

Ibsen: not for Halifax



Photo / Anthony Mansarati

Pam Rogers as Mrs. Linde and Diana Leblanc as Nora in a tense scene from *A DOLL'S HOUSE*. Neptune Theatre's current production which plays until February 25th, with performances nightly [except Sundays] at 8:00 and matinees Wednesdays and Saturdays at 2:00. Tickets are available at the Neptune Box Office, 429-7070.

by Judith Pratt

Judging from the response of Halifax audiences to Neptune's production of Henrik Ibsen's play "A Doll's House", written in 1879, he has not successfully bridged the transition from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. What was originally conceived of as a scathing expose of the inner female law and its submission to external male law is now appreciated as a farce. Presented to an audience comfortable in its seeming liberation from these structures, what should be pathos is transformed into comedy and hence a gloating smugness seems to pervade the atmosphere.

The production's failure to elicit a response which would rightfully herald Ibsen's genius must be assigned to the director Bernard Hopkins. Both the main characters of Nora and Torvald, a couple at first secure in their versions of happiness, are underdeveloped. Hopkins particularly neglects to guide Diana Leblanc as Nora

through the genetic process whereby she attains the insecure but necessary stature of a human being. Because this play does not instantly present an audience with a dramatic situation, it is essential that each step of the journey toward the climactic ending be planned and well-defined. Hopkins fails to move forward at a rate which allows the full pathos of Nora's position and her miscomprehension of right in a world dominated by the male and his rationality to develop. Hence Leblanc's Nora enters the stage with a bounce but deflates too quickly. One does not appreciate the vacillation between blissful ignorance and dictatorial reality because Nora too quickly adopts the furrowed brow alien to her previous image of "sky lark" and "squirrel". She is too quickly subdued by the cares and worries she later adamantly insists that she discover in a world outside the artificial and precarious sanctity of the home Torvald has created.

Chuck Shamata's Torvald Helmer is properly static and egoistic. Hopkins adds force to Torvald's vision of Nora as his child of nature and his wood nymph by decorating the set in blues, greens, and natural wood panelling. Integrally though, it is difficult to understand Nora's unconscious martyrdom (she thinks of it as her pride and joy) for a man who is as robust and massively healthy as is Shamata. Torvald, although he has recovered, was eight years previously hovering on the precipice of death. This illness forces Nora to shame her social position by borrowing money without her husband's consent, hence by submitting to the terms of a Norwegian Shylock, and compound this shame with the illegal forgery of her father's name as cosigner. She sees both acts though as merited by the love she feels for her husband and her father. Saved by a year's trip to Italy, paid for by Nora's loan, Torvald returns now to confront the promotion to the position of manager of the local bank. With the intervention of the bank clerk and money lender Krogstad (played with vibrant passion by Daniel Buccos), Nora's heroic action becomes tainted and she is forced to acknowledge that the world's law is not synonymous with hers. This growth within Nora is, however, never fully balanced in Hopkins' production, Shamata's Torvald has no need to masquerade his physical and emotional weaknesses behind a facade of invulnerable masculinity, and this essential character loses his pathetic qualities which should supplement Nora's wretched vacillation.

These flaws in the interpretation of Nora and Torvald detract from the omnipresent ironies in the play and seem to twist them into farcical reversals. The social ironies implicit in nineteenth century law and those of the woman in a man's world are neglected and the contrast between female and male roles is almost caricatured in the nursery world of the Helmer house. The final irony of

the doll's house disintegrating after innocence has been forcefully rejected while those two, Krogstad and Christine (almost the anthesis of the Helmers), who spend most of their adult lives in misery and hardship, unprotected and forced to confront and cope with fate, end in a promising marriage, is obscured by Hopkins' insistence on staunchly presenting the false security of Torvald when faced with Nora's gaining of a glimpse of herself.

Hopkins does succeed in highlighting the nursery-like atmosphere of the Helmer house by manipulating Leblanc so that, during the final crisis for example, she hangs limp in a chair, looking like a neglected marionette. Previously she performs a dance for Torvald and Doctor Rank (played with finesse by David Renton) and reinforces her position as her husband's puppet who performs in exchange for food and drink. Leblanc succeeds in the conclusion in almost physically purging her character of all semblances of the child which was until then so much a mirage and a haven of protection from realities. The final shedding of the fun-filled world which was yet not a happy one for Nora is well portrayed, but is marred because of the neglect to bring Nora comprehensively to the conclusion to leave her life with Torvald.

The final fault in this production lies as much with Halifax audiences as with Hopkins. Not accustomed to drama concerning issues that have now supposedly been erased (have none of them heard of the Houston convention?), the audience tended to view Hopkins' weak production as a soap opera instead of acknowledging that these issues were ideas which motivated playwrights like Ibsen and Shaw to consciously attack a social facade which they deemed harmful. Judging from the snickers and laughter erupting frequently throughout the play, one almost expected a Proctor and Gamble commercial during intermissions.

Theatre New Brunswick exceptional

by Sheena Masson

Theatre New Brunswick's latest production could hardly fail to have a wide appeal. The announcement that *The Incredible Murder of Cardinal Tosca* was a Sherlock Holmes adventure certainly helped pack the Cohn Friday night. This famous detective needs no introduction to most people and for those who have read his "cases" a seven per cent solution is hardly strong enough.

No doubt TNB's growing reputa-



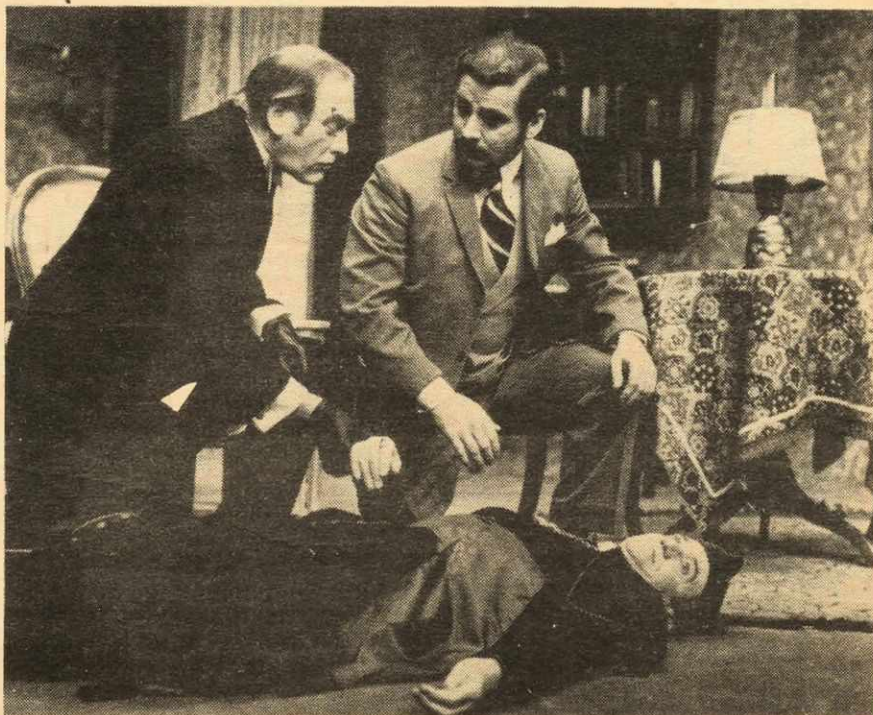
tion also attracted the crowds to the Halifax performances. The audience was not let down in either way—both the acting and the play itself provided one of the most successful evenings the Cohn has seen in a while. This ten year old company is experienced and professional—their acting and the sets brought this "previously undisclosed" case to life.

The real success of the production however is the script written by Alden Nowlan and Walter Learning.

Both devoted Holmesians, their two years of research must have been a pleasant chore. The result is a play which masters Conan Doyle's story telling style. This is not to say however that a script about Sherlock Holmes must emulate Doyle to be successful (as *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes* and *The Seven Percent Solution* attest to).

Nowlan's and Learning's script is so true to Doyle's genre that the Holmes fan can only delight in it. The details of Holmes' room, and the distinct characterizations of Holmes, Watson and Moriarty are exact. Holmes' witty banter and Spock-like deductions are recreated once more from the imaginations of these two authors.

The only modern touch is a vulcan-like neck grip that Holmes applies to Dr. Watson after he goes mad. Why does Watson act insanely? Why does Holmes call Moriarty to 22 Baker Street? Why was this case kept from publication by Watson? You'll never be able to read about this one, though hopefully there'll be another Nowlan-Learning Holmes adventure produced. Doyle has not sent the real Holmes to as permanent a grave as he thought.



"HE'S DEAD!" Master-criminal Professor James Moriarty [Vernon Chapman] and Sherlock Holmes' faithful assistant, Dr. John Watson [Dan MacDonald] examine the body of Cardinal Tosca [Kenneth Wickes] in Act II of *THE INCREDIBLE MURDER OF CARDINAL TOSCA*, a new Sherlock Holmes adventure by Alden Nowlan and Walter Learning.