

DOMMAR[®]



IBSEN'S
**JOHN GABRIEL
BORKMAN**
IN A NEW VERSION BY
DAVID ELDRIDGE

Study Guide

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Cast and Creative Team

Cast

- Ian McDiarmid** **John Gabriel Borkman**, a former bank manager imprisoned for embezzling his customers' money. For the past eight years he's lived the life of a recluse railing against the injustice he believes he's suffered.
- Deborah Findlay** **Mrs Gunhild Borkman**, his wife, lives in disgrace following the scandal. Although they share the same house she never sees her husband, placing all her affection on their son whom she hopes will restore her family's honour.
- Rafe Spall** **Erhart Borkman**, their son, a student, longs to be free of his parents, be young and live his life. He has a plan to leave home for good.
- Penelope Wilton** **Miss Ella Rentheim**, Mrs Borkman's twin sister, Borkman's first love whom he abandoned to secure his position at the bank. Hers was the only money to be spared and so she bought her family's estate and installed the bankrupt Borkman and her sister while she lived elsewhere, raising her sister's son as her own. In poor health she's now returned to her childhood home to reclaim the adult Erhart.
- Lolita Chakrabarti** **Mrs Fanny Wilton**, Mrs Borkman's neighbour, an attractive woman in her thirties, she was abandoned by her husband and now lives alone with Erhart for occasional company.
- David Burke** **Vilhelm Foldal**, a copyist in a government office and frustrated poet who, despite losing all his money when the bank collapsed, still visits his old friend Borkman, partly to escape his unhappy home.
- Lisa Diveney** **Frida Foldal**, his daughter, occasionally plays the piano for Borkman and is under Erhart's tutelage, she hopes to travel abroad with Mrs Wilton and study music.
- Emma Beattie** **Malene**, Mrs Borkman's maid, long-suffering and frustrated by life in the Borkman household.

Creative Team

Michael Grandage, Director

Artistic Director of the Donmar Warehouse. Recent work includes, for the Donmar: *Don Juan in Soho*, *Frost/Nixon* (also Gielgud Theatre), *The Cut* (also UK tour), *The Wild Duck* (Critics' Circle Award for Best Director), *Grand Hotel – The Musical* (Olivier Award for Outstanding Musical Production and Evening Standard Award for Best Director), *After Miss Julie* and *Caligula* (Olivier Award for Best Director); for the West End: *Evita* and *Guys and Dolls*; as Artistic Director of the Sheffield Theatres: *Don Carlos*, *Suddenly Last Summer* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Peter McKintosh, Designer

Theatre includes, for the Donmar: *The Cryptogram*; in the West End: *Summer and Smoke*, *The 39 Steps*, *Donkeys' Years*, *The Home Place* and *The Birthday Party*; for the RSC: *King John*, *Brand*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Pericles*; for the NT: *Honk!* and *Widowers' Houses*. Other work includes: *Romance* (Almeida Theatre), *The Home Place* (Gate Theatre, Dublin), *The Scarlet Letter*, *Just So* and *Pal Joey* (Chichester Festival Theatre), *Hilda* (Hampstead Theatre) and *The Rivals* (Bristol Old Vic).

Neil Austin, Lighting Designer

Theatre includes, for the Donmar: *Don Juan in Soho*, *The Cryptogram*, *Frost/Nixon*, *The Wild Duck*, *The Cosmonaut's Last Message to the Woman He Once Loved in the Former Soviet Union*, *Henry IV*, *World Music*, *After Miss Julie* and *Caligula*; for the RSC: *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *King John* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*; for the NT: *Henry IV Parts I and II*, *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, *Further than the Furthest Thing*, *The Night Season* and *The Walls*.

Adam Cork, Composer and Sound Designer

Recent work includes, for the Donmar: *Don Juan in Soho*, *Frost/Nixon*, *Caligula*, *Henry IV*, *The Wild Duck* and *The Cut*; other theatre: *Don Carlos* (Gielgud), *Suddenly Last Summer* (Albery), *On the Third Day* (New Ambassadors), *Speaking Like Magpies* and *The Tempest* (RSC), *Five Gold Rings* and *The Late Henry Moss* (Almeida).

? Did you know that . . .

Although both Ian McDiarmid and Penelope Wilton have long and distinguished careers in the theatre they are also well known to younger audiences for their film and television roles: Ian as the sinister Senator Palpatine (later the Emperor) in the Star Wars movies and Penelope as Prime minister Harriet Jones in Doctor Who.

An introduction to Henrik Ibsen and his work

Biography

Henrik Johan Ibsen was born on 20th March 1828 in Skien, Norway, a small port town which mainly shipped timber. He went on to become a world-renowned playwright, often referred to as the 'father of modern drama', whose plays are the most frequently performed after William Shakespeare's.

The oldest of five siblings Ibsen had many distinguished ancestors and his mother and father, Knud and Marichen Ibsen (nee Altenburg), were the head of a respectable merchant family. However, in the mid-1830s their fortunes dwindled. Beset by financial difficulties Knud Ibsen was forced to close down his business and auction off property. In the space of a year the family's prosperity turned to poverty, Ibsen's mother finding religion while his father fell into a deep depression. The experience was to have a lasting effect on their oldest child, financial difficulty being a recurring theme in his later work.

Ibsen left home aged fifteen and moved to Grimstad to train as an apprentice pharmacist. It was here he began writing, publishing the poem *In the Autumn* in September 1849. Three years earlier he had fathered an illegitimate child with a maid abandoning them both to move to the capital Christiania (later renamed Oslo) to study medicine at university. Having failed to pass the entrance exams Ibsen decided to concentrate on his writing instead and in 1850, aged only twenty-two, published his first play *Catilina* under the pseudonym Brynjulf Bjarme. He also worked as a journalist founding the satirical periodical *Andhrimner*.

In 1851 Ibsen moved to Bergen where he was employed by the Norwegian Theatre to 'assist... as a dramatic author'. Over the next seven years he was involved in the production of more than a hundred and forty-five plays as a writer, director and producer gaining an insight into all aspects of theatre production. Although he did not publish any new plays of his own during this time the experience was to prove invaluable when he did eventually continue writing. While in Bergen he met and married Suzannah Thoresen with whom he fathered his son Sigurd, their only child.

Ibsen returned to Christiania in 1858 to become the Artistic Director of the National Theatre. This was a difficult time for the dramatist. He and his family lived in poor conditions and the theatre eventually went bankrupt in 1862. Ibsen became increasingly disillusioned by life in Norway and after working as Literary Consultant at the Christiania Theatre, where his play *The Pretenders* was staged in 1864, he left his native country and moved to Italy, spending the next twenty-seven years living abroad.

Ibsen's next play *Brand* (1865) brought him the critical acclaim and financial security he had long sought. It was his first major success within the Nordic book market and from then on he published his plays in Copenhagen not Christiania. *Brand* and his next play *Peer Gynt* (1867), for which Edvard Grieg composed the music, are considered Ibsen's great philosophical dramas in which he moved away from the prevailing romantic tradition to which his plays of the 1850s belonged and developed a more satirical tone in the criticism of his native country. Success

brought increased confidence, Ibsen exploring his own beliefs in what he called the 'drama of ideas'.

In 1868 he moved to Dresden, Germany and began work on a series of plays regarded as his 'golden age'. He was at the height of his power and influence and soon became the centre of dramatic controversy across Europe. After completing *Emperor and Galilean* in 1873, Ibsen's last historical drama which he considered his most important work, he moved to Munich in 1875 and wrote the first of his groundbreaking contemporary plays, *The Pillars of Society* (1877). There followed *A Doll's House* (1879), with which Ibsen achieved his international breakthrough, *Ghosts* (1881) and *An Enemy of the People* (1882) plus further moves between Germany and Italy. These realistic dramas made Ibsen a leading figure in European intellectual and cultural life and lay the foundation for much of today's theatre. In 1871 he also published his first and only book of poems containing in all sixty-four verses.

Before finally returning to Norway Ibsen wrote *The Wild Duck* (1884), considered by many to be his finest work, *Rosmersholm* (1886), *The Lady from the Sea* (1888) and *Hedda Gabler* (1890). These plays represent a gradual transition from realistic to more symbolic drama. In 1891 he moved back to Christiania where he lived until his death in 1906. His last four plays *The Master Builder* (1892), *Little Eyolf* (1894), *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896) and *When We Dead Awaken* (1899) are often described as dramatic self-portraits. The main characters are, like Ibsen, aging men looking back on their lives.

Ibsen suffered his first stroke in 1900 and eventually died on 23rd May 1906 after several years of poor health. In total he wrote over three hundred poems and twenty-six plays, which continue to be staged all over the world, rewriting the rules of drama with a realism which was to be adopted by the Russian playwright Anton Chekhov and many others. In 2006, the centenary of his death, Ibsen's iconic status and place within the world repertoire were celebrated in Norway as 'Ibsen Year'.





Prevailing ideas and themes

Henrik Ibsen was fundamental to the development of modern realistic drama. His plays introduced a newfound inquiry into the conditions of life and issues of morality, examining the realities that lay behind many facades. The work was regarded as scandalous by many of his contemporaries when any challenge to the prevailing Victorian values of family life and propriety was considered an outrage.

Plays of the time were expected to be moral dramas resulting in morally appropriate conclusions – goodness brought happiness and immorality pain. Ibsen challenged this notion, shattering the illusions of his audience. He confronted them with their own society recreated on stage, addressing such inflammatory issues as women's position in marriage and society, the relationship between truth and justice, abuse of power among leading men, environmental considerations versus economic interests, incest, euthanasia and more.

A Doll's House, one of Ibsen's most popular plays, is a scathing criticism of the traditional roles of men and women within Victorian marriage; *Ghosts* offers another critical commentary on the morality of the time. In *An Enemy of the People* Ibsen went even further. Previously, controversial issues centred on individual households, in this play the community at large becomes the focus. Ibsen argues that the individual who stands alone is more often 'right' than the mass of people, challenging the prevailing belief that the community was a noble institution which could be trusted. But as his next play demonstrated he was willing to examine all parts of the political spectrum, including his own. In *The Wild Duck* Ibsen's focus was not the traditional right-wing elements of society but idealistic liberalism, showing it to be just as destructive and self-serving as conservatism.

In his later plays, such as *Hedda Gabler* and *The Master Builder*, Ibsen moved away from social criticism and denunciations of Victorian morality, developing a more introspective drama exploring the psychological conflict of individual characters. These have proved popular with modern audiences who appreciate their tough and objective examination of interpersonal confrontation.

Man of the theatre

From 1851 till 1864, first at the Norwegian Theatre in Bergen then at the National Theatre in Christiania, Henrik Ibsen gained a working knowledge of the many elements of theatrical production which was to prove fundamental to his development as a dramatist. For thirteen years he was directly involved in casting, directing and marketing plays establishing a solid foundation upon which he could build his own unique dramatic vision. This vision was communicated through the plays he wrote, the stage directions making specific demands in terms of acting, costumes, lighting, etc., and in extensive correspondence with directors and actors. The detailed advice contained therein reveals Ibsen's preoccupation with how his plays should be staged. The governing premise of his vision was to portray 'real life' on stage: 'Every scene and every picture ought as far as possible to be a reflection of reality', he wrote in a letter to Harald Holst, a member of the Christiania Theatre management, in 1872. There should be, 'Equal truth to life on all counts.'¹

Ibsen's insistence upon realism extended beyond the confines of his plays, the dramatist stipulating that no other play should be performed before or after his and that the orchestra should not entertain the audience at the beginning of, or at any point during, the performance. Nothing was allowed to distract the public from the impression that what they were seeing on stage was real life. Similarly, the portrayal of reality had implications for the composition of the acting company, whom Ibsen regarded as a collective.

'An actor stands in a different relationship from any other artist,' said Ibsen to his mother-in-law Magdalene Thoresen in 1870. 'He is nothing completely in and of himself alone, he belongs to a complicated machine in which he has to engage in a rule-bound manner.'²

His preoccupation was with the performance of the company as a whole - the effect of the machinery the actors constituted. Although he created such memorable characters as Hedda Gabler, which have since become some of the most sought after parts in the theatre, Ibsen's stage was not to be dominated by one or two individual performances given by star actors. He was equally concerned with the minor characters and even those populating crowd scenes, such as in *An Enemy of the People*, which were not to be played by extras but actors, the overall impression of the production being the priority. 'The greater the number of characteristic, true-to-life figures in the crowd the better,' wrote Ibsen in a letter to the Royal Dramatic Society in Stockholm in 1882.³ The director had to ensure, 'The greatest possible truth to life and strictly forbid any caricaturing expression.'⁴

A dramatic vision in which the totality of the performance was the focus with a corresponding emphasis on the ensemble made it necessary, Ibsen insisted, for the actors to know each other's parts as well as their own - only then could they fully appreciate the whole of which their characters were a part. Language, both as an expression of an individual's personality and a means to creating realism on stage, was central to Ibsen's vision and it was important to him that it should sound as natural as possible. In a detailed letter to Andreas Isachsen, dated 1872, Ibsen gave the actor some notes on what to concentrate on in the delivery of his lines, these included: 'The natural alternation in the rapidity and slowness of speech, all according to the content... the natural lowering and raising of the voice... the increasing speed of the tempo that arises when a person, as a result of what is being said, or as a result of the fact that he himself talks heatedly, is

brought into an emotional state, into a state of anger, of indignation, of disgust.' ⁵ The dialogue, Ibsen instructed him, is full of clues as to how it should be spoken.

He also insisted upon complete fidelity to text: the lines should be delivered, 'Precisely the way it says in the book.' ⁶ This meant the actors having full command of the text from the first day of rehearsals as time was too precious for it to be spent learning lines. Only with a perfect knowledge of the above would it be possible to achieve real interplay between the actors and allow them to move freely about the stage. In the 1850s it was common for actors to gather in a semi-circle around the prompter's box at the front of the stage, the demands of remembering several roles in a frequently changing repertoire leading to an over-dependence upon the prompter and, consequently, extremely static acting. It was the director's job to ensure that the actors' 'positions in relation to one another are changed as often as is natural' and to avoid the 'marching up of the acting persons into the foreground'. ⁷ In focusing upon the importance of the actors' positioning on stage Ibsen's dramatic vision broke completely with earlier traditions.

His own experience as a director gave Ibsen an appreciation of good directing and an understanding of the time needed for rehearsals. In many ways, as a dramatist, Ibsen worked from a similar perspective to the modern director. In 1884 he commented to August Lindberg, with reference to *The Wild Duck*, 'Like all my plays [it's] arranged from the place of the spectator and not from the stage. I arrange everything in the way I see it while I am writing.' ⁸ His work both on stage and behind the scenes, testing new ideas and studying the audience's reaction, gave Ibsen a unique starting point in his career as a dramatist. His lasting legacy is the embodiment of his dramatic vision in each of his plays.



JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN

*Deep in the mountain's desolate night
The rich treasure beckons me.
Diamonds and precious stones
Among the red branches of the gold.*⁹

This verse, taken from the young Henrik Ibsen's poem *The Miner*, was written forty-five years before the dramatist's penultimate play *John Gabriel Borkman* in 1851 and anticipates many of the sentiments expressed by that character, who hears the valuable iron ore buried deep within the mountains crying out to him, begging to be released:

'A greeting from petitioning spirits – I sense them in their buried millions,' he tells Ella in the final scene of the play. 'Feel the veins of iron, twisting branching out, tempting arms beckoning towards me. Living shadows... Unborn creatures deep in the dark demanding to be brought to life – with all your attendant power and glory.'¹⁰

Written in Christiania in 1896 at the age of sixty-eight the play, like the poem above, reveals Ibsen's lifelong fascination with the darkness of the subterranean world and his belief that the answer to the secrets of life lay therein. Described by the Norwegian artist and contemporary Edvard Munch as 'the most powerful winter landscape in Scandinavian art,'¹¹ its theme, in Ibsen's own words, is 'the coldness of the heart'.¹² It tells the story of disgraced former bank manager John Gabriel Borkman, imprisoned for fraud, who, after his release, lives the life of a recluse and eventually dies of exposure to the cold outside, 'a hand of iron'¹³ around his heart.

The story is based in part upon a real-life incident which Ibsen heard while still a student in Christiania. In 1851, the year in which the dramatist wrote *The Miner*, a senior army officer was accused of embezzlement. After denying the charges, plus a failed suicide attempt, the officer was sentenced to four years hard labour. Upon his release, shortly before Ibsen returned to Christiania as Artistic Director of the National Theatre, he lived in solitude, shut up within his house unable to talk to anyone, including his wife. There was also a later scandal at Arendal in the 1880s when a bank manager was sent to prison for embezzling his customers' money. Bankruptcy was a subject close to Ibsen's heart following his father's own financial difficulties many years before and, along with moral conflicts stemming from family secrets, it was to become a recurring theme within his work.

Another source of inspiration was the Danish scholar Georg Brandes' work on William Shakespeare, of which Ibsen read parts during the summer of 1896. Brandes' interpretation of Shakespeare was strongly influenced by the Prussian philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche's ideas of the Superman and the desire to achieve power, both of which are evident within Ibsen's play. In his solitude Borkman rails against the gross injustice which he believes he has suffered, revealing his inflated ego when he describes himself as one of the 'chosen'.

'I wanted to control all the sources of power and influence in this country,' he tells Ella in Act Two. 'All the earth's riches, its energies, the mountains, the forests, the sea. I wanted to harness them all and create my own kingdom to bring prosperity to thousands of others.'¹⁴

Although *John Gabriel Borkman* continues the realism and social criticism that marks Ibsen's productive middle-period, the fourth and final act of the play in many ways returns to the epic drama of his earlier work, such as *Brand* and *Peer*



Gynt, and foreshadows his last and most symbolic play, *When We Dead Awaken*. The advocate of realism turns increasingly to poetry. However, many perennial themes remain, including: the danger of a loveless marriage (*A Doll's House*, *Hedda Gabler*) and the man who sacrifices the happiness of the woman he loves for the sake of a personal ambition or cause (*An Enemy of the People*, *The Master Builder*). When Ella accuses Borkman of destroying all the love within her in his quest for power and glory, the former bank manager smiles:

'How well I recognise that passionate mind, Ella. It's understandable you see things the way you do. You're a woman. You won't let anything in the whole world stand in the way of... a matter of your own heart... But I'm a man. As a woman you were the most precious to me. But if it has to be, then one woman can be replaced by another.' ¹⁵

It is generally assumed that Ibsen began planning *John Gabriel Borkman* some time in 1895, although he did not actually start writing the play until the summer of 1896 as was his usual practice. After finishing a play he would take a break for a year then spend the winter thinking over new ideas and begin work the following summer, his favourite season for writing. In the spring of 1896 Georg Brandes invited Ibsen to London. In a letter dated 24th April the dramatist declined, stating:

'I am busy preparing a big new piece of work, and I do not want to postpone this any longer than necessary. I might easily be hit on the head by a roof-tile, you know, before I had time to make up the last verse. And then what?' ¹⁶

The play was completed within four months, Ibsen sending the final draft to his publisher Jacob Hegel in Copenhagen on 20th October. The first edition appeared two months later on 15th December and consisted of 12,000 copies, the largest of any of Ibsen's previous plays, and was immediately followed by a further 3,000 such was the huge demand.

The early performances of *John Gabriel Borkman* took the form of public readings, the first taking place at the Avenue Theatre in London (in Norwegian) the day before publication, on 14th December, in order to secure the English copyright. The first professional productions of the play took place early the following year on 10th January 1897 in Helsinki at the Svenska and Suomalainen theatres, in simultaneous Swedish and Finnish productions. More recent productions have included a 1958 television version starring Laurence Olivier and two at the National Theatre in London, with Ralph Richardson and Paul Schofield as the eponymous hero in 1975 and 1996 respectively.

Like all great dramatists, from Shakespeare to Chekhov, Ibsen's plays are capable of many interpretations. Before the First World War Borkman was commonly portrayed in Scandinavian productions as a Nietzsche-like figure, in the 1930s he was compared to the match-king Ivar Kreuger and in the 1940s to Adolf Hitler. Ibsen seldom committed himself on paper about any of his characters, however, in a letter to a reader of the newspaper *Kjøbenhavnns Aftenblad*, the dramatist expressed his opinion as to how the character of Mrs Borkman should be played:

'The main point is that Mrs Borkman loves her husband. She is not at heart a hard or evil woman; she was, to begin with, a loving wife, and has only become hard and evil because she has been deceived. Her husband has deceived her doubly – firstly, in love, and secondly, because she had believed in his genius. It is above all important that the actress should make this clear. If Mrs Borkman did not love her husband, she would long ago have forgiven him. Despite having been doubly deceived, she still waits for the sick wolf whose tread she hears every day. As he waits for "the world" to come to him, so she waits for him to come to her. This is made clear in the dialogue, and it is above all else important that the actress who plays Mrs Borkman should bring out this side of her character.'¹⁷



Research task

The Norwegian artist Edvard Munch (1863 – 1944) was one of Ibsen's closest contemporaries and even designed sets for some of his plays. In 1895 the playwright supported Munch when his notorious 'Frieze of Life' exhibition, which included his best-known painting *The Scream* (1893), was attacked for its psychologically disturbing nature. It was the beginning of a lasting friendship between the two men and their work often reflected one another in meaning, Munch once commenting, 'I am reading Ibsen again and I read him as me.'¹⁸

Look at some of Munch's paintings and compare them to the worlds depicted in Ibsen's plays. What are the similarities? How does their work echo one another?

Inside the rehearsal room

The rehearsal room is a special place. Rather like a classroom it's a space in which people make discoveries and learn together. As such it's an intimate environment where mutual understanding and support need to be encouraged, where the actors and director are permitted to be vulnerable, to try things out, take risks and occasionally fail. All are part of the learning process. It's rare for anyone not directly involved in a production to be allowed inside but in this section we take a unique and privileged look.

The first day of rehearsals starts with a 'meet and greet', an opportunity for the cast and Creative Team to meet one another and be introduced to the rest of the staff who work at the Donmar Warehouse. Artistic Director Michael Grandage and the designer Peter McKintosh unveil the model box and talk through the design of the set. One of the biggest challenges presented by the play is the creation of the upstairs and downstairs environments, Borkman's lair and the drawing room occupied by Gunhild beneath, in particular the movement between the two. Adam Cork's sound design will be integral to the staging, pacing footsteps and Frida's piano playing introducing Borkman and his world before we actually see them.

After this it's time for the rest of the staff to leave and for the real work to begin. The cast and Creative Team gather round as Michael then David Eldridge, the writer of the new version, take it in turns to discuss both the play and the rehearsal process. Michael begins by commenting that JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN is not often performed, there have only been two major productions in this country - both at the National Theatre - in the past thirty years, and audiences and critics alike have changed in that time. As such it's rather like performing a new play, there's an element of the unknown, of people asking, 'What will happen next?' He outlines the Donmar's policy of approaching playwrights to do new versions of old plays rather than scholars and explains that this is the second time he and David have collaborated on a piece by Ibsen. Together they have decided to move the setting of the play forward by a few years, from the late nineteenth century to the early 1900s - 'The dresses were better then!' quips Peter.

Rehearsals will last five weeks and Michael's preference is to start at ten-thirty each day and work through till 3.30pm with a short half-hour lunch, 'That way you avoid the four o' clock slumber.' It's his intention to work on an act a day, so hopefully by the end of the first week they should have covered all four acts and there will be a 'shape' of the play in people's minds. There are no rules in his rehearsals, says Michael, except one: 'There is no such thing as a stupid question, however basic or mundane.'

He hands over to David who talks about his new version of the play and the creative process behind it. (For a more detailed discussion see the interview below.) For him it's similar to writing an original play, 'Primarily it has to be an emotional experience connecting to the heart.' He won't be able to answer academic questions about the piece as he doesn't write plays with a theory in mind to which the text is then a thesis. He wants to discover something about the world through the writing of a play. He ends by saying that while he's tough on text he's not a fool, 'If something's not working I'll change it.' It's likely there will be changes to the text in the first week of rehearsals.

Michael doesn't want to continue by talking about the bigger questions of the play. He finds it unhelpful to have long discussions about what the piece is about preferring instead for actors to get up on their feet as soon as possible with

scripts in hand. 'It's OK to have no idea what you're doing early on. We've just got to be people in a situation and hopefully we'll discover the play through that.' On the subject of back stories he has no particular preference but doesn't think them essential. 'At worst it doesn't illuminate anything for the actor.' He thinks they should all have a basic 'foundation'. For example, given that the play's set in 1900, when were their characters born? They should also know certain facts, that Gunhild and Ella are twins for instance. The Assistant Director will be 'monitoring' rehearsals and keeping a record of these in a production bible.

As a director Michael doesn't tend to do a read through of the play on the first day of rehearsals, 'They're never a level playing field, some people are more prepared than others.' But today he has decided to make an exception and the actors turn to page one of their scripts. 'Use it as part of the rehearsal process,' says Michael before they begin. This is the first time this version of the play has ever been heard and the actors quickly get a sense of the overall shape of the piece, their characters' journeys and quite literally what the words will feel like in their mouths. Some give bigger performances than others, who prefer instead to read more quietly, but all bring their characters to life suggesting the many possible ways of interpreting the play. All these things will be explored over the next five weeks.

Afterwards there's a definite buzz in the room, everyone's excited and offer their first impressions. People agree it's an elusive play. There's a brief discussion about class and the Borkman family's sense of shame following the scandal, which is heightened by living in a small town. Also the central theme of age versus youth and the differing attitudes between the generations towards age. Gunhild, for instance, is in her mid-fifties which isn't considered old today but was in 1900. Some questions are asked and details clarified. For example, how long Borkman was in prison and the intimacy that grows between him and Ella throughout the play as she goes from calling him Borkman in public to John privately.

Michael notes that the text has been 'customised' for this production, in terms of entrances and exits, to take into account the layout of the auditorium at the Donmar. He refers to the moment towards the end of the play when Borkman and Ella climb the mountain, explaining that it's possible to go on an off-stage journey around the back of the audience and still be heard. The specific dimensions of the Donmar's stage, with the audience seated on three sides, has an effect on the spatial relationships between actors. 'Inevitably you end up playing on a diagonal,' says Michael.

Other elements of production will be addressed later in the week as initial discussions about hair and costumes take place between the designer and individual actors, Michael favouring a 'spareness' as he doesn't want anything to get in the way of the relationship between the actors and audience. He reminds the actors that regardless of individual processes they all have to be clear on the 'make-up and structure' of a scene and that ultimately the purpose of the next few weeks is to celebrate the emotion of the play as it comes out.

Revisiting rehearsals over the coming weeks it's fascinating to see how a first read through develops into a fully-realised production. One afternoon in the second week a discussion ranges from the differing attitudes of men and women to parenthood to the meaning of a specific word and how, depending on its interpretation, it completely changes the sense of the line. Some shifts ('gear changes') between the emotions in a scene are found to be difficult and Michael helps the actors find the transitions. In terms of blocking he warns them against standing in a line, reminding them of the need to take up strong positions on the Donmar's stage. 'It's very exacting,' comments one actor. At the end of Act

Two he encourages Ian McDiarmid as Borkman not to follow Ella immediately downstairs in order to placate an agitated Gunhild. He remains on stage and we carry the uncertainty of whether he will follow into the interval.

As the weeks progress old ideas are rejected and new ones discovered. Some elements of the design, furniture and costumes, appear within the rehearsal room and actors are freed of their scripts as more and more lines are learnt. This is a difficult stage of rehearsal as some actors are not quite 'off book' and the blocking isn't yet fixed. Michael tells them to focus on the trajectory of a scene, this will help them remember the shape of it and ultimately anchor the work. All the while he encourages them to keep playing and explore the 'dance' of specific moments.

In the fifth and final week the cast run through the play several times. Staff from the Donmar return to watch these early performances and afterwards Michael gives the actors notes, guiding and supporting them. Then the Stage Manager packs up the rehearsal room and everyone prepares for the move to the theatre where all the other elements of the production - set, lights and sound - will be added. Rehearsals are over but hopefully not further discoveries.



An interview with David Eldridge, writer of the new version of JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN by Henrik Ibsen

David Eldridge was born in Romford, Essex and studied English and Drama at Exeter University, graduating in 1995. His plays for theatre include: *Market Boy* (National Theatre 2006), *Incomplete and Random Acts of Kindness* (Royal Court Theatre 2005), *The Wild Duck* (Donmar Warehouse 2005), *Festen* (Almeida Theatre, West End, UK tour and Broadway 2004), *M.A.D.* (Bush Theatre 2004), *Under the Blue Sky* (Royal Court Theatre 2000), *Summer Begins* (Donmar Warehouse 1997), *Serving it Up* (Bush Theatre 1996). David has been the recipient of the Time Out Live Award for Best New Play 2001 for *Under the Blue Sky* and the *Theatregoers'* Choice Award for Best New Play 2005 for *Festen*.

Q You and Michael Grandage collaborated previously on Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*. How did *John Gabriel Borkman* come about?

A It actually pre-dates the production of *The Wild Duck*. The summer before last Ian McDiarmid was in a television film of mine and I made a set visit one day. There's not much for a writer to do on a film set so I sat in the green room chatting to the actors and Ian said how much he'd enjoyed *Festen*, a film I adapted for the stage. We got on well and he said,

'I hear from Michael Grandage that you've written a new version of *The Wild Duck* and he's thrilled about it.' Then he said, almost with a wink, 'I've always wanted to play the part of John Gabriel Borkman. Do you know the play?'

And we got into a discussion about it, but because we hadn't opened *The Wild Duck* yet and Ian hadn't read my version I said,

'Why don't you come and see it? You might hate what I've done with the play. See if you like it and maybe in the new year we could have a chat?'

Anyway, we opened *The Wild Duck* and it was a great success and Ian came to see the show and loved it. He said to Michael afterwards,

'I'd really like to play John Gabriel Borkman at the Donmar.'

Michael knew the play and was excited by the idea and asked me if I was up for it. So, unusually, it was a commission that came out of the energy of an actor as well as a theatre and that interested me. Also, I thought it was a super play. It was a great opportunity to see what it felt like writing with a particular actor in mind because when I did *The Wild Duck* I didn't know who was going to play the characters and I certainly didn't imagine any actors. But with Ian I knew he was going to play Borkman from the start.

Q And did that help the writing?

A I think it did make it easier, in the sense that it made it more vivid to me. I had a very clear picture that it was Ian who was Borkman as I was working on it and that was enjoyable.

Q Presumably when considering doing a new version of an old play as a writer you have to feel some sort of connection with it?

A Absolutely, particularly the way I do it. *Festen* was different because that was an adaptation. With *The Wild Duck* and *John Gabriel Borkman* I've written

new versions of plays that already exist. I don't speak Norwegian so I'm reliant on a literal translation. For me theatre is an emotional experience. That's one of the main things about being a playwright, you're writing into that. It's not a literary art form, it's a visceral one. And ultimately it will be an ephemeral, live experience. I can't do an academic version.

Personally it's about sitting there with the literal and working through it very slowly and writing my own version. With both *The Wild Duck* and *John Gabriel Borkman* I didn't read the literal too many times before I started because I wanted it to be an emotional process not an intellectual one. I only look at other versions once I've finished the first draft. In a way it's not about doing an adaptation, it's about trying to have an emotional engagement with what's there and trying to get as close as possible to what Ibsen intended. And the only way I can do that is to feel my way through it. I haven't got a theory, I wouldn't know what a theory of Ibsen is.

In a way it's the same as writing an original play. With that I'd start off with more of a structure, do a bit of planning, which isn't what I've done with the Ibsens because obviously the plays already exist and are structured. But you certainly think about things you want to try and bring to it, although it's not about doing a number on it. It's not about being flash, it's about being invisible. In a way I don't want anyone to see David Eldridge. I want them to see Ibsen.

Q Would you even refer to it as an adaptation?

A The Donmar and I call it a 'new version'. We stick very much to the etiquette in theatre which says if you don't speak the language and work from a literal then you're writing a new version. Some writers don't credit the literal translator but I think it's important, particularly because I'm so reliant upon what they've done. I'll often accept what's in the literal because the line itself can't be bettered.

Q Do you think you'd feel inhibited if you read too many other versions?

A I think I probably would. It's peculiar because with the original plays that I've written I've sometimes looked at other plays for formal inspiration, which doesn't screw me up at all. In fact it's quite freeing. But with the adaptation of *Festen* and with these new versions I've not been able to look too much. I do have things in mind, though, when I start work on a new version. With *The Wild Duck* the title of the play was referred to in the literal over twenty-five times and to our taste now the wild duck was a clanking symbol and we wanted it to be more of a resonant metaphor.

With *John Gabriel Borkman* I'd noticed from the literal that the characters generalise a lot more about the past than they do in other Ibsen plays. I decided that in places that was right, in the way that when anyone argues they say, 'You've always hated me' and don't nail it down to one incident. But I also felt sometimes a little more specificity was needed. Not massive interventions, just a tiny bit more detail here and there in terms of the way characters talk about the past so that there's a clear action for the actors to play. I think it's much less satisfying for an audience if a character generalises, but at the same time these are people who are old, deluded and do generalise a bit. They're way past giving each other the benefit of the doubt. So it felt important in *John Gabriel Borkman* to write the lines, even if they are quite generalised, in a way that is playable, that has a clear sense of an action to it, a sense of what one character is trying to do to another.

Q Is writing an original play and creating a new version of an old one very different?

A Of course, because with a new play you have nothing or very little. You may have a lot in your head, you may even have done quite a lot of work in terms of notes and have bits and bobs that you're going to feed into it, but essentially you start on day one and the play doesn't exist. You're constructing a narrative, structuring a story for the very first time. But with the Ibsen plays that's already there. And so you focus on the detail of what people say to each other. I pay much more attention to the detail of the dialogue right from the start, whereas when I'm writing an original play I find more as I go on. With each draft I layer in more and more detail. In many ways it's much more enjoyable doing new versions because you realise how much an original play costs you in terms of energy and emotion. The actual act of writing might take place over just a few weeks, but it can take me a lot longer to get to the point where I say, 'I know what it is and I've got the energy to do it.'

In one sense the biggest part of my job working on an old play is to find a speakable andactable version, particularly with my approach and philosophy. Of course it's much more complex than that once you get into the imagery and the patterning of the language and the way that characters use certain words. The older versions of Ibsen's plays are much more concerned with the act of literary translation and end up giving you something quite windy. Norwegian is a sparer language than English, there are far fewer words. In seeking to give a very precise translation of a line into English they invariably end up using more words. With *The Wild Duck* and *John Gabriel Borkman* it's been really important to find something that's a bit more succinct and luminous.

With the new versions it's ultimately about trying to keep as baggage free as possible so I can have the purest form of emotional engagement with what's in the play already. There's so much, it's ninety per cent there. I feel like my job is the other ten per cent because the plays exist and they're fantastic.

Q Is it a good way to balance your work, writing an original play then a new version?

A Yes. With each one you learn so much from the other writers and I have a real respect for them and their process. You might have the same destination but their route can be a very different one and in doing a new version or adaptation you have to embark upon their route not impose your own. You have to follow their path.

Q So you're literally following in Ibsen's footsteps?

A I think it's about saying, 'What's Ibsen up to?' rather than going, 'I know what Ibsen's up to.' I think the latter's when you start to impose your own ideas.

Q What do you think will resonate in your version of the play with contemporary audiences?

A I'm not sure. I know from working in the professional theatre for nearly twelve years and having had a lot of shows on that audiences always confound your expectations. I suspect some will have a very intellectual response to it about the route of all evil being in money, the corrupting influence of capitalism and Borkman in terms of a study in power. And I think others will respond on a very emotional level. It's a family story in a way. It's the story of a family that's trying

to come to terms with its past and not managing to. And obviously there's the theme of middle-age. So I think people will get different things from it. Some will get a mixture of those things. All I ever hope is that the majority of the audience get something from it whatever that is. Even if it's more of a sensual experience. Quite often when I go to the theatre I have a response that's sensual, that's about enjoying the performance of a particular actor, or the emotions, or the fact that I laughed a lot. And sometimes I go to a play and have a very cerebral response to its themes and issues.

I think the thing about *John Gabriel Borkman* is that, like all good plays, it's really rich. It's a play that works on a number of levels. What really excites me is how wonderfully it catches the fixedness of middle-age, how that encroaches upon people. There are lots of very generous and open minded people who are middle-aged, but we also know as a lot of us get older we become more fixed in our sense of self and our world view. Even with Ella who, after everything she's said about wanting Erhart to be free, says to Gunhild after he's gone, 'Quick! If you shout now you might catch him.' It's a wonderfully funny line.

There's also the frustration of youth. For me there is something of John Osborne's Jimmy Porter about Erhart Borkman. This twenty-three-year-old man who's frustrated that the world he lives in hasn't caught up with the reality of the present. I think that's why he says 'I am young' so much. And it's great that Michael's cast a young actress as the maid, because with a maid you either cast someone who's sixty or someone who's twenty, like the Fool in *King Lear*. The fact that Malene is so pissed off with the way these people carry on and is quite arsey, cursing all the time - 'Lord and Heaven above!' - is wonderful. There's a sense of the younger generation, whether it's Malene, Erhart, Frida or Mrs Wilton, and a dialogue between youth and age.

I also love the theme of financial corruption. It's one that writers have tackled over and over again, look at Chaucer in *The Pardoner's Tale*: 'The route of all evil is in money.' And of course Borkman meditates on that. We've got the Conrad Black [sp.?] trial coming up, I think it's a week or so after we open. There will continue to be the Borkmans of this world. And all of that stuff appeals to me and gives the play a wonderful contemporary feel.

The other thing I'd say about *Borkman* is that it's a late Ibsen play and he's playing with the form a bit, which is what particularly interests me. It's fantastically well structured. There's a confidence in the storytelling, you just feel that he can do it. I got a strong feeling from the play as I worked on it that here was a writer who was utterly confident in his ability to tell this story and therefore could afford to be daring and occasionally a little complacent. For example, the play's called *John Gabriel Borkman* but we don't actually see him for the first half hour. His entrance is delayed while this almost stichomythic fist fight between the two women in his life, Ella and Gunhild, takes place. The climb up the mountain at the end of the play is a great dare. He's a writer that's at a certain point in his career where he thinks, 'We'll find a way of getting up the mountain' rather than worrying about it.

In *Borkman* he's pushing the envelope a bit. And you can see he's having fun with what he's got, Erhart's mission and all that. It's fantastic to compare his mission, which is sort of pretty pathetic and almost dismissed, to Hjalmar Ekdal's in *The Wild Duck*. While we might think the latter deluded, his mission isn't dismissed by the play. So you get a sense that Ibsen is having a wry look back. There's lots of wonderful stuff like that and I love the in-jokes - Vilhelm Foldal and his awful play. The frustrated playwright and how Ibsen writes that. It's a great piece.



An interview with Michael Grandage, Artistic Director of the Donmar Warehouse and director of JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN

Michael Grandage trained at Central School of Speech and Drama, leaving in 1984, and worked as an actor for twelve years before becoming a full-time director in 1996. From 1999 to 2005 he was Artistic Director of the Sheffield Theatres. In 2002 he was announced as successor to Sam Mendes as Artistic Director of the Donmar Warehouse. (See Section One for further biography and production details.)

Q What does being the Artistic Director of a theatre mean?

A It's a choice you have as a director. You can either make a decision to be a freelance director, which gives you the freedom to work from theatre to theatre, working on the assumption that people want to employ you, or you can seek to be a building-based director. The good thing for me about being a building-based director and why I like running an organisation is that you have the opportunity to build up a body of work under one roof and therefore create a house style. Whereas going from one theatre to another you give your own individual style fleetingly to one organisation and it doesn't necessarily add up to something that you feel you're creating with a group of people over a period of time.

The collaborative nature of building a group, building a house style and a set of productions under one roof with a group of people - working with them in how you achieve it, what you choose, who you employ if it's not going to be you directing - that can only happen if you're a building-based director and heading up an organisation and trying to take it in a specific direction. If you're working on your own you can only take you in a specific direction and it's rather nice and satisfying to develop others.

It comes with a whole mass of added responsibilities that you have to be prepared to take on. You are effectively a public servant where your responsibilities to a wider audience are much more tangible than if you just stop off at one theatre, do a show and then move on, because it's the responsibility of that theatre to educate their public rather than you as a director. As an Artistic Director you have to do that as part of the process and you also have to be responsible for a staff of people who you have to excite and encourage to go in a particular direction. All of those things are in addition to being in a rehearsal room directing a play and you have to be prepared to take that on.

I was very clear early on in my career, almost as soon as I started directing, that it was much more exciting to get to know an audience and try and take them with you. To try and build and develop them in all sorts of different directions in tandem with taking with you a group of people who you can collaborate with and come up with something that over a period of time adds up to a journey that's not just the tinier journey of directing a play.

Q How did you become an Artistic Director?

A I suppose I was invited to be. The first time I worked in a building as a freelance director was in Colchester. As well as enjoying directing the play I was excited about the way they marketed it and used the event to move the whole organisation forward. So I immediately became hooked on the notion of there

being more than just directing a play. Then I went to Sheffield Theatres and I was very aware that that was a huge organisation and somewhere in that big three-theatre organisation I saw all sorts of possibilities. Somebody asked me if I'd like to join as an Associate Director and eventually I became the Artistic Director. What Sheffield provided was the fantastic scale of the building and an audience over a whole geographical location, the opportunity to do something with that. The Donmar provides something much more forensic in terms of being able to forge something very specific.

I was lucky. I had an Artistic Directorship thrown at me very early on, but it came after a long period of working out what I wanted to do and who I was and what that meant through an acting career that I had before I became a director. That evolved into directing and that directing evolved into being building based. It all happened at the time it would probably happen in a normal career, in one's early middle-age, as opposed to coming out of school and saying, 'I want to run a building.' It was a period of many years working it out really.

Q Did your experience as an actor help you as a director?

A I hope so. I don't overuse it because I was aware when I was an actor that some of the best directors I'd worked with had never acted at all. So I don't think it necessarily goes hand in hand, but it can sometimes help.

Ultimately theatre is about the collaborative process between actors and each other and between actors and a director. But beyond that there's a whole creative process that involves coming up with a visual world with a designer and a lighting designer that the play can sit in, a world that the soundscape can help transform so it's not just a physical world but one that appeals to our other senses as well. Those things happen away from the rehearsal room but they're fed back into it. And so when you all come together for the week you move into the theatre you hope everybody has arrived at the same point together.

That in a nutshell is the thrill of directing. A director has to direct all of those elements coming together. The one thing all directors share in common - there are as many ways to direct a play as there are directors - is that we go into rehearsal and come out of rehearsal and we have to deliver a performance to a public at the end of it. How you get from A to B is up for debate. You could sit opposite twenty directors and every single one of them would say they have a different process.

Q The thing that struck me watching some of the earlier rehearsals is that you have to allow for actors' different creative processes but check that each of them is on track.

A That's another exciting challenge because you can have about ten actors, as we do in this production, all with their own processes and you've got to allow each of their processes to have a full airing. The one thing you shouldn't do as a director is try and make all the processes the same because that just makes your job easier and their job harder. It's not about making a director's job easier, it's a director's job to accommodate all of those. Somebody might be very slow in their approach. It's not about making them quick, it's about making sure that their slow version still gets them to where they need to be in time for kick-off.

Q So your people skills have to be really good?

A Oddly enough I think that's ninety percent of the job, people skills. You spend the first two weeks of rehearsal trying to gain the trust of your actors, it's not the other way round. Why would the actors need to gain the trust of the director? They're the people who have to get up and do it every night and be vulnerable in front of the public. The director goes home. I think they have to know they're in safe hands and some of the people skills you need is in showing them that you're ready for anything. Ready for all of them individually and collectively and that you've come up with a vision for the piece. When dealing with a text we are, after all, all interpretative artists – the director, the actors, the musicians, whoever. Ibsen was the creative artist and we're the interpreters. I'd like to think, however, that we're interpretative artists with a strong creative brief.

Q I noticed that you too allowed yourself to be vulnerable in rehearsals, you didn't pretend to have all the answers.

A You can't and indeed I don't. How could I ever pretend to? I think it's important that you put yourself in a group where you can offer leadership and you can steer and help be an umpire. If a question of 'How do we play this scene?' comes up and there's three or four possible answers I'll say, 'There's several ways to play this scene, why don't we try them?' So then the actors try all four and it's the director's job to say, 'Of all of them there's one that feels truer than the others, let's land on that.' It's a bad director that says, 'Scrap the idea of there being three or four possibilities, I've thought about it and what I'd like is this...' Because that's effectively straitjacketing the actor and the actor has to be the inventor of their moment. They have to create it and you have to facilitate that. Sometimes if they don't get anywhere near their moment and need help you can come up with a very specific action or reason or something. On the whole, though, you have to sit there and encourage. That's the main way the process works.

Q But as Artistic Director you have to make sure that not only this show is on track but also the one after it.

A Which is why you rely heavily on the people you work with. The people who are running the building, making sure that the organisation is kept afloat on a day-to-day basis. One's creative input is leading it but again it's about facilitating them to be able to get on and be empowered by the job. I think in all cases nobody is going to enjoy coming to work if they think they're just executing a series of edicts from above.

Anyone who elects to work in the theatre, whatever part, has made a choice. They've chosen not to work in a different kind of organisation and that's got to mean something. It's got to mean above all they have a creative soul which they want to explore and I think that means if you're running a building you've got to try and facilitate that. It's a mirror of what goes on in the rehearsal room.

Q Of the Donmar's six productions a year how many of those do you direct?

A Sometimes I direct three, which is too many. This year I'm doing two. The reason I did three quite early on was in order to create the house style. If you're leading the organisation there's a better chance of saying what a house style is if you're doing at least half the plays in the programme because the style develops within itself. Now, after five years of programming at the Donmar, I feel quite

confident that one can bring in other directors who will evolve that house style and push all of us a little bit further. The danger with a style is that it can become restricting if you let it.

All I mean by 'house style' is knowing what you stand for in terms of programming, what kind of things you want to programme to excite a public. I don't think it necessarily means all the productions have to look the same. It just means it's got to be about a commitment to a particular kind of work and a commitment to how you deliver that work to an audience.

Q Presumably that determines how you choose the visiting directors?

A That's absolutely right. I don't think you could necessarily say any good director would be right for what we're doing at the Donmar at the moment. You have to choose somebody who you believe will enter into the spirit of the organisation, the way it works, and maybe offer it something new. Certainly a director who'll produce something on its stage that is in keeping with the kind of work we're doing in developing our audience.

Q How do you decide upon the programme? Who do you do that with?

A You choose the plays first unless a director comes to you with a very specific project. You tend to pick the kind of plays that you'd want a season to be made up of. I do all that internally with an Executive Producer, a General Manager and a Casting Director. The four of us form a sort of Senior Management who talk about how we can make the plays work.

Q How far in advance do you programme?

A We sort of know what we're doing up to the beginning of 2008 with one gap in 2007. It's a difficult question. Sometimes you can be very lucky and have nearly eighteen months of work planned out and then other times you don't know what you're doing for the next three shows. It's really about the way things do or don't come into land.

Q Of all Ibsen's plays what made you choose JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN?

A Partly because this was a play identified by an actor. Ian McDiarmid asked me if I'd be interested in doing it as it was a part he had always wanted to play. I had just commissioned a new version of *The Wild Duck* by David Eldridge, which was a play I'd wanted to direct for a long time. It's one of Ibsen's later plays and I was looking at that repertoire of work towards the end of his career, *Borkman* being his penultimate play. So a combination of Ian, the fact that I was doing *The Wild Duck* and that the latter part of his output was of more interest to me meant that *Borkman* felt like a good fit.

Q What do you think modern audiences coming to the play today will take from it, particularly in David Eldridge's new version?

A I think one of the first things you have to decide when doing a period piece is whether you're going to set it in period or modernise it. We modernised our latest production, *Don Juan in Soho*, so we wanted to set this in period. And if you're going to set it in period you have to somehow find a language that is absolutely a language for now, that an audience of today will understand. But it also has to have a nod towards the classical tradition of the Victorian period from which it is coming. In that respect it's quite a difficult thing for a writer of a new version to

achieve because they're invited to reflect 1896 and at the same time answer to 2007. And we have a job to do the same in staging the piece. So in many respects it's a balancing act but the play and its themes are just thrilling to take on.

The other thing that's thrilling in terms of putting it on today is that it was written as a sort of melodrama. Melodramas are very dodgy things these days because people find them silly and what David set about doing was looking at the emotions that are guiding the characters and tried to distil them down to something that we can relate to, as opposed to heightening them and pushing the play even further into melodrama. So that was the challenge of both his translation and what we're trying to do in the rehearsal room, to try and create something where it will inevitably tip at certain points into melodrama, because the actions of the characters are melodramatic at times, and to allow our audience to laugh at and with it at those moments. But we also have to have the courage to pull them back with an honesty and a truth which is at the centre of the more distilled version we've tried to create.



Discussion Point

The word **melodrama** comes from the Greek *melos*, meaning song. It describes a dramatic genre in which the emotions are heightened. In the Victorian theatre melodrama featured a number of stock characters - the hero, the villain, the heroine – and followed a strict formula: a villain poses a threat, the hero escapes the threat (or rescues the heroine) and there is a happy ending in which the hero rights the disturbance to the balance of good and evil in a moral universe. The term has since taken on a pejorative meaning.

Having seen the Donmar's production of JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN what elements of the play could be described as melodramatic? How have both Ibsen and David Eldridge attempted to subvert the genre?



JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN in performance

? **Practical and written exercises based on the opening of Act One**

The following extract is taken from the beginning of the play. It is a winter's evening, outside it's dark and the snow is falling. Gunhild sits alone in her drawing room knitting, waiting for her beloved son Erhart to return from town. She hears approaching sleigh bells and excitedly goes to the window. They pass and, disappointed, she returns to her knitting. Her maid Malene enters and tells Gunhild she has a visitor. She shows her a calling card and Gunhild stares at the name in disbelief, eventually giving permission for the person waiting outside to enter.

Working as a group read through the extract and experiment with the staging of this scene. As a director what atmosphere do you want to create? How would you direct the actors playing Gunhild and Ella to establish their relationship in the scene? In rehearsals Michael Grandage worked with the actors to 'find the moment' at the beginning of the scene where Gunhild and Ella, having not seen one another for many years, stand and stare at each other. 'See how uncomfortable you can make it,' he said. Consider the following: What has happened previously? Where are the characters emotionally? How does that affect your approach to pacing the scene? Michael encouraged all the actors to make sure their lines 'landed', that they carried their full weight and impacted upon the other characters. David Eldridge referred to this scene as a 'stichomythic fist fight' between the two women. What do you think he means? How might this comment help the actors in their playing of the scene?

You should also take into account the other elements of production. For example, what should the lighting be like? The warm interiors contrasted by the cold and dark outside. Is any specific sound required? Later in this scene Ella refers to the pacing footsteps she can hear in the room upstairs, which Gunhild reveals belong to Borkman - 'A sick wolf in a cage right above my head.' Similarly the piano music heard at the end of the act introduces Borkman in his lair as we move into Act Two. How might this be used to underscore the action below?

Once you have seen the Donmar's production of JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN consider how the staging of this scene compares with your own.

JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN by Henrik Ibsen

A new version by David Eldridge

An extract from the beginning of Act One

Miss Ella Rentheim enters the drawing room. She resembles her sister in appearance; but her facial expression is more one of suffering than harshness. It still has the look of a great beauty, full of character, from years ago. The heavy hair is swept up in natural waves from the forehead and is quite silver white. She is dressed in black velvet with a hat and a fur lined coat of the same material.

Both sisters are still and silent for a while and look at each other searchingly. Clearly both of them expect that the other will speak first.

Ella Rentheim You're surprised to see me Gunhild.

Mrs Borkman stands upright, motionless between the sofa and the table and presses her fingertips against the table cloth.

Mrs Borkman Are you sure you've not come to the wrong place? The managing agent lives in the wing on the side.

Ella Rentheim I haven't come to see him today.

Mrs Borkman So is it me you wish to see?

Ella Rentheim Yes it is – I need to have a few words with you.

Mrs Borkman Well sit down.

Ella Rentheim Thank you but I'd like to stand.

Mrs Borkman As you please – but at least unbutton your coat.

Ella Rentheim *unbuttons her coat.*

Ella Rentheim It's hot in here –

Mrs Borkman I always feel the cold.

Ella Rentheim Gunhild it is almost eight years since we last saw each other.

Mrs Borkman Yes it is – since we've spoken – certainly.

Ella Rentheim I suppose you've seen me from time to time – When I make my annual trip out here. To see the agent.

Mrs Borkman Once or twice.

Ella Rentheim I've glimpsed you on a few occasions – From the window over there.

Mrs Borkman What through the curtains – You must have very good eyes? The last time we spoke – that was in here.

Ella Rentheim I know Gunhild.

Mrs Borkman Yes the week before he – before he was let out.

Ella Rentheim Don't bring that up. Please.

Mrs Borkman It was the week before he – the bank manager was released.

Ella Rentheim Yes, yes, yes. How could I forget. But it's far too depressing to think about.

Mrs Borkman But what if one does not think of anything else. Well I don't understand. In all the world I cannot comprehend – something – something like that – could strike us. Imagine – our family. A family as distinguished as ours. Imagine that it should happen to us.

Ella Rentheim Gunhild I think many more people than just our family were struck by the blow.

Mrs Borkman That's all very well but I don't care very much for all the other people. They only lost money – or some papers. But for us. For me. And for Erhart. He was just a child. The shame! We were two innocents. Oh – the disgrace! The hideous disgrace. Bankrupt as well.

Ella Rentheim Tell me Gunhild – how is he?

Mrs Borkman You mean Erhart?

Ella Rentheim No – He – How is he?

Mrs Borkman Do you think I ask after him?

Ella Rentheim Surely you don't have to ask?

Mrs Borkman You don't think that I have anything to do with him? Or that I spend any time with him? Or I ever see him? Do you?

Ella Rentheim What –

Mrs Borkman What! He – the imprisoned one? For five years? And to think what the name John Gabriel Borkman used to mean? No, no, no! I'll never see him again! Never! The shame!

? Questions on the production and further practical work

You may wish to work individually on completing these questions.

- When creating a new version of an old foreign-language play the writer usually works from a 'literal translation'. This is a word-for-word translation of the original text prepared by an academic or scholar. It is the playwright's job to breathe life into the translation. The new version may update or even relocate the action but always the adaptor tries to remain faithful to the spirit of the original piece.

The following extract is the same scene as above but taken from Charlotte Barslund's literal translation of the play. This is what David Eldridge used to create his new version. Compare and contrast the two and consider the following: How does the literal and new version differ? What changes has David Eldridge made? Do they make the story clearer? Do they make the piece feel more contemporary to a modern audience?



JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN by Henrik Ibsen
Literal translation by Charlotte Barslund
An extract from the beginning of Act One

Miss Ella Rentheim enters the drawing room. She resembles her sister in appearance; but her facial expression is more one of suffering than harshness. It still has the look of a great beauty, full of character, from years ago. The heavy hair is swept up in natural waves from the forehead and is quite silver white. She is dressed in black velvet with a hat and fur lined coat of the same material.

Both sisters are still and silent for a while and look at each other searchingly. Clearly both of them expect that the other will speak first.

Ella Rentheim (*who has remained near the door*) Yes, I can see that you are surprised to see me, Gunhild.

Mrs Borkman (*stands upright, motionless between the sofa and the table and presses her fingertips against the table cloth*) Are you sure you are not in the wrong place? The managing agent lives in the side wing, you know.

Ella Rentheim I have not come to see the managing agent today.

Mrs Borkman Is it me you want to see?

Ella Rentheim Yes, I need to have a few words with you.

Mrs Borkman (*moves forward across the floor*) Oh, - well do sit down.

Ella Rentheim Thank you; but I am fine standing.

Mrs Borkman As you wish. But at least loosen your coat a little.

Ella Rentheim (*unbuttons her coat*) Yes, it is rather hot in here -

Mrs Borkman I am always cold.

Ella Rentheim (*stands a while and looks at her whilst resting her arms on the back of the arm chair*) Well - Gunhild, it is almost eight years since we last saw each other.

Mrs Borkman (*coldly*) Since we spoke, certainly.

Ella Rentheim Spoke, indeed, yes. - I suppose you have seen me from time to time - when I make my annual trip out here to see the managing agent.

Mrs Borkman Once or twice, I believe.

Ella Rentheim I too have caught a glimpse of you on a few occasions. From the window over there.

Mrs Borkman That must have been through the curtains, then. You do have good eyes. (Harsh and cutting) But the last time we spoke, - that was in here -

Ella Rentheim (*appeasing her*) Yes, yes, I know, Gunhild!

Mrs Borkman - the week before he - before he was let out.

Ella Rentheim (*crosses the floor*) Oh, don't bring that up!

Mrs Borkman (*firm, but with lowered voice*) It was the week before he, - the bank manager was released.

Ella Rentheim (*moves downstage*) Oh, yes, yes, yes! I won't forget that time! But it is far too depressing to think about. Even dwell on for a single moment - oh!

Mrs Borkman (*darkly*) And yet one's thoughts are never allowed to concentrate on anything else! (*Bursts out; clasps her hands*) No, I don't understand! Never in all the world! I cannot comprehend that something, something like that can hit one family! And then, imagine - our family! A family as fine as ours! Imagine that it should hit us!

Ella Rentheim Oh, Gunhild, - I believe many, many more than just our family were hit by that blow.

Mrs Borkman Very well; but I don't care much for all those other people. For them it was just money - or some papers - which they lost. But for us -! for me! And then for Erhart!

He was just a child then! (*Her anger grows*) The shame on us two innocents! The disgrace! The ugly, terrible disgrace! And then utterly ruined as well!

Ella Rentheim (*carefully*) Tell me, Gunhild - how is he taking it.

Mrs Borkman Erhart, you mean?

Ella Rentheim No, - he himself. How is he taking it?

Mrs Borkman (*puffs spitefully*) Do you think I ask after that?

Ella Rentheim Ask? Surely you don't have to ask -

Mrs Borkman (*looks at her in amazement*) You don't for a moment think that I have anything to do with him? Spend any time with him? Ever see him?

Ella Rentheim Not even that!

Mrs Borkman (*as before*) He, who had to sit locked up for five years! (*Covers her face with her hands*) Oh what a crushing disgrace! (*Flares up*) And then to think of what the name John Gabriel Borkman used to mean! - No, no, no, - I'll never see him again! - Never!

? Questions on the production and further practical work

- Find another version of the play and compare it with David Eldridge's. In what way do the two differ? What do you notice about the way he has altered the language? Stylistically, how does this version compare with the one you have found? Experiment with reading the different versions aloud.
- Using the extract from Charlotte Barslund's literal translation above re-write the scene updating it and relocating the action.
- Write the outline for a new version of JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN set in the present day. In addition to giving careful thought to where the action is set, consider the following: What position of power would the modern-day Borkman have once had and abused? What does Erhart do in town, work or study? What does he long for?
- Once you have seen the production you could improvise new scenes exploring the background to the play, taking the material within this Study Guide as a starting point. The scenes could include Borkman abandoning Ella to take up his position at the bank or the trial following its collapse. What discoveries do you make? How do such improvisations inform your ideas about the play and characters?
- When you go to see the Donmar's production of JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN consider the following:
 - What transformations take place within the characters through the journey of the play? How do the actors embody these changes?
 - How does the design establish the world of the play – time, place, feel? Note the changes in the set from the first to the last act. How might these relate to the characters' journeys?

Ideas for further study

Reading and research

To gain a fuller understanding of Henrik Ibsen's work you may want to read some of his other plays:

Henrik Ibsen Plays: One (Ghosts, The Wild Duck, The Master Builder)

Henrik Ibsen Plays: Two (A Doll's House, An Enemy of the People, Hedda Gabler)

Henrik Ibsen Plays: Three (Rosmersholm, Little Eyolf, The Lady from the Sea)

Henrik Ibsen Plays: Four (The Pillars of Society, John Gabriel Borkman, When We Dead Awaken)

Henrik Ibsen Plays: Five (Brand, Emperor and Galilean)

Henrik Ibsen Plays: Six (Peer Gynt, The Pretenders)

All translated by Michael Meyer and published by Methuen.

The following books provide useful background information and criticism on Ibsen:

The Cambridge Companion to Ibsen, ed. by James McFarlane (Cambridge University Press 2004)

Drama from Ibsen to Brecht, Raymond Williams (Chatto and Windus 1968)

Bibliography

Books

Henrik Ibsen Plays: Four (The Pillars of Society, John Gabriel Borkman, When We Dead Awaken), translated and introduced by Michael Meyer (Methuen 1980)

Websites

Biographical background, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henrik_Ibsen

Dedicated Ibsen site, <http://www.ibsen.net>

Endnotes

(Endnotes)

- 1 Quoted in 'Henrik Ibsen's dramatic vision', Thoralf Berg, 16/10/01 (www.ibsen.net)
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibsen quoted in a letter to the director Schroder in 1882 (Ibid.)
- 5 Quoted in 'Henrik Ibsen's dramatic vision', Thoralf Berg, 16/10/01 (www.ibsen.net)
- 6 Ibsen quoted in a letter to the director Schroder in 1882 (Ibid.)

- 7 Ibsen quoted in a letter to Harold Holst in 1878 (Ibid.)
- 8 Quoted in 'Henrik Ibsen's dramatic vision', Thoralf Berg, 16/10/01 (www.ibsen.net)
- 9 *The Miner* by Henrik Ibsen (1851), *Henrik Ibsen – Plays: Four*, trans. Michael Meyer (Methuen 1980)
- 10 *John Gabriel Borkman* by Henrik Ibsen (1896) in a new version by David Eldridge (2006)
- 11 *Henrik Ibsen – Plays: Four*, trans. Michael Meyer (Methuen 1980)
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 *John Gabriel Borkman* by Henrik Ibsen (1896) in a new version by David Eldridge (2006)
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Quoted in 'Facts about John Gabriel Borkman – Creative process', Jens-Morten Hanssen, 10/08/01 (www.ibsen.net)
- 17 *Henrik Ibsen – Plays: Four*, trans. Michael Meyer (Methuen 1980)
- 18 Quoted in 'Ibsen's Back!', Hannah Clifford, *Donmar Magazine*, Issue 16 (2006)

About the Donmar Warehouse –

a special insight into the theatre

The Donmar Warehouse is an intimate (not for profit) 251 seat theatre located in the heart of London's West End. The theatre attracts almost 100,000 people to its productions a year. Since 1992, under the Artistic Direction of Michael Grandage and his predecessor, Sam Mendes, the theatre has presented some of London's most memorable theatrical experiences as well as garnered critical acclaim at home and abroad. With a diverse artistic policy that includes new writing, contemporary reappraising of European classics, British and American drama and music theatre, the Donmar has created a reputation for artistic excellence over the last 12 years and has won 25 Olivier Awards, 12 Critics' Circle Awards, 10 Evening Standard Awards and 10 Tony Awards for Broadway transfers.

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