Director Stacy Ray has orchestrated a superb production of Nora at UH Manoa’s Kennedy Theatre Mainstage, playing one more weekend, April 20, 21, and 22. Nora is Ingmar Bergman’s adaptation of Ibsen’s A Doll’s House. Bergman masterfully honed the script to its minimum, and the result is a taut line through events forcing the eponymous character to come to terms with her life.

No curtain is used for this play. The simple set is revealed for the audience to soak in from entering the theatre. Like the script, there are no extraneous pieces. It is obvious each item has been carefully chosen to fit into the narrative. At both stage right and left visible near the wings, there are chairs painted black, and it becomes apparent that when not in the scene, the actors will wait here.

Set designer Rachel Filbeck has created a set of large windows looming over the acting area. They very nicely provide a view and show us the passage of time through the use of excellent projections by lighting designer Joseph Governale. His lights are best described by the fact they do not draw attention to themselves. They guide our eyes to the action. I never questioned where I was supposed to place my attention, because the lights effortlessly led me to the center of action.

Each character is announced by their name in lights upon entering the play for the first time. It’s not something that I found necessary, but it was a choice that I could live with.

The costumes by Marc Marcos fit. A simple thing to say, but it is high praise. The actors were at home in everything he put them in. They flowed with the characters, and the actors never fought with what they were wearing. I never felt the characters having to somehow explain the costumer’s choices. I could tell they were fully invested in the clothing chosen for them.

Brian Shevelenko’s sound design added color to the experience of the whole. I felt it was like a heart beating just beneath the surface of the action. Nora enters the playing area with a lively dance number. It sets the tone. She’s wearing earbuds, and we’re eavesdropping, which is what happens in the rest of the play. The events revolve around Nora, and we watch as she moves through them. At one point, a clock’s ticking resonates through the theatre, and I found myself wishing it had a subtler beginning by fading into our awareness.

Nora begins the action with a purposeful step into the playing area informing us that the stage is divided between the center where the action happens and the sides where actors wait their various...
entrances. Christine Lamborn, a master’s level student, plays Nora. However, I’d like to look at the other actors first.

Dr. Rank is male in *A Doll's House*. Director Ray cast a woman in the role for this production, and I applaud loudly. A female family friend adds great depth and utterly transforms one of the most touching scenes between the doctor and Nora. It is a director’s choice that is worthy of its own applause. Our doctor is played by Malia Wessel. She walks with a cane and a stiff leg, a disability that informs the character we see. The woman we see as the doctor is similarly constrained, and Ms. Wessel plays it well. I had no doubt this character had a limit. The actor, Ms. Wessel, has no limit, but her doctor does, and she plays it. There is one aspect that doesn’t work for me. Persons with disabilities find a way to exude life they may not be able to display as those with freely moving bodies can. It may be in a certain body part, or it may be in an attitude. I kept watching for this from Ms. Wessel. I saw the disability played expertly, but I wanted the life under it.

Emily Steward brings Christine Lund to life. When she enters, she’s sheathed in an enormous scarf that covers her throat and chest. This is the only costume choice I disagreed with. It bound Ms. Steward. It guarded her, and in some ways closed her off from Nora in their first scene together. Christine Lund is a guarded woman, to be sure, but the character is also there in need of Nora’s help. I saw a character protecting herself. I wanted an opening, an invitation. Ms. Steward reaches out with the words and pleads with Nora in a very subtle way. The words reach us. Christine Lund is a woman who reaches out to other characters, and Ms. Steward does that nicely. She does come unwound from the scarf, and Ms. Steward opens the character appropriately.

Tyler Haugen plays Nora’s husband, Torvald Helmer. Mr. Haugen moves like a man who is going places, as indeed Torvald is. In the early minutes of his entrance, I found myself questioning how Mr. Haugen was going to show us the master of the house. I was a bit lost, but Mr. Haugen dispelled my questions and set himself on his throne in his castle. It’s those first few minutes that worry me. Is there something about being a master of a house that Mr. Haugen was questioning? Torvald is a man in love with his role. Mr. Haugen definitely gets into the role of master, and he relishes it very soon after my initial questioning. He wields his power in his castle completely, and I rested easily in my seat watching this husband lord it over his wife.

Nils Krogstad provides the catalyst for Nora to find change necessary. Donovan Oakleaf plays the antagonist superbly. From the way he stepped into the playing area, I knew this character was fully realized. Krogstad has a crystal clear understanding of his mission; Mr. Oakleaf knows precisely how he’s going to get it. With perfect pitch, this Krogstad is rock solid in his determination to prevail. There is no questioning. He will get what he wants, or he will wreak havoc in the lives of anyone in his way. Mr. Oakleaf breathes like he is fully at home on a stage in a costume living as a character. Perfect.

Christine Lamborn beautifully realizes Nora Helmer. From her initial step, she bounces into our lives as a wonderful Nora, a woman living as a wife and mother who happens to have a secret, which is to her an inconvenience. When Krogstad changes the game, the inconvenience becomes a danger, but Nora doesn’t fully grasp its depth. Ms. Lamborn lets her bounce linger, fading as the realization grows. Ibsen wrote a full arc for Nora, and Ms. Lamborn fills every inch of it. There is clear growth. Ms. Lamborn gives us a fully realized woman to watch as she experiences events. In the end, Nora stands on a precipice about to step in faith not knowing where she may land. Ms. Lamborn is engrossed in the moment. She,
too, has no idea where her Nora is going to land, but she knows she must take a step. She understands she must cease being a wife/mother and become a woman/human. She looks into the black space out of the playing area, forcing our gaze there, too. Glorious.

The design is excellent, and the performances are masterful, which would not have been possible without the expert direction of Ms. Ray. The choices were informed by her vision. The superb line delivery by the actors was from the sure hand of a master director. In many places, the actors talk over each other just like we do in real life, certainly a choice of Ms. Ray. The actors have clear performances, because the director clearly understands each character's presence in the scene. There is nothing extraneous in Bergman’s adaptation of this classic script, and Ms. Ray is equally precise. Each line and each movement in the acting area have meaning. I thought I’d watched a master acting class, and that is only possible with a master at the helm. This play is clean. Ms. Ray deserves the highest praise.

See this play.

Written by Jake McPherson.  
Nora, Kennedy Theatre

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