A Doll's House

Society: Ewhurst Players
Production: A Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen
Director: George Yates
Producer: Amanda Jones
Venue: Ewhurst Village Hall
Date: Friday 30th October 2026

Ibsen wrote this famous work in 1879, and he aimed to show that tragedy need not always be in verse, or about royalty and the aristocracy, but also about the lives of an ordinary family, about a typical marriage of its day. (Of its day? To what extent do the themes of the play still resonate today?) In his first notes for the piece, he writes: 'There are two kinds of moral laws, two kinds of conscience, one for men, and one, quite different, for women. It is an exclusively male society, with laws made by men, and prosecutors and judges who assess feminine conduct from a masculine standpoint.' Things are different now, of course, but are there not still two different ways of experiencing the world?

We were presented with a really interesting and well-designed programme. Director George Yates had written a great piece on the play, and on its relevance to today, and had also included the extract from Ibsen's notes from which I quoted before. There was also a quote from a Norwegian historian and politician describing the impact of the play on society at the time. 'It exploded like a bomb into contemporary life.' Cast and creative team profiles were interesting; there were some rehearsal photos as well as colourful photos of past productions.

The set was beautiful. There were grey wood-panelled walls, with a picture rail over, from which 3 rather typical Scandinavian landscape paintings were suspended from chains from good old-fashioned picture hooks. Great attention to detail. There was a piano; a wood or coal burning stove with coal scuttle; a desk; a beautifully shaped sofa. A triangular table with lamp and what looked like barometers and other such instruments on it stood to the left of the stage, a beautiful bird cage on a stand to the right. Set at Christmastime, there were also pretty Christmas arrangements and a wreath of pine, with red ribbons, and plenty of candles everywhere, which were lit on Christmas Day. A sumptuous, authentic, and very pleasing set.

Nora Helmer looked stunning in a charming sky-blue dress, with wide white laced girdle, and fascinating white laced boots. Her husband Torvald wore an Edwardian long jacket, grey waistcoat, stiff collar and lilac silk tie. Kristina, in great contrast to Nora, wore a long woollen brown skirt, wide-sleeved cream blouse, double breasted dark olive-green jerkin, brown boots, and had a dark brown wig in an austere style. Costumes were sending their own message. Nora also changed into Italian peasant girl costume with brightly coloured embroidered waistcoat, in which she was to dance the tarantella at the neighbour's party. On Christmas Day Torvald changed into his 'Christmas best' with silk waistcoat and so on.

Lighting and sound were both effective throughout. The piano was played in various scenes by Anna, the children's nurse, which made for a pleasant distraction. (The piano solos were in fact performed by Simon Fraser and had been recorded).

We met the family at a good time in their life together. Torvald had just been promoted to be manager of his bank, so there was a good feeling of no longer having to scrimp and save, and of their future now being secure. Exciting preparations were under way for the Christmas celebrations, Nora arrived home from shopping with loads of parcels.

There's a brightness, a bubbliness about the interaction between the couple, a great optimism. 'My little squirrel' is but one of Torvald's many pet names for dear Nora, who seems to be able to wrap him round her little finger, up to a point. She plays along with his idea of her, delights in pleasing him, acting as 'his little bird'.

Torvald's great friend Dr Rank arrives, and an unexpected visitor for Nora – her childhood friend Christina, who she has not seen for many years. Christina looks very dowdy compared to Nora, and explains that now she's a widow and needs to work in order to support herself, her husband having had no fortune to leave her. Nora implores Torvald to find her a job, which he willingly agrees to do, as Christina seems well qualified for clerical work.

Gradually though, a darkness comes into Nora's life. At the start of her marriage, Torvald had fallen desperately ill, the doctor had advised rest in a warmer climate. Nora had found the necessary money for this by borrowing it (quite illegally at the time, for a woman was not allowed to borrow money without the agreement being co-signed by a male relative). She had gradually and efficiently been paying off this loan by means of hard work. So she's a good egg, dear Nora, and only acted out of love for her husband. The fact that she happened to have forged her dead father's signature in the process leads to her downfall, and the tension that builds as she realises the enormity of this, is palpable, and quite frightening for us as well as her. Ewhurst Players built up this tension so well over the three acts of the play, bit by bit, horror by horror, we could really imagine the distress Nora was feeling, as she tried all the while to give her husband and children a happy and peaceful Christmas. Stephanie Kay was perfect as Nora, she showed this development very clearly, her transformation to independent woman was believable, as well as heartbreaking.

Christina, friend and confidante, and in the end, saviour of the family name, was played sensitively by Izzy McLean, you could see why Nora felt it so easy to confide all this to a friend she had not been in touch with for years. Christina exuded a kind of calmness, an antidote to Nora's seemingly childlike playfulness.

Dear Dr Rank, the couple's old friend, who seemed to visit, and eat with them, most days was another well-formed character portrayal by Mike Humphries. He was amiable, quite jovial, yet all the while aware of his impending death, and harbouring a secret love for Nora that he was not going to let interfere with the relationship he had built up, and so enjoyed, with the happy couple. A good friend he, too.

Contrast him, then, to the dreadful Krogstad, a bitter, desperate man, who was the cause of the crisis in the Helmer's marriage. He was sneaky, threatening, a bully, he towered over tiny Nora. Ben Aveyard performed this menacing role well, also showing a more gentle side in his scenes with Christina.

Sweet natured nursemaid Anna was a lovely role for Tina Hall, she was the reliable, calming influence in the family, not only for the children, but also for Nora. Anna was the grown up in the room, her smile made everything right, another good piece of casting, and a sensitive, warm portrayal.

Simon Fraser's Torvald was marvellous – his chirpiness with Nora, his delight in his little skylark, his pride in his new situation, his self-satisfaction, in Nora's words, 'his manly independence'. As he himself says: 'I should not be a man if this womanly helplessness did not just give you a double attractiveness in my eyes.' Hmmm.

Of course, the whole house of cards comes tumbling down, he rants, he raves, he shows how little he really cares about Nora, only about his spotless reputation, and his 'perfect' family.

The chemistry between this couple seemed very real. Stephanie Kay's tender yet firm depiction of the enlightened Nora: 'You have never loved me. You have only thought it pleasant to be in love with me.' 'Our home has been nothing but a playroom. I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I was Papa's doll-child.' Simon Fraser showed a superb quiet bewilderment as his world fell apart.

George Yates had put together a fine cast, who brought out all the nuances of character, and of the complex plot. A thought-provoking evening indeed. A play still very relevant today, despite the passing years. Thank you, Ewhurst Players.

Pauline Surrey

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