

Julie HOLLEDGE, Jonathan BOLLEN, Frode HELLAND, Joanne TOMPKINS, *A Global Doll's House. Ibsen and Distant Visions*, Palgrave Studies in Performance and Technology, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, ISBN 978-1-137-43899-7, 233 p.

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There is no simpler manner to begin a scientific study than the one *A Global Doll's House* chooses in order to catch the reader's attention, namely through "a very simple question: what accounts for the global success of Henrik Ibsen's most popular play?" (1). This deceptively blunt question hides the temptation to elaborate ample answers based on a so-called general "message" included in the main topic of the play. However, this would not say, in fact, anything about what is "global" in Nora's success. Perceived as a sophisticated example of what reception studies mean nowadays, the book attempts to thwart the general truths about Ibsen's play and to give a more realistic answer to the question. At the same time, it explores the subtle inner dynamics of transmission that are invisible in the process of close reading.

As the title already announces, it is the "distant vision" that can offer the reader if not a more real, at least a wider and more concrete perspective on the worldwide reception of the play. Inspired by Franco Moretti's network, graphs and maps theory, and thus based on Digital Humanities methods, *A Global Doll's House* is a subtle, flexible and well-documented historiographic study that tackles a generous amount of information and data sets, building the scientific argument on a past whose special inner dynamics is revealed through quantitative research methods. Moreover, the book is supported by a complex informational system, namely *IbsenStage Performance Database*¹. The specificity of the database consists of the fact that it evolves constantly because the information is permanently changed or added in order to create an image as accurate as possible of Ibsen's reception all over the world. However, the data that is perpetually collected does not give an answer *per se*, but rather creates premises for interrogations what would not have been possible otherwise. Thus, quantitative research can only be brought to full

¹<https://ibsenstage.hf.uio.no/> (Accessed 30th of October 2017).

potential and enriched through qualitative analysis, because “no diagram can show us why an artist chooses to produce this play, or how an audience receives it; nor can it reveal the complexities and extraordinary richness of the adaptations and translations of the play” (8). In this respect, the authors express their scepticism towards three arguments used mainly to justify the global success of Nora’s story: “the theatrical representation of a human being striving for individual freedom and self-realisation (...); the iconic status of the character of Nora as a representation of an emergent female subjectivity tied to modernity (...); and the development of theatrical modernism and aesthetics” (9). Though valid, these main ideas concerning the freedom of individual, the emergence of women rights and the essential role played by Ibsen and its characters for the “birth of modernism” (as Toril Moi underlines in her research²) do not explain the global theatrical success, but rather express the canonical position Ibsen had acquired in the theatrical world and in the aesthetic and social history of literature. Hence, from the perspective of Ibsen-scholarship, this study not only supports the expansion of new research methods, but also questions the position of Henrik Ibsen’s drama in the history of theatre from an innovative angle, opening up a new path. On the other hand, the fascination *A Global Doll’s House* manages to exert on the reader is due to questions that, by their nature, are not only to be circumscribed to the Ibsen studies area, but also to other domains.

What is even more striking is the sly irony contained in the title, because there is no such thing as a “global” doll’s house, but thousands of *doll’s houses*, each of them transposed in their own manner. Ibsen’s *doll*, Nora, has not found her *home* yet and is likely to never find it, if we follow the path numerous actresses, producers, critics etc. have chosen in order to welcome Nora to their local traditions. Thus, the “way” of the globalization of *A Doll’s House* is only a twisted clue that ends in the myriads of local cultures, wishing to re-create in their own “home” the “house” of Nora, together with her story, her lines and her dance. However, as the authors point out, the overall immersion of Ibsen’s play in these local communities addresses, in fact, two important processes, drawn from Régis Debray’s theory: cultural transmission and adaptation (1). It is the use of these conceptual lenses that will serve the authors to explain the global success of *A Doll’s House*.

²Toril Moi, *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism: Art, Theater, Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).

The volume has two parts that deal progressively with the aforementioned theoretical dimensions, and use maps, graphs and trees extensively, as the main reference point. Part I focuses on analysing the first international tours of *A Doll's House* across the world. At the same time, it addresses the individual destiny of the most important actresses that played Nora as an argument supporting and explaining their choice. Part II focuses on the adaptations of *A Doll's House* and combines historical and theatrical criteria in order to analyse the patterns of the transmission of acting and staging traditions from one generation to the next. In addition, the authors discuss the transformations that have influenced the formal aspect of the play and how these changes affected its reception.

Thus, Part I is an entertaining reconstruction of the most important touring companies that intensively staged *A Doll's House* until World War One. These productions are symbolically arranged around resonant names of actresses that managed or co-managed their own theatre companies. They chose to play Nora not only because Ibsen's character was famous or controversial, but also because their personal lives resembled hers in so many ways. Europe was just the starting point of tours that continued all over the world, including Australia, New Zealand or both North and South America, not to mention the very specific case of the Japanese tours in East Asia.

In this context, the authors briefly analyse the most important figures that have influenced the global dissemination of *A Doll's House* all over the world. Alla Nazimova, Agnes Sorma, Matsui Sumako, Janet Achurch, Lan Ping, Gabriela Zapolska, Eleonora Duse and Olga Chekhova are representative names not only of the history of Ibsen's reception, but also of the international or local theatre tradition of the communities they belonged to. However, these feminine examples remain specific to Ibsen's early reception. The world wars and the influence of the male gaze on the artistic world left strong marks on the way in which actresses were perceived afterwards, both in their private and public life. This situation changes only well after the end of World War Two: "It was not until 1970 that female theatre artists regained some control over theatre repertoires, but they used their influence to programme plays written by women, not plays written by men about women" (64).

The subjective criteria that determined the aforementioned actresses to choose Nora and not others famous Ibsen feminine characters in order to ensure their glory on stage hide both inner doubts, social blame, drug addiction, damaged

private lives marked by painful divorces and children estranged from their mothers. They were even blamed for their work as actresses and accused of a decadent and unstable lifestyle. Despite the occasional negative reactions, playing Ibsen's heroine was both a cure and an artistic rebellion delivered as a metaphorical reply or as an explanation of their lives which have been perceived many times as socially unacceptable: "By identifying with the fictional character of Nora, they could reimagine the incidents in their lives that had attracted criticism as fierce struggles for personal freedom. (...) The contemporary rhetoric that merged actresses with their characters adds weight to the suggestion that the actress-managers chose Nora to counter social ostracism" (56-57).

Furthermore, the authors refer to the construction and transmission of an aesthetic acting tradition in order to analyse the patterns that define how *A Doll's House* travelled around Europe and especially in the Nordic countries. To exemplify, they refer to five famous actresses who played Nora at the Christiania Theatre (in nowadays Oslo): Betty Hennings, Adelaide Johannesen, Ida Aalberg, Johanne Dybwad and Tore Segelcke. The main thing that distinguishes these actresses from the previous ones who went touring around the world is that they travelled to other theatres as guest-artists. Therefore, in order to ensure a homogenous performance, not only had the theatre company to adapt its style to the actress' perspective, but the actress had to adapt her acting style too. This interaction evokes a double transmitting process and an enriching experience that enhances the exchange horizon in the theatrical field. The main result is the creation of "a performance tradition that would last until the late twentieth century" (73). The creative dimension presupposes a blended acting style that assumes unique feature elements from different traditions – the Norwegian one and the ones the actresses belonged to. Moreover, important patterns of transmission are revealed in the cultural inheritance by families that have worked in the theatre for several generations, so that they determined a certain way of acting and staging Ibsen's text. One relevant example is Johanne Dybwad that echoed Nora's performance acted by her mother Johanne Juell at the Christiania Theatre.

Another important aspect the authors discuss is the role the Norwegian institutions have played in promoting Ibsen as a part of their "soft" diplomacy policy. This direction can easily be visualised in the *IbsenStage* maps that show how the recent touring companies gather their Ibsen productions mostly around subsidised

festivals. Since the central institutions ensuring the promotion of the play are situated in Norway, the interest in the participation at these festivals is a logical consequence. But the main question the authors address here is to what extent the success of *A Doll's House* remains authentic if it is so much initiated and controlled by Norwegian political, social, economic and cultural authorities.

From this perspective, the recent reception of Henrik Ibsen's play is strongly connected to the cultural policies driven by the Norwegian state. Ibsen Festivals, Ibsen Awards as Ibsen Scholarship³, projects as *Nora's Sisters* that have assumed as a mission the promotion of human values through Ibsen's texts, Norway's choice of *A Doll's House* manuscript to represent the culture of the country in the UNESCO Memory of the World digital repository are examples that support the idea of the strong institutional influence. What is more, these events have generated a real "Ibsen industry", in which *A Doll's House* is depicted as one of the most important pillars because of its echo both in the world of drama and in the social field. However, the travelling of Ibsen's text across the world would not have been possible without the process of adaptation as a main surviving strategy in the local cultures and in the contemporary theatre world.

However, the adaptation of *A Doll's House* proves its vulnerability from the very beginning. For example, the alternative ending of the play written in 1880 as a compromise for the German public did not survive, but had generated controversy once more. From this moment on, Nora's story will constantly assume changes, either to fulfil the public's expectations or to show cultural differences with respect to local communities (Chinese, Japanese, Indian, African etc.) and their specific rules, interdictions, and debates. Thus, the adaptations of plot, time, space and genre, as well as the reconfiguration of the interactions between characters in different versions of *A Doll's House*, reflect a wide range of very diverse changes. They illustrate not only how Nora lost agency over time or how she evolved in different versions, but also how the representation of other characters was altered. For instance, Nora was often approached and played with a focus either on her appearance as a sexual object, as a submissive doll or as a mother that fights for her children and chooses to take them with her when leaving. On the other hand, characters as Mrs. Linde or the maid disappeared in some adaptations. Furthermore, Krogstad's appearance changed in order to create the impression of either a pitiful

³*Hedda's Sisters: Empowering Women Artists from Romania and Eastern Europe.*

father that tries to raise his children or of a villain man whose main intentions are to take revenge and destroy the happiness ruling over Nora's family. In order to make sure that the play will appeal to the public, directors and actors chose to underline specific aspects from Ibsen's text, so as to convert the controversies presented on stage into an echo of the social and, sometimes, political situation of the moment. One of the most entertaining analyses in the book concerns the Tarantella Rehearsal. This represents an iconic moment that has known numerous approaches as a consequence of both the process of aesthetic cultural transmission and the multiple local readings that have often managed to give creative versions of Nora's dance.

The "branches" analysed in the book reflect a historical evolution of the interpretative patterns and of the acting styles. Firstly, there is the legendary depiction of Nora holding a tambourine in her hand, and secondly there are several forms in which this rehearsal has been re-configured, not only to express local traditions or interdictions, but also to present new approaches. Therefore, the role of (sub)branches the authors analyse is to illustrate precisely this variety in the evolution of Tarantella's rehearsal over time: the branch of dolls, the branch of cuts and substitutions (with the sub-branch of cultural and religious censorship), the branch of other dancing bodies, the branch of voyeuristic pleasure (with the sub-branch of the female gaze) and the branch of transgression (with the sub-branch of altered states). Each of them represents a different conceptual solution to the Tarantella dance that enriches the adaptation of the play and favours a creative dialogue with the original. Moreover, the female body is engaged differently every time or sometimes not engaged at all. In the latter situation, only men are allowed to dance, while the tension of the scene lies in the woman's wish to become free through dance.

Moreover, the icon of the Tarantella rehearsal is supported by a pattern of aesthetic transmission documented with photographs not only for the dance itself, where generally Nora holds the tambourine in her hand, but for Torvald too. The unfortunate husband is unsuccessfully trying to direct her dance, while employing specific hand gestures nearly identical for all generations of male actors. Regardless of the actors being conscious or not of their gestures, this corporeal dimension testifies that "the visual images have a form of authority and have a role to play in the forces of cultural transmission" (92). Thus, the authoritative role of the theatrical tradition indicates a cultural transmission pattern still visible nowadays.

Finally, the theoretical skeleton of the book is subtly reflected in the analytical content. Photographs, maps, graphs or networks adhere to the hypotheses and make sure that the quantitative evidence supports the arguments. Thus, the main ideas are based on a data set arranged in multiple versions in order to deliver as many relevant perspectives as possible. Consequently, the book can be considered an invitation to discover new methodological ways to approach Humanities and a complex vision upon Ibsen's plays. Indeed, the rich distant view proposed by *A Global Doll's House* praises the global experience not only as an encounter between local cultures, but also as the full expression of both the controversial and heterogeneous aspects that make them unique.