

The artist pays a terrible price in Henrik Ibsen's *The Master Builder*

By Sandy English
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At the Harvey Theater at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, directed by Andrei Belgrader

The Master Builder, the 1893 play by the great Norwegian dramatist, Henrik Ibsen, begins with this complaint from a character: "I can't take it anymore!" These words set the mood for strife and unhappiness among the various family members and employees of architect Halvard Solness, which ends in tragedy for the "master builder" himself.

A production of Ibsen's work was staged at BAM's Harvey Theater in Brooklyn earlier this summer.

Solness (John Turturro) has built up a practice and achieved a degree of fame by seizing on opportunities to build based on his premonitions of disasters. He employs Knut Brovik (Julian Gamble), who was once his competitor, Brovik's son Ragnar (Max Gordon Moore) and Kaja Fosli (Kelly Hutchinson), his bookkeeper.

The elder Brovik is ill and begs Solness to give his son professional approval and allow him to design a new house so that he can begin his career and marry Kaja. Solness won't hear of this because he is terrified of competition from the young. Moreover, he is romantically involved with Kaja, a fact that Solness's wife, Aline (Katherine Borowitz), suspects.

John Turturro, a fine actor with many television and film credits, including *Do the Right Thing* (1989), *Barton Fink* (1991), *Quiz Show* (1994) and *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000), supplies the play with energy and vibrancy. He lets the audience feel that Solness is brusque and selfish, but not cruel, as he strides up and down in his knee-high boots.

Early in the play, Solness's wife Aline moves onstage in a gentle, understated manner, blinking in denial at the intimacy between her husband and Kaja. Borowitz's Aline makes the audience laugh, and one senses almost immediately that director Andrei Belgrader is undercutting a more somber tone in the play, intentionally

or not.

A potentially comic moment, though, is handled well, as Solness bemoans his inevitable downfall when, he fears, he will hear "youth knocking on the door." Just then, such a knock is heard (this is in Ibsen's original script) and a young woman, Hilde Wangel (Wrenn Schmidt), enters. Turturro does not play this for laughs.

Hilde explains that 10 years ago, when she was 14, she watched him set a wreath on the steeple of a church he had designed in her village. She tells Solness that he kissed her and promised her a kingdom, and that she has returned to have him make good on the offer.

Hilde plays a decisive role in Solness's life from that point on, functioning as a dreamlike, emotional provocateur, an ardent admirer and bird of prey all in one. Ibsen is bending the realism of the play here toward an illustrative symbolism. Hilde clearly represents youth and temptation, but Ibsen does succeed in individualizing her.

Wrenn Schmidt's Hilde wears a light, revealing gown (the other female characters are more covered up). She plays up the "groupie" more than the admonishing ghost. Her body language and tone of voice are seductive, but they seem to downplay the kind of seduction Ibsen may have had in mind. It is clear that with her presence Ibsen intends a sexual element to have entered the drama, but Belgrader chooses to overemphasize it.

Knut Brovik takes to his deathbed, but Solness still will not relent and sign Ragnar's drawings. Solness reveals to Hilde the horrible accident that befell his family, but which also granted him success in his career. He gets to the heart of the matter, perhaps the essential tragedy of the play, when he calls himself an artist who must sacrifice to create.

It is finally through Hilde's influence that Solness signs the younger Brovik's designs and lets him get on with his life, although even that also has an unhappy result. Hilde then pushes Solness toward a full embrace of his fantasies

of breaking with this life and going forward, with deadly consequences. *The Master Builder* treats a situation that is unsatisfying to everyone involved. The characters struggle with complexities of life beyond their control and try to find solutions, but they are unable to remake their world.

There is a certain resonance today in the condition of the relatively small-scale master builder Halvard Solness. One cannot help but be reminded of a principal in a Manhattan architectural firm, who is materially well off, but whose creative ambition has been frustrated by the demands of the market.

Turturro's determined voice could just as well belong to the designer who has never seen another plan of his completed after an initial great success. The figure of the artist who has major accomplishments to his credit, but has encountered profound limitations remains in the social landscape today.

Staging the play and unpacking, or at least suggesting, its meaning to a contemporary audience must have been a difficult task. Overall, the BAM production was an artistic success. Actors, script, design and direction worked together to produce an impact.

The sets were spare. The rooms in all three acts were framed by sloping beams arranged like the scaffolding of a house. Within this overall theme, the set in the opening scene realistically represented an architect's offices with plans in folders, desks and lamps, though most of the office in the back was hidden in shadow. In the second scene, a living room was depicted with more light, and in the third, a garden with still more, but the architectural motif remained throughout.

The acting in the play was excellent, although director Belgrader seems to have given Turturro the most latitude to explore his character. Borowitz's Aline's was somewhat too muted, and the director, as we have already noted, overemphasized the sexual element in Schmidt's portrayal of Hilde, though that is hardly surprising in today's cultural climate.

For almost a century and half, Ibsen's plays have been renowned for displaying a fierce and principled type of middle-class revolt of the individual against an oppressive society. Ibsen dramatized the status of women (*A Doll's House* [1879]), the individual who strikes out against corruption and conformity (*An Enemy of the People* [1882]) and the son who challenges the hypocrisy of his family (*The Wild Duck* [1884]). His work exercised an enormous intellectual influence in the latter part of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Important figures in the socialist movement played a major role in shedding light on Ibsen's significance...and his limitations. Frederick Engels, Georgi Plekhanov, Franz Mehring, Anatoly Lunacharsky and Leon Trotsky all commented or wrote about the Norwegian playwright. The Russian Marxist Plekhanov noted in his famed 1891 essay, "Ibsen, Petty Bourgeois Revolutionist," that "Henrik Ibsen is unquestionably one of the greatest and most sympathetic figures in modern literature. As a dramatist he probably has no peer among his contemporaries."

Plekhanov and Mehring in particular traced the quality of Ibsen's revolt—which often included contempt for working people—back to the social conditions of Norway in the late nineteenth century, a country in which the middle class maintained a stronger social position and independence than in almost any other European nation.

There is a continuity with Ibsen's previous theater work in *The Master Builder*. Like the characters in his earlier plays, Solness is engaged in a revolt against the conditions of his existence. He doesn't set himself against the complacent and philistine conventions of his society, but rather against himself, his own arrogance and selfish fear. As with many of those earlier characters, there is a certain triumph, but for Solness, it also spells his downfall.

Mehring felt that Ibsen had become "really enigmatic" in *The Master Builder*, and there are certainly symbols in the play that are not easy to interpret. Nor do they combine to drive forward or produce a unified artistic meaning. But this performance of the play, particularly with the remarkable efforts of Turturro, and the excellent stage design and the overall direction of Belgrader (with a few troublesome slips), drove home something powerful and enduring.

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