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## Review: Channeling 'Ibsen's "Ghosts"' at Mary-Arrchie Theatre



Carolyn Hoerdemann, left, as Mrs. Alving and **Catherine Lavoie** as Regina in Mary-Arrchie Theatre's world premiere of 'Ibsen's "Ghosts."'

(Joe Mazza photo)

Kerry ReidChicago Tribune

REVIEW: Eye-opening "Ibsen's 'Ghosts'" at Mary-Arrchie by Neo-Futurist founder Greg Allen.

Ten years ago, Neo-Futurist founder Greg Allen hit a comic home run with "The Last Two Minutes of the Complete Works of Henrik Ibsen." As the title proclaimed, that show attempted to filter the dramatic (or melodramatic or downright ridiculous) endings of all 26 plays of the Norwegian father of realism through the metatheatrical Neo-Futurist aesthetic. Now Allen applies the same technique to a complete Ibsen play, with largely successful results.

"Ibsen's 'Ghosts,'" a caroming, carousing and finally cathartic reimagining of the 1882 play (directed by Allen), doesn't shy away from mocking the more histrionic elements of the original, sometimes to a repetitive fault. But it also retains sufficient focus on Ibsen's

evergreen obsessions of suffocating morality and the disinfectant qualities of the harsh truth to be more than clever pastiche.

Though it had its world premiere with a traveling Danish troupe in Chicago, "Ghosts" doesn't appear to have the same appeal for contemporary reinvention that the proto-feminist "A Doll's House" provides. Described by London critic Clement Scott as "an open drain; a loathsome sore unbandaged," the revelations about the widowed Mrs. Alving, her ailing artist son Oswald and the dead Captain Alving, whose name is about to grace an orphans home in "a small town in Norway that no one's ever heard of," seem nearly quaint. The Social Disease That Dare Not Speak Its Name in the original is called out in Allen's script as "Starts with an 'S,' ends with an 'S' and is 'filled' in between."

The great strength of Allen's treatment here is Carolyn Hoerdemann's Mrs. Alving, whose stack of plays by Ibsen has given her hope of literally stepping out of the frame of her life. "These books make me really see what my situation is," she tells the moralizing windbag Pastor Manders, played to the gusty hilt by Stephen Walker. At one point, she simply walks offstage and sits in the audience as Walker's hypocritical cleric gestures and pontificates to her empty onstage chair.

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Unlike Nora, Mrs. Alving hasn't ever found the strength to escape her stultifying — and psychologically abusive — marriage. She has instead given a home and employment to Regina ([Catherine Lavoie](#)), the daughter of her husband with a former housemaid. Regina's adoptive father, the drunken carpenter Jacob Engstrand (Kirk Anderson, a comic colossus atop a block of wood for Engstrand's clubfoot), now wants to pimp her out at a home for wayward mariners. Regina, who speaks French, has other plans. "I want to be the star of my own drama," she proclaims. Meantime, Oswald (Gage Wallace) yearns for Regina, unaware that she is his half-sister.

Allen sprinkles his script with winking references to other Ibsen works — "the Wild Duck Tavern" and "Little Eyolf Street." A "ghost light" (in theatrical terms, a work light that stays on when the rest of the theater is dark) provides a sledgehammer metaphor late in the play.

Yet after everyone else has left, Hoerdemann's hypnotic Mrs. Alving and Wallace's tormented Oswald, caught between the "ghost" light of past sins and the weak sun of a new day, finally face their future of no future with sorrowful clarity. The last two minutes of this Ibsen play land as one imagines the original author intended.

**Review: 'Ibsen's "Ghosts"'**

**3 STARS**