

## **An Approach to the Construction Methods of Acting for the Ibsen Characters?**

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### **Abstract**

The characters of Ibsen undoubtedly demonstrated a vast and diverse richness within the worlds that the Norwegian author wrote. Ibsen's goal was to transcribe real human behaviour from reality to fiction. He broke free from the tragic-romantic style of the time, creating a series of real-naturalistic characters that resembled human nature and tackled the important and constant questions each individual weighs in. Borrowing elements from philosophy or psychology in the construction of his characters, these protagonists of Ibsen have revolutionized the way drama is conceived, giving rise to what has been called "modern drama". By analysing these construction methods, I aim to explain how an actor can approach and act some of the Ibsen characters, without interfering with the directorial work or the concepts that each stage creator can bring when working with the characters of Ibsen. My aim is to envision a way in which an actor can have a more real, organic, natural, and reliable interpretation of the characters he plays. This research also aims to help students who are preparing in universities, conservatories, or theatre schools where Ibsen's approach is important for their pedagogical development in the years of stage training.

**Keywords:** Henrik Ibsen, psychology, emotions, ideas, acting, human, A Doll's House, Torvald Helmer, improvisations.

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## Introduction

What makes Henrik Ibsen's theatre so attractive and so challenging? His ideas, the voice that he gave to the underprivileged or silenced figures in the structures of society, his break from the rules imposed by the Holy Bible or his criticism of marriage became possibilities for the protagonists to face their past, their traumas, understand their emotions or emancipate themselves.

Johan Henrik Ibsen developed his great dramatic work during the second half of the 19th century, in which man, nations, and theatre changed. His revolution was unique, because it was expressed through theatre and his dramatic opera created a before and after in the theatrical conception. His contribution was to equalize the literary value between novel, poetry, and theatre, giving the latter the subtlety of running through deep and complex characters, giving the drama the quality of being the most loyal and honest representation of the forms of expression of the human life. Thanks to him, a revolution was created that would change the way of doing theatre, and during the 20th century authors from all over the world such as George Bernard Shaw, Eugene O'Neill, Lilian Hellman, Gerhard Hauptmann, Anton Pavlovich Chekov, Miguel de Unamuno, Rubén Darío, Rodolfo Usigli, Liviu Rebreanu, Rodolfo Usigli, Tennessee Williams or Arthur Miller<sup>1</sup>, will follow in his footsteps, acknowledging the inspiration they took from him and his dramaturgy (Meyer, 1974).

At the end of the 19th century, Ibsen was the most recognized author worldwide after Tolstoy<sup>2</sup>. His work was to observe man in detail and in depth, to describe through his characters the wills, emotions, and internal conflicts of the human being. Ibsen found in drama a form of expression that consolidated. How did he achieve his revolution? Not by turning the dramatic stage as an existential or ideal forum for debate, but by showing that great dramas and tragedies can exist in the ordinary life of man, showing ordinary men and women, giving them the voice and the power to exempt themselves. Ibsen showed through his theatre and his characters a mirror through which the audience saw normal people, like them,

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<sup>1</sup> There are several academic studies, interviews, and essays in which the aforementioned thinkers, playwrights and writers drew inspiration from Ibsen's work to develop their own dramaturgy, continuing the legacy of the Norwegian author.

<sup>2</sup> At the beginning of the 20th century, two European authors were the most recognized and the most read, the Russian Liev Tolstoy and the Norwegian Henrik Ibsen, who through his theatre catapulted psychological realism.

engaged in emotionally tragic situations, such as Hamlet or Oedipus, and made the man recognize himself in them. The subtle and complex relationships that he moulded in his characters required a new way of acting, interpreting and understanding, being the driving force behind the creation of a new actor, who was capable of playing his immeasurable and infinite characters. Ibsen is the father of modern drama, and without knowing it, he was also the driving force behind the revolution in theatre pedagogy, which would end up changing theatre and acting.

### **Ibsen through the filter of emotions and psychology**

The psychological and emotional analysis in the construction of Ibsen's characters, opens a huge window towards understanding the way of interpretation and towards the knowledge of human behaviour from the actions of the characters in all his dramaturgy. Without a doubt, Ibsen opens doors towards the questioning of the "I", which human beings have continuously manifested. The construction methods that the actors must foresee go hand in hand with the inward processes and the introspection that human beings do continuously, consciously or unconsciously. When an actor prepares to create a role, he requires to know his character in-depth through a deep analysis of the text, seeking to find the elements that make his interpretation valid. To know who his character is, where does he come from. Or where is he going. Also important are the relationship with the alternate characters in the work in question, as well as his objectives referring to the actions, feelings, and emotions that the character will experience on stage. I call it "entering fiction" or "living fiction", i.e. the communing that actors must have with the history and the given situations. This could be easy if it is thought of as child's play, however, the professional actor puts aside the childhood game to play professionally, living the fiction. For this reason, the Ibsen characters have so much material for the interpreters to immerse themselves in the worlds that Ibsen built. As an observer of human life, he gave each of his characters solid, complex characters, similar to the human characters. For this reason, their incarnation requires to be frank, subtle, contained, and true. The actor, through his honest and in-depth understanding of the reality of each of the Ibsen characters, can bring the situation and the emotion of his character to the realm of reality. This is where the knowledge of the ideals and the psychology of the characters plays a very important role because in the end the characters simply imitate the emotions and daily feelings of everyday man. The work on the interpretation of the Ibsen characters requires an own understanding of the conflicts that each being (in this case the

actors) may have. This is to later be transferred from the imagination to the image of a representation of the character that is expected. In this case, a character like Torvald Helmer from the play *A Doll's House*, needs to know himself as an individual who treasures his wife and believes he loves her, a character attached to social and moral customs. The actor who plays this character will know that perhaps deep down the character of Torvald is aware that when he loses Nora his world will succumb and change to 180 degrees. The same context must be taken into account by the actor who plays Stockmann from *An Enemy of the People*, who has to have a forceful interpretive solidity that supports the idealism that this character presents. He will remain alone because he prefers not to lose his moral identity, to stain his own conviction and succumb to the immorality of society.

Stanislavski (2013) mentions that it is important to discover the character/personality of the protagonist that is played. Ion Cojar (1998), in turn, gave continuity to the psychological understanding of the characters because this is the key so that the actor can interpret his characters with organicity. The actors seek to be real and represent the truth on stage. This is achieved by doing an analysis or biography around the character, creating his story, and understanding the personality of that character. The actor must perfectly understand the vital field of the character to be able to interpret it perfectly. It is about feeling those sensations on your own skin and recording them when going on stage in order to use them at the time of the performance. This is how you get to play a character naturally. An actor too, despite the work that the creation and study of a character requires, must have a good time on stage, enjoy the given experience, always seeking to perfect it. This is done through mastery of the theatrical technique. The actor must understand and work on the character and correctly understand the text given in order to achieve good dynamism. Ibsen was definitely an author who knew how to write theatre; therefore, his works have a solid structure, and the actors who interpret his works require in-depth knowledge—beyond context and the given situation—of the personality of their characters through their emotions and conflicts. This is perhaps the key to achieve a coherent and lively construction that goes hand in hand with the emotional intelligence required.

### **Naturalism in the preparation of the actor: how to play Ibsen**

An interesting point that I noticed is how in the study programmes of most theatre training centres in the world (I documented this in Mexico, Romania, and Spain, where I trained and collaborated as an actor), the approach of realism/naturalism

always comes in the second stage of training, in the second semester or the second school year. There are various school programmes that consider that an actor needs training under psychological realism after going through a stage of disinhibition, creativity, play, development of imagination, contemplation, and development of bodily means (singing, speaking, movement), which takes place usually in a first stage of training (first year or first semester). When approaching and studying realism/naturalism, the student/actor must first understand the basic stages of training, he must know his workspace, the team, his own tools, as well as an identification of what it means for an actor to enter in fiction. The second stage will be defining, because the actor needs to understand, play, recognize and live a series of circumstances and conflicts that allow him to put himself in the given situations. For this stage, it is important for the actor to work on "A and B" couple recognition exercises, in which he is subjected to a situation or a conflict to be resolved. After performing this series of improvisations, it is essential that the student / actor has access to a solid dramaturgy with dramatic elements such as realism, which opens a door to identification and allows theatrical play through the emotions of the performer. Approaching the scenes of psychological realism allows the actor to understand what the play involves, to put himself in the situation and to really live what the role is intended to be. Only after this experience and recognition, will the actor be able to train in styles and genres of acting, and continue with the practice of continuous acting offered in the last years of training or during the master's degree which involves deepening and specializing in stage performance, and later put the learned elements into practice on the professional stage. I admit that several important theatre pedagogues have practically worked with Ibsen's texts and characters. However, I propose an analysis based on the emotional intelligence and psychology of Ibsen's male characters, and then through various theatrical exercises, I propose a deeper approach to these characters, for the benefit of the acting student, the professional actor, or the stage director that need to know in-depth what the structure of the characters they are addressing is. Ibsen undoubtedly reveals an enormous lucidity in his ability to understand these central details about a character, based on behaviour and actions. Because only by knowing these details in-depth, will the actor obtain a total, deep, and credible identification, which, without a doubt, will allow the viewer to have a better understanding and identification with what he sees on stage.

It is important to divide the work stages, because this division generates a series of moments that the interpreter has to go through, achieving a concrete

development of the work that starts from the basic elements: relaxation, concentration, visualization, introspection, identification, approach, construction, development, confrontation, and interpretation.

Below I describe in detail each of the mentioned elements:

1) **Relaxation:** This first part is essential in the work of the actor. Relaxation is a stage in which the actor must work with his body to allow him to reach the maximum point of expression. From relaxation, the actor will be able to find his own organic restructuring and will allow himself a predisposition to enter fiction. As a relaxation exercise, I suggest to the group of students or actors to walk through space (Brownian motion), to recognize the workplace, their group of colleagues and to observe the participants. They can increase in intensity, they can stop and continue while walking, participants are encouraged to breathe. When a few minutes have passed, they can stop, and the participants take a seat. Closing their eyes, inhaling, and exhaling, breathing through the nose, and releasing the air through the mouth with a sigh. This is to be repeated several times until the participants have reached both mental and physical relaxation, continuing with the next exercise.

2) **Concentration:** After relaxing the body and mind, the actor must do a mental exercise focusing on himself, his body, his mind, controlling his breath, inhaling, and exhaling, it is better not to mentally play with external judgments and thoughts that distract the mood of the actor. A goal can be to achieve a specific emotion that allows the actor to access both mentally and physically a specific memory.

3) **Visualization:** This step consists in feeling in the body and in the mind the emotion chosen in the previous exercise, having the availability to observe the different forms, moments, actions, situations, and people that caused the actor this specific emotion. By simply identifying the details, the actor will open his senses, and he will realize where the emotion is. Visualization means observing inside to bring out the respective emotion of the character to be constructed and represented.

4) **Introspection:** Introspection is an act of self-awareness that allows the actor to create an analysis of himself and reflect in the character. This will allow the performer to identify behaviours, ways to act, and reflect the vital emotions that will serve to express character. Introspection is an important part of philosophy, psychology, religion, spirituality and, most of all, art. In this case, the actor accesses his past experiences, not to recreate them, but to identify specific

moments, circumstances, and experiences. After achieving concentration, the actor can choose a moment in which he lived a specific situation, identifying the emotionality of that moment.

5) **Identification:** The actor identifies with the chosen emotion. After introspection there must be an identification, this work requires a mental transport in which the actor knows where his emotion is and can easily access it to live it through the embodied character.

6) **Approach:** The actor then approaches the character, conducts a study on the characteristics that trigger the actions and behaviour of the specific character. It is important to recognize the psychological triggers and emotional characteristics that give the character his motivation, his relationship with the other characters in the play and his goals.

7) **Construction:** The actor builds his character through the sources available. He develops and looks for starting points, which will allow him to build a character, always starting from himself, but considering specific, unique, original, and real elements. (See Stanislavski's chapter from *My Life in Art* on his construction of Dr. Stockmman (2013)).

8) **Development:** In this stage, the actor develops his character. In rehearsals, the actor will work constantly to provide more specific details that will enrich what has already been worked on and provide uniformity and vitality to his character.

9) **Confrontation:** Conflict and confrontation are key points in any dramatic exercise. Without conflict, theatre becomes simple description. The crisis is exactly the necessary signal that each character needs to face their own destiny. It is the prelude to change. On stage, each character has its own complexity and is subjected to different forces that support or hinder the path to their goals: external forces, such as destiny or family, or internal forces, such as the moral code itself or the intensity of certain emotions. This is what will strengthen the creation of a character and his stage representation.

10) **Interpretation:** In this last stage, the actor is ready to represent his character, he has the necessary materials to play a role on the stage of the theatre, or in front of the camera. The actor recreates a totally different being from himself, but one that is part of himself, shifting his mind, spirit, and body to that of the created character. He will have the ability to do it as many times as possible, as long as the actor has the technique, study, and conviction to believe

in his character. At that moment, he ceases to be just the actor and becomes the fictional character.

I will further give the example of an improvisation exercise that works for the construction of Torvalds's character. Lawyer Torvald Helmer is one of the best-established Ibsen male characters, as he represents a solid masculine character, attached to social structures and rules. He is a character who is left in a big dilemma when he is abandoned by Nora, because he has to realize and acknowledge that his experiences were probably a mistake created by the morals and manners of his times. He represents such a powerful figure of the patriarchal thinking, both in his time and in our times in many cultures. Undoubtedly, the change that Torvald has from the first scene of the play *A Doll's House* to the end of the last act, demonstrates a strong and totally tough character arc. The actor who plays this character has to work on human vulnerability, because the violation he shows in the end shows his emotionality and inability to lose everything (Nora).

The main objective is for the actor to find a point of vulnerability that will allow him to decipher the feeling of guilt, helplessness, and sadness and then to interpret this as Torvald.

Exercise for actors and students:

- a) The main exercise for this character is to work with LOSS as the central theme. How does the human being feel when he loses something? That is why I propose to choose a situation in which the participants have a connection.
- b) Once they have decided on the connection, the actors must suggest to their co-worker that this connection must be broken, because something new will happen.
- c) I usually use a separating text that is simple and neutral with "A" and "B" characters, which the actor reads several times and then interprets by improvisation.
- d) What is important is not the text, but the context created by identifying the emotions they interpret.
- e) After the game of improvisation and the identification of emotions, the actors use the original text and experience the emotions previously discovered in the improvisation game.
- f) The result must be credible, and emotions must be an important part of the work done by the actor.

• Example of exercise, scene A and B<sup>3</sup>:

- A: How are you?

- B: Hey! Well, I didn't expect you to come...

- A: I'm sorry I didn't warn you! I was in the neighbourhood, and I thought I'd come, we need to talk.

- B: Now? I thought you forgot; you don't have to...

- A: No, wait! We need to talk! Things shouldn't be like this...

- B: Like? It is often better to leave things like that, rather than thinking too much about them.

- A: It's not like that. Look, I know there were things that weren't right.

- B: There were many things that were not right, which means nothing, life goes on in the end.

- A: If it is true, we continue, but in the end, it is better to find solutions...

- B: No, for once there will be no solutions.

- A: Do you really think so? I didn't think you'd take it that way. Or at least that's your last decision.

- B: So, what do you propose?

- A: Just say it, let it go if you want to get somewhere...

- B: There is no way to get anywhere, things are like that. You know I'm going...

- A: Are you leaving? How? Where? When?

- B: I'm leaving this afternoon.

- A: So, there is no solution after all?

- B: Not right now.

- A: I don't know what to tell you, I'm sorry, I'm very sorry. I'll leave you then, I don't want to hurt you anymore.

- B: It will pass me by, give me some time, only time will help us. Don't forget I love you.

## Some conclusions

As a conclusion I mention that these stages are developed in accordance with a series of conclusions derived from my own academic and professional experience, in addition to the workshops created as a form of theatrical research to embody the

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<sup>3</sup> Exercises A and B are a form of improvisation developed by various theatre educators such as Sanford Meissner or Lee Strasberg. In this case the role play works for the actors when putting themselves in a dramatic situation.

Ibsen characters that I developed during my doctoral studies. It is important to mention that I do not intend to impose a single creative technique for Ibsen's characters, but only to propose, through this form of approach, a way for their construction to serve as a different aspect that includes not only Ibsen's characters, but the masculine character of contemporary man, which has changed and evolved constantly, but without a doubt, requires an optimal and sensitive understanding of the performers who intend to create such rather emotionally complex characters and which Ibsen, in his dramaturgy, detailed very well.

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