

TRAVIS MICHAEL HOLDER

Ghosts



Photo by Cooper Bates

Odyssey Theatre Ensemble

Henrik Ibsen desperately disliked the English translator's use of the word *Ghosts* as the title of what is perhaps his most controversial play. For him it was a misrepresentation of its original Norwegian title *Gengangere*, translated as *The Revenants*, which more literally means "The Ones Who Return."

After being reviled in his native Norway and throughout Scandinavia, his scathing treatise on 19th-century morality was ironically first presented by an amateur Danish touring company at Chicago's Vorwaerts Turner Hall, a neighborhood athletic club for Scandinavian immigrants.

Ibsen's contemporaries in Europe found the play shocking and indecent, an attack on religion and the morals of the time in its subject matter. Venereal disease, incest, illegitimacy, free love, and assisted suicide were hardly topics discussed in polite society in those days, let alone publicly onstage.

By the turn of the century, the almost universally banned *Ghosts* slowly began to be accepted as the groundbreaking classic it is, tentatively mounted in vilified and highly criticized presentations in Sweden and Berlin, then in London as a single unlicensed performance for a small subscription audience where it elicited such negative reactions in the press as "wretched, deplorable, a loathsome history," "revolting, suggestive, and blasphemous," and a "dirty deed done in public."

Ghosts came to New York as an invitation-only 1899 production starring Mary Shaw as Mrs. Alving and was subsequently presented in a small room in New York's Lower East Side featuring recent Russian immigrant Ally Nazimova as its tortured leading lady, but the play still remained shocking to theatregoers and the subject of much public controversy wherever it landed.

Said the great British director and Ibsen aficionado Richard Eyre about the world's original reaction to *Ghosts*, "In case we bask in the glow of progress and the delight of feeling ourselves superior to our predecessors, it's worth remembering that the response to Edward Bond's *Saved* in 1965 and Sarah Kane's *Blasted* 30 years later was remarkably similar."

Today we have become desensitized by the equally dark and scandalous subjects explored by Tennessee Williams and more recently writers such as Jeremy O. Harris, so for modern audiences, the play seems infinitely less shocking and unworthy of public viewing.

It was in 2013 when Eyre debuted his own far more accessible contemporary adaptation of the play in London, winning Olivier Awards for Best Revival of a Play, Best Director, and top acting honors for Lesley Manville and Jack Lowden as Ibsen's eternally doomed mother and son.

Director Bart DeLorenzo is the perfect partner to bring Eyre's searing downsized one-act take on Ibsen's play to the Odyssey in a reverently sparse but effective mounting true to the award-winning 2013 British incarnation.

Oddly, all of the play's original twists and turns and revelations and tragedies are included, yet somehow Eyre's intermissionless fast-paced Cliff Notes version of the three-act drama retains its power, even though we are being asked to suspend belief that everything is happening at warp-speed. Why it works is because it's done so well.

On Frederica Nascimento's equally austere set, the rooms of Helene Elving's sprawling home are without walls, defined only by familiar white rehearsal tape used to define the spaces. Here the movement of the characters not in the action is clearly viewed so every member of Ibsen's intertwined storyline stays devoid of any privacy.

Above and behind the action, a wooden dollhouse-esque structure depicting of the Alving estate hangs suspended above the stage, appropriately upsidedown, as though it contains an enveloping shroud of secrets and regrets.

DeLorenzo's cast is onboard in the attempt to keep things palpably tense, moving rapidly from thinly disguised exposition to talk of future plans to the sudden destruction of those plans to the unraveling of the last of the Elving family's fragile honor—all in 90 minutes.

Although the pivotal opening scene between Mrs. Alving's ambitious, flirtatious maid Regina and her sauced pig of a father Jacob (Viva Hassis Gentes and J. Stephen Brantley) portend of possibly of not the most polished of things to come, the entrance of Pamela J. Gray as Mrs. Alving and Barry Del Sherman as the tightassed local clergyman and our heroine's former lover Reverend Manders immediately raises the stakes. Thankfully the other actors, perhaps at first thrown off by the yammy-yammies of opening night, quickly caught up to their costars.

Recent CalArts graduate Alex Barlas makes an auspicious debut as poor doomed Oswald, the son Mrs. Alving sent away to study in a more urban environment at a young age who has now returned a troubled adult with one of those hacking persistent coughs so familiar in turn-of-the-20th-century dramatic literature.

Still it is the towering, magnificently multifaceted performance of Gray as the proud widow fiercely working to hide the depth of her drunken and brutish late husband's depravity that lifts Eyre's all-new take on *Ghosts* into the theatrical stratosphere.

Her subtle and delicately nuanced work tops itself by the end of the play, as Mrs. Alving's newfound intention to live out the rest of her life free of restrictive rules and commandments of society and religion turns sour—and she realizes there is a hell after all, not some fantasy afterlife but right here on terra firma.

Henrik Ibsen had a great knack for juggling his era's hypocrisies in the name of decency and devotion to some vengeful god with what he describes as "dead morals, dead habits, dead values," and he was also a master at getting some sly jabs in about the nature of greed and the push for political power.

In the gifted hands of Bart DeLorenzo and his band of equally talented droogies, the great master's *Ghosts* comes around to haunt us again, leaving the audience spent and Gray, his leading lady, obviously ready to take a long nap.

THROUGH OCT. 23: Odyssey Theatre, 2055 N. Sepulveda Blvd., West LA. [310.477.2055](tel:310.477.2055) or OdysseyTheatre.com