



[Scotty Zacher](#) | November 16, 2015



Ibsen's *Ghosts*

Adapted, Directed by [Greg Allen](#)

Ibsen enhanced with Chicago flavor



[Mary-Arrchie Theatre Company](#) presents

Ibsen's *Ghosts*

Review by *Keith Glab*

Ghosts by [Henrik Ibsen](#) made its world premiere in Chicago back in 1882 and wasn't well received due to its coarse and melodramatic subject matter. [Greg Allen](#), the founding director and creator of [Too Much Light...](#) has re-worked the legendary Norwegian playwright's text and updated it with some contemporary language and Allen's distinctive meta-theatricality. The resulting *Ibsen's Ghosts* makes its world premiere with [Mary-Arrchie Theatre](#), one of Chicago's best storefront theatre companies for the past 30 years.

Although Allen stays true to Ibsen's plot – which involves philandering, adultery, euthanasia, incest, and syphilis – his meta-theatrical touch is evident onstage even prior to curtain. The maidservant Regina ([Catherine Lavoie](#)) hands out programs and greets the audience in character, speaking in French and improvising expertly. One side of the stage features a door marked "Entrance" while the other side has one marked "Exit," and the characters are only able to use the doors as marked. A table full of Ibsen's plays dominates the stage.

These literal plays within a play provide the primary thesis for Allen's adaptation. Mrs. Alving ([Carolyn Hoerdemann](#)) reads through them, semi-aware that she herself is a character in an Ibsen play, and wonders whether she can turn the narrative in her favor the way that so many of Ibsen's other female leads do, thus avoid the tragic end written for her family. In essence, Ibsen's ghosts are influencing the actions of the characters in *Ibsen's Ghosts*.



Even if this notion doesn't tickle you, Allen's added references to the stage/audience, contemporary colloquialisms, and sexual innuendo inject some most welcome humor into Ibsen's grim discourse on ideals versus truth. Moreover, these jokes often underscore some of the absurdity and melodrama in Ibsen's script, and by doing so allow the serious moments to pop and ironically feel more real.





The entire cast does an excellent job of delivering slightly elevated performances that still remain in the realm of realism, but no one more so than **Stephen Walker** as Pastor Manders. This happens naturally to an extent, as the morally ostentatious and proper character juxtaposed with occasional contemporary slang proves so riotous that it actually caused some of the cast to break character opening night (fortunately a less odious offense in a meta-theatrical performance such as this). But Walker deserves tremendous credit for his masterfully crafted vocal instrument that permeates the space with melodious austerity. If this Pastor Manders stars in a spinoff one-man show, I'm totally watching it.

[Greg Allen](#) and Mary-Arrchie combine to elevate this overlooked work of a master playwright into an experience that proves riotously funny and more poignant than the original. Do not hesitate to see *Ibsen's Ghosts*; with this being Marry-Archie Theatre's final season, memories of their trademark high-risk, high-reward storytelling will soon become ghosts themselves. Enjoy them while they're still here.

Rating: ★★ ★ 1/2

Ibsen's Ghosts continues through December 20th at Angel Island, 735 W. Sheridan ([map](#)), with performances Thursdays-Saturdays at 8pm, Sundays 7pm. Tickets are \$20-\$30, and are available by phone (773-871-0442) or online through [TicketWeb.com](#) (check for half-price tickets at [Goldstar.com](#)). More information at [MaryArrchie.com](#). (Running time: 2 hours 20 minutes, includes an intermission)

artists

cast

[Kirk Anderson](#) (Jacob Engstrand), [Carolyn Hoerdemann](#) (Mrs. Alving), [Catherine Lavoie](#) (Regina Engstrand), [Gage Wallace](#) (Oswald Alving), Stephen Walker (Pastor Manders)

behind the scenes

[Greg Allen](#) (director), [Matt Gawryk](#) (set design, lighting design), [Sarah Jo White](#) (costume design), Chas Vrba (sound design), Mike Sanow (technical director), Brent Eickhoff (asst. director), Ellen Osborne (stage manager), [Joe Mazza](#), [Brave Lux](#) (photos)