Symbolism, Realism, and a Nordic Playwright Grudge Match: Crash Course Theater #33

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=xiiaed3puhY
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/xiiaed3puhY

===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

(PBS Digital Studios logo)

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Theater, and today we'll be visiting one of the greatest grudge-matches of 19th century drama: the bitter Scandinavian rivalry between Norway's Henrik Ibsen and Sweden's August Strenberg. How ugly was this rivalry? Ibsen bought a portrait of Strenberg, retitled it "The Outbreak of Madness", and hung it above his writing desk. "He is my mortal enemy," Ibsen told a friend, "And shall hang there and watch while I write. I think he looks so delightfully mad." What did I say about acting like a gentleman? We'll also be looking at how both Ibsen and Strenberg created shattering realistic and naturalistic dramas and then made late-career turns towards symbolism. The two of them basically invented modern drama. Lights up.

(Crash Course Theater intro)

Meet Henrik Ibsen and his mutton chops. Ibsen was born in Norway in the port town of (?~1:06). He left school at the age of 15 and apprenticed himself to a pharmacist. At 18, he got the pharmacist's 28 year old maid pregnant and she had a son that he never met. He spent the next few years writing verse dramas that no one paid much attention to and helping to head a theater. Then, he married and left Norway and wrote a pair of hugely influential verse plays: "Brand" which is about a priest so stern and unshakable that he lets everyone die, and "Peer Gynt", a parable about identity derived from folk tales. It has trolls, runaway brides, the sphynx, and a fearsome monster called the Boyg, and even though Ibsen thought it was basically unstagable, directors liked to try.

Now, maybe you're thinking, uhh, this is the guy who transforms realism? The everyone-dies-in-an-avalanche, party-down-with-the-troll-king dude? Yeah. Because after writing "Emperor and Galilean", which Ibsen and only Ibsen considers his best play, something wild happened.

===== (02:00) to (04:00) =====

Ibsen decided that prose is for reality, verse for visios, and he started writing plays about bourgeouis people in trouble, which, incidentally, is also the rejected first title for House Hunters International. First Ibsen wrote "The Pillars of Society" and then "A Doll's House", "Ghosts", and "An Enemy of the People". "People demand reality," Ibsen wrote, "No more, no less," and Ibsen gave it to them. It's hard to describe how important and shocking these plays were to 19th century theater. They seemed to shake the very foundations of civil society in Europe. One of the things that made them so radical is that they don't look radical. If you squint, they look like (?~2:45) well-made plays with end-of-act cliffhangers, plenty of plot twists, and a recognizable narrative arc, but Ibsen made important changes. He got rid of the really artificial stuff like the soliloquies and streamlined the exposition, shifting the themes towards heredity and environment. (?~3:04) sacrificed characterization to the demands of plot, but Ibsen held character, complicated multi-layered character, paramount.

"Before I write down one word, I have to have the character in my mind through and through. I must penetrate into the last wrinkle of his soul," he wrote. But here's the real scandal: (?~3:27) plays end with discoveries that reaffirm comfortable ideas about marriage and children. Bourgeois people out of trouble. Ibsen's plays end by revealing the bourgeois family as a sham. These plays don't complacently transmit received ideas. They argue that the ideas themselves are the problem.

Unlike some realistic and naturalistic writers, Ibsen never enjoyed degredation for its own sake. He wrote a little prudishly, "Zola descends into the sewer to bathe in it. I to cleanse in it."

===== (04:00) to (06:00) =====

But plenty of his critics felt that his plays weren't clean enough. There's a famous review of "Ghosts" that compared the play to "an open drain, a loathesome sore unbandanged, a dirty act done publicly, a lazar-house with all its doors and windows open". Go on, tell us what you really think.

For a closer look, let's explore one of Ibsen's only slightly less controversial plays, his 1879 work "A Doll's House". The ending was such a shock that Ibsen wrote an alternate ending for German audiences. Help us out, Thought Bubble.

Nora Helmer is a nice, middle-class wife preparing a nice, middle-class Christmas for Torvald, her bank manager husband, and their three children. Nora receives a visit from her school friend, Christine, who hopes that Torvald will give her a job at his bank. As they chat, Nora reveals that years ago, she borrowed money for a trip to improve Torvald's health, forging her dad's signature on the bank loan. Torvald says that, yes, he can give Christine a job, because he's about to fire creepy Krogstad. But after Torvald leaves, Krogstad sneaks in and tells Nora he now knows about her loan secret and if he's fired, he'll expose her as a forger. Nora's friend Dr. Rank also plays a visit. Torvald refuses to rehire Krogstad so Krogstad shoves a letter detailing Nora's crimes into Torvald's mailbox. Dr. Rank returns and tells Nora that he's dying of a venereal disease contracted by his father. Heredity and environment. And that he loves her. He says this using an elaborate metaphor involving asparagus and Nora's all, heh heh heh, asparagus? Gotta go. Nora confesses to Christine and Christine's all, Krogstad? I used to date that dude. Let me see what I can do, and then Torvald is all, hey, why don't you practice your sexy dance that you're going to do at tomorrow's costume party, because it's important that we establish how I see you as a sexual object rather than a human being, but Nora dances badly on purpose so that Torvald will have to spend the evening coaching her and won't have time to check the mail.

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

Then she thinks about killing herself. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

In the final act, Christine tells Krogstad that she's always loved him and Krogstad says, okay, I'm so happy, I'll take back the letter, but Christine is like, no. It's time everyone knows the truth. Nora and Torvald return from the costume party with Dr. Rank who tells them he has to go off and die now and Torvald finally checks the mail. He reads the letter and instead of praising Nora for her ingenuity and sacrifice, he turns on her and tells her that she's ruined them all and that she's not a fit mother. Then, a letter arrives from Krogstad returning the forged document. Torvald's all, hahaha, just kidding, we're saved, yay! But Nora's all, but wait, you've just shown me that our marriage was always a hollow fiction, I'm leaving you and the children and going out into the world to discover who I really am, here's your ring back, kthnxbaiiii, door slam heard round the world.

Ibsen borrows from bourgeois drama and melodrama, but also inverts their conclusions. Earlier dramas imply a return to conservative values, but Ibsen's work suggests that these values are all wrong, and that they keep people from realizing their full humanity and potential. In the late 19th century, it's hard to imagine an act more brave and subversive than Nora's.

Ibsen continued to write prose dramas, but in his late plays like

"The Wild Duck" and especially "When We Dead Awaken", he returned to a kind of mystical symbolism. Ducks aren't just ducks, mountains aren't just mountains, these tragic beautiful plays became a huge influence on later writers who argued that maybe realism actually isn't the best way to capture the experience of life.

After his tryst with the pharmacist's maid, Ibsen's life, for the record, was impeccably upright, moral, and bourgeois itself. That was just one of the many things that Strindberg hated about him. The Newman to Ibsen's Seinfeld, Strindberg was a playwright, historian, and alchemist, and apparently a really fun guy when he wasn't having bouts of extreme paranoia or raging against the Jews. Ew.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

Strindberg was born in 1849 to a mother who had been a servant. After a brief stint as a pharmacist's assistant--coincidence?--he studied modern languages and wrote a bunch of history plays while working as a librarian. He married (?~8:26), an actress from an aristocratic family, and together, they left Sweden.

In the 1880s, Strindberg began to correspond with Zola and discovered naturalism before eventually turning to symbolism. He had two more marriages and periodic breakdowns, including instances of paranoia where he thought the world was full of Strindberg impersonators.

Why did he hate Ibsen so much? Well, he thought that Ibsen had modeled a couple of ineffectual characters after him. "Do you know that my seed has fallen into Ibsen's brainpan--and fertilized! Now he carries my seed and is my uterus," Strindberg wrote. So first, for the record, eughhh. Strindberg also hated Ibsen's focus on independent women, calling him an "ignorant women's writer". Not gonna lie, I'm pretty much rooting exclusively for Ibsen all the way in this rivalry, but we're gonna see what Strindberg got up to when he wasn't paranoid or whinging.

Strindberg's first artistic successes were a trio of naturalistic plays: "The Father", "Miss Julie", and "The Creditors". In his most famous, "Miss Julie", written in 1888, an aristocratic woman has sex with her father's manservant. Realizing she is now in his power, she commits suicide. Strindberg published a preface to the play, explaining his naturalistic theories. In his preface, he wrote that, "The theater has always been a public school for the young, the half-educated, and women, who still possess that primitive capacity for deceiving themselves or letting themselves be deceived." And that he was going to work to write something more truthful.

===== (10:00) to (12:00) =====

Yeah. If it isn't entirely clear by now, Strindberg had huge borderline psychotic issues with women. Like Ibsen and the French naturalists, Strindberg believed that character was way more important than plot and he spent a lot of time exploring the psychological aspects of his characters, especially as they related to our good friends Heredity and Environment. Here's his explanation for what leads to Miss Julie's tragic fate: her mother's primary instincts, her father raising her incorrectly, her own nature and the influence of her fiance of her weak and degenerate brain, also more particularly, the festive atmosphere of midsummer night, her father's absence, her monthly indisposition, her preoccupation with animals, the provocative effect of the dancing, the midsummer twilight, the powerfully aphrodisiac influence of flowers, and finally, the chance that drives the couple together into a room alone plus the boldness of the aroused man.

So, for the record again: Eughhh. Yes. The guy doesn't take psychology lightly or actually. After some periods of occultism and insanity, don't ask, Strindberg like Ibsen made a late turn towards symbolism. He began to write plays that had the feel of dreams or nightmares, including "To Damascus", "A Dream Play", and "The Ghost Sonata". Like his earlier realist works, these are about people seeking meaning in a seemingly meaningless universe but in these symbolist works, Strindberg abandoned psychological realism for something stranger and more fragmented. "The author," he wrote, "has sought to imitate the disconnected but apparently logical form of a dream. Upon an insignificant background of real life events, the imagination spins and weaves new patterns: a blend of memories, experiences, pure inventions, absurdities, and improvisations."

Strindberg's late plays anticipate expressionism and surrealism, styles we'll explore in upcoming episodes.

===== (12:00) to (13:09) =====

These two guys, who hated each other, pretty much established or anticipated most of the major forms of 19th century drama, and it's worth noting that even though they loathed each other personally, they did kind of sneakily admire each other's work. Ibsen couldn't deny that Strindberg had real talent and Strindberg once wrote that since Ibsen had written a play as good as "Ghosts", it was impossible to hate on him completely.

Next time, we're off to Russia to hang with that bespectacled modernist colossus, Anton Chekhov, but until then, curtain.

Crash Course Theater is produced in association with PBS Digital Studios. Head over to their channel to check out some of their shows like The Art Assignment. The Art Assignment is a bi-weekly series hosted by curator Sarah Urist Green. Sarah highlights works, artists, and movements throughout art history and travels the world exploring local galleries and installations.

Crash Course Theater is filmed in Indianapolis, Indiana and is produced with the help of all of these very nice people. Our animation team is Thought Cafe. Crash Course exists thanks to the generous support of our Patrons at Patreon.