikki Massoud).

After I saw the celebrated version of the Ibsen play with Janet McTeer in 1997, a feminist friend of mine said, “So what did we [society] get from her walking out? Divorce and broken homes?” That’s kind of the jumping off point here. Maybe “A Doll’s House” was as much narcissism as feminism?

That’s what Nora is confronted with by the three other characters, but not so fast, she says, listing all the ways that marriage is bad for mind, body and soul. So why, counters Anne Marie, has the institution gone on so long? And her hip young daughter can’t wait to marry as she challenges her mother:

“I know nothing about what a marriage is and what it looks like. But I do know what the absence of it looks like, and what I want is the opposite of that. I want to be held. I want to be possessed. I want to be somebody's something. I can see you cringe when I say what I'm saying. But that's about you, and it's not about me, and I'm telling you what I want, and you may want something different for yourself, but don't make my wants about your wants.”

There’s a Shavian feeling to the dialogue and Shaw’s “Getting Married” was an influence on the play. Hnath says in the program notes’ joint interview with Hnath and the production’s director Les Waters, a champion of the playwright’s work. And like Bernie,

Hnath spreads the good lines around to everybody. Nora gives as well as she gets and, once again, has the last word.

“A Doll’s House, Part 2” could have been little more than a jokey updating of Ibsen or a dry dialogue, but every time either of those alternatives threaten then Hnath snaps the story back into something smarter and wittier. And Waters and the four cast members are with him every step of the way.

I find most revisitations awful – “Death Comes to Pemberley,” “Christmas at Pemberley,” ugh. But Nora, it’s great to see you again.