

**Hedda Gabler**

**Amateur Players of Sherborne**

**Venue: Sherborne Studio Theatre**

**Date seen: 25 March 2025**

**Director: Graham Smith**

This could easily have been a professional production, the standard of the performances was so high and the Director's vision so well thought out and executed. The contemporary setting, with the script translation adapted by the Director (Graham Smith) and the actor who played Judge Brack (Robert Brydges) worked brilliantly and the actors did it full justice with their performances, making the whole thing totally believable. Setting the play in the present day may have led to some superficial anomalies such as the absence of mobile phones and other digital technology, and the presence of a maid, but this was not a problem – the tensions of the story and the strength of the performances meant that those weren't really noticed, the audience was gripped by what was unfolding on stage.

The box set portraying the smart flat of the Tesmans was very well designed (Graham Smith) and realised (Mark Lambert, Adrian Hole, Robert Yeo and John Crabtree) with a raised rear section, dominated by the portrait of Hedda's father, which, worked perfectly as a way of separating off concurrent interactions, providing a space for a pair of characters to retire to and thus remain on stage when, in the original script, they went off instead into another room of the house. By keeping those characters in view of the audience while another set of characters were interacting with each other downstage and referring to the pair at the back, the Director added another dynamic, another tension, to the drama.

The view of the garden through the window, with a three-dimensional tree clearly visible, was a nice touch and made the relatively small stage feel larger. The woodburning stove – a real one, not just a mock-up – was a masterstroke and very impressive. The furniture and set dressing was stylish and appropriately simple and set-changes were handled brilliantly by the maid character, Berthe (Fiona Holt) in a smooth, efficient and unhurried way.

The lighting effects (Adrian Hole) were subtle, conveying different times of day for the different scenes (a lovely touch of a birdsong sound effect complemented the early morning lighting) and the moody jazz music played between Acts enhanced the sense of foreboding and approaching doom. I was particularly struck by the prop of the musical box (a clever replacement for the piano of the original script). When Hedda opened it the sound of the music playing seemed to come absolutely from within the box, even though it was just a prop, not an actual musical box. I understand that this was through a careful focussing of a set of speakers (Sound by Mark Lambert) – stunning!

The Director made this production totally accessible for the audience and brought out exceptionally well the emotional tensions, power dynamics and underlying motivations among all of the characters. As well as eliciting realistic, subtle and engaging performances from the actors he displayed a mastery of positioning them and moving them around the stage to enhance the creation of particular moods and

the telling of the story. This was seen, for example, in the way Tesman, Hedda, Judge Brack and Thea were positioned around the room as they considered Løvborg's death, and then again at the very end, with the Judge making himself at home by the wood-burner, Tesman and Thea at the table at the back, and Hedda on the sofa. Tesman and Thea kneeling on the floor by the table to go through Lovborg's notes, rather than sitting at the table, was a clever touch, and the use of the 'fourth wall' to allow a view out onto the imaginary garden was very effective.

The choices of costume were sound and appropriate, such as Tesman's 'dull' brown outfit, Hedda's stylish, colourful clothes, Aunt Juliana's smart and restrained jacket and skirt and Berthe's dark blue dress and apron. Judge Brack's dapper suit and Løvborg's casual and slightly 'crumpled' academic look. Each character's clothing was matched by the way the actor portrayed them, with skill and subtlety. Juliana Tesman (Sally Matthews) – Aunt J - was calm, poised and decorous; a loving aunt towards her nephew Jørgen, cautious but hopeful with Hedda and warm and friendly towards the maid Berthe, with just a hint of hauteur. Her conversation with Hedda after the death of Rina was both touching and very convincing.

Berthe (Fiona Holt) was well played, hitting the right notes with a presentation of a slight layer of anxiety underlying her maid-like deference and calm. Jørgen Tesman (Freddie Wopat) gave a mesmerising, tour-de-force performance – utterly believable and managing to be both comic and very moving in his boyish enthusiasm, with a touch of prissiness. His excitement and delight at being reunited with his old slippers (which the props team did a very good job of embroidering) was a delight to watch and his body language and movements, such as the nervous polishing of his glasses, expressed as much as his words his emotional state. He was excellent, for example, in showing distress on hearing that the professorship might not go to him, shock on reading that Aunt Rina was dying and joy on realising, at last, that his wife was pregnant.

Hedda Tesman (Sarah Nias) seethed with frustration and boredom initially, pacing around her living room, and then with a burning desire to gain some control of her situation, and this came across clearly and powerfully to the audience, drawing them into her thought processes and her passion, eliciting both sympathy and distaste. As well as being totally convincing in the role generally, displaying brilliantly a gamut of emotions and characteristics including a finely-tuned sense of entitlement, she delivered wonderful individual moments, such as clapping her hands in enthusiasm at the thought of an academic duel between her husband and Løvborg; being superficially disarming and friendly in a conversation with Thea Elvsted and throwing in a barbed aside to Thea's emotional confession that she couldn't cope with her workload; and her show of triumph after persuading Løvborg to go to Judge Brack's soirée.

All of the actors had strong projection and clarity of voice and diction and Thea Elvsted (Mary Flanagan) used this to particular effect to allow the audience to hear and savour every word and phrase while presenting a complex mix of nervous anxiety and her underlying passion for Løvborg which she tries to hide but can't prevent revealing itself; as in her heightened intensity when quoting the critical response to Løvborg's new book. It was an impressive performance that was both subtle and powerful, giving the audience a believable, fully-realised character with a

broad range of emotions, switching for example from pain at Løvborg's feigned rejection of her, to worry at what might have happened to him on his night out with Brack, then to grief when his fate is at last revealed.

Judge Brack (Robert Brydges) had a suave imperiousness and charm, moving around the Tesmans' living room with a languid manner and a smile which gave the suggestion that he did indeed feel completely at home there, the cock of the walk and the only rooster in the hen-house. He struck a subtle balance of calm, restraint and professionalism with a flirtatious towards Hedda that was trod the line between smooth and 'seedy', between playing a mutual game with Hedda and sinister domination. He was particularly good when telling Hedda a possible solution for the problem of her pistol having been used by Løvborg to shoot himself, and earlier when flirting with Hedda; here the two of them sometimes overlapped each other very slightly, one cutting in over the end of the other's sentence, which gave the impression of the intensity of their exchange, the to-and-fro of the high-stakes game they are playing. It made it all very alive and 'real'.

Eilert Løvborg (Alex Scrivenor) was magnificent as the bright star burning intensely towards its destruction. Playing the part with great sensitivity and naturalness he moved with apparent effortlessness from great joy to utter despair and held the audience riveted as they followed his fate. Like the other actors, he both presented a fully-rounded character that the audience believed in, and reacted to the others on stage in a way that was fully believable as that character. Maximum impact was achieved through minimalism, as with his nice Buddhist prayer-hands on greeting Jørgen Tesman on his first entrance. There was a restraint in his characterisation which made the effect of his emotion, when he presented it, all the stronger, as in the exchange on the sofa with Hedda over the photo album, where he described their earlier relationship; or in his shame over the loss of his manuscript and the consequent tortured rejection of Thea. When, at the high-point of his despair, Hedda said to him 'so what will you do now?', his immediate reaction was superb – no words, just a completely convincing physical manifestation of despair, confusion and helplessness.

This production was powerful and accessible, an intimate study of relationships and emotions; subtle, complex, fascinating and above all convincing and believable. It felt 'real', it was great classic drama brought up to date for an audience of today.

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