



Script for *StageWorks* Episode 3, by Katrin Redfern

(TITLE ANIMATION AND MUSIC) I'm Katrin Redfern, and you're watching *StageWorks*. Now, I recently caught a really well-done production of Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* in London, and I want to talk about what made it so memorable, but also a bit about Ibsen's contribution to drama in general.

If you're in London, you're in luck because the play (PIC 1) is in the West End until March. If you're somewhere else, I'm going to try and make up for it – I guarantee you'll learn something.

So first, to set the scene, a family home amid the misty fjords of 1880's Norway, where long-held secrets are waiting to emerge. The set (PIC 2) and lighting creates a visual language for Ibsen's drama of light and shadow, drawing from the work of Scandinavian artists like Edvard Munch, (PIC 3) Vilhelm Hammershoi, and Ibsen's own paintings, and conjures a dark beauty, like an Ingmar Bergman film. The trailer for the play gives a good sense of the atmosphere they created onstage. (VIDEO CLIP)

The 'ghosts' in Ibsen's momentous play refers to those entrenched patterns of behaviour, and limiting customs and expectations that we inherit and find difficult to shrug off. Helene Alving, the protagonist, has spent her life suspended in an (PIC 4) emotional void after the death of her cruel but outwardly charming husband. Weary of protecting the family's honour, she finally summons the courage to cut through all the lies and reveal that her husband was... kind of a dick, and had made her life a misery (she's even had the daughter (PIC 5) he had with their maid living in her house all these years). The tragedy is that she decides to stop keeping up appearances too late, and at a point which coincides with the realisation that her (PIC 6) son Oswald, newly returned from living the high life in Paris, and interested in this undercover half-sister of his, is being eaten from inside by syphilis (PIC 7), a longterm gift from his philandering father.

The superb Lesley Manville is a subtle and searching Mrs Alving, who starts out with a confident and capable exterior (PIC 8) and thus has a scintillatingly long way to fall. There's an intriguing sense of the beginnings of a liberal, independent life that she has started to carve out for herself in this suffocating Norwegian backwater, watched over by the disapproving (PIC 9) Pastor Manders. There's an edge of recklessness to the bitter humor and disappointment with which she confronts the Lutheran minister, who insisted (PIC 10) that she return to her husband when she sought his love and help. With his pedantic expression and (PIC 11) pinched tone, Will Keen brings out what is grimly ludicrous in this officious spiritual adviser who, while adamantly convinced of his rightness, is an (PIC 12) unerringly bad judge of character.

Ghosts is a spring-coiled 90 minute arc of secrets and lies setting off dramatic fireworks in a single room, (PIC 13) the performance unfolding with alertness and intensity to its devastating conclusion. In the climactic final scene, as Jack Lowden's charismatic, anguished Oswald descends into the madness of his disease and his (PIC 14) harrowingly

distraught mother contemplates euthanasia (PIC 15), the translucent walls of Tim Hatley's set are flushed with a (PIC 16) blood-red Nordic dawn.

Sir Richard Eyre (PIC 17) directs the fourth of his five major productions this year, and from the start, his (PIC 18) staging is vibrant, forceful and swift-footed. (PIC 19) As he said, by the end we're left wondering, "Bloody hell. How did we end up here?" Eyre also did the translation, as he's done previously, adapting and directing Hedda Gabler, also at the Almeida Theatre (PIC 20). The dialogue has a freshness and immediacy, managing to convey the time without lapsing into anachronism.

So that's the production that's in store for you if you head to the West End. The best of Ibsen's work, wherever you see it, speaks to his vision of (PIC 21) thwarted human potential. From Ibsen we have Nora from A Doll's House, Hedda Gabler, Mrs. Alving, Rebecca West from Rosmersholm, Petra Stockmann from An Enemy of the People – all are trapped in convention and repression. And all, are women! Ibsen was particularly interested in the limitations placed on women and provides us with some of the few plays with central characters who are female. It really is rare folks.

So thanks for that Ibsen. The great political activist Emma Goldman wrote, "The voice of Henrik Ibsen in *Ghosts* sounds like the trumpets before the walls of Jericho. Into the remotest nooks and corners reaches his voice, with its thundering indictment of our moral cancers, our social poisons." As with Chekhov, Ibsen sees boredom and indifference to suffering as the insidious malaise that infects his society. "Every man," (PIC 22) he said "shares the responsibility and the guilt of the society to which he belongs. To live is to war with trolls in heart and soul. To write is to sit in judgment on oneself."

Apparently Ibsen liked to judge his appearance as well, he had a mirror sewn into his hatband so he could admire himself. He rocked a pretty big look, (PIC 23) check out those sideburns. Not the hottest guy around but luckily he was good with pen and paper.

Ghosts was written when Ibsen was living in Rome. It was customary to publish plays before they were performed, and the play appeared in bookshops in Denmark shortly thereafter. He anticipated its reception: "It is reasonable to suppose that *Ghosts* will cause alarm; but so it must be. If it did not, it would not have been necessary to write it." He wasn't to be disappointed. The play was called "revoltingly suggestive and blasphemous", this was 1881! Large piles of unsold copies were returned to the publisher, the booksellers embarrassed by their presence on the shelves. *Ghosts* was sent to a number of theatres in Scandinavia, who all rejected it. It was first performed by Danish and Norwegian amateurs in a hall in Chicago, for an audience of Scandinavian immigrants.

Shortly after Ibsen's death in 1906, director Max Reinhardt asked the Norwegian artist Edward Munk to design the set for the production of *Ghosts* that was to open his new theatre in Berlin. Munk designed an expressionist set (PIC 24) that surrounded Biedermeier furniture with oppressive walls of (PIC 25) ochre yellow. "I wanted to stress the responsibility of the parents," he said, "but it shows my life too, my 'why?' for youth was a sickroom and life a shiny, sunlit window – with glorious colours and glorious joys – and out there I wanted so much to take part in the dance, the Dance of Life."

Well that's our show for today, hope you enjoyed it. We'd love to hear from you on twitter – @stageworks007, by email, or on Facebook. Bye for now.

END CREDITS

Writer Katrin Redfern

Host Katrin Redfern

Producer Katrin Redfern

Executive Producer Tony Hindhaugh

Director Tony Hindhaugh

Editor Marcus Cooper