

# A Satire on Social Taboos

TNB's Ghosts reviewed by Kwame Dawes

When Ibsen's *Ghosts* was first staged in the late eighteen hundreds it caused quite a stir. It was controversial because it challenged the hypocrisies of the church and the aristocracy of the time. At the core of the play is the unmentionable disease of decadence, syphilis which afflicts two generations of a very wealthy family.

Today, the issues dealt with in the play are hardly shocking. If we are to be impressed by the questionable practices of these assumed bastions of virtue, we have to enter the world of Victorian values and pretences. The extent to which this is achieved in a period piece like *Ghosts* determines the success of the work.

TNB's production of *Ghosts* is handled with a curious combination of satirical comic caricature and high sounding melodrama. For some reason, the satirical quality, which is most important in a successful staging of this play, never begins to emerge until the second act.

Mrs Alving, played by Shirley Douglas is a heavily made-up, stiff moving and noisy woman who reminds one of a sterner version of Tammy-Faye Baker. Her movements as she delivered her lines seemed extremely contrived and pointless. She moved from one end of the stage to the other like one determined to obey the director's commands without even understanding the rationale for these commands. Her performance lacked the command and range that one would expect from an actress of her experience. This was

most apparent in the first act in which both herself and Pastor Manders (Roland Hewgill) are granted lengthy monologues which are essentially ponderous narratives about the things that have occurred before the play opens.

The stiffness of Shirley Douglas and the completely believable and witty performance of Roland Hewgill totally destroyed any chance of our believing that there could have been a potential romantic relationship between these two. That important piece of subtext seemed to have been lost on the production to the extent that it obliterated many of the subtle games being played between the characters in the first act. Consequently, the first act was somewhat humourless.

Things picked up whenever Jakob Engstrand (Sean Hewitt) the enterprising working class father of the maid Regina Engstrand (Julie Stewart) was on stage. The character is a sly man who understands the hypocrisies of the aristocracy and the clergy and is able to manipulate them to his best interest. Here is the emerging petty bourgeois and merchant class feeding on the weaknesses of the dying aristocracy and doing so effectively.

Julie Stewart as Regina was less bouyant and full of energy than the script seemed to demand. Her homely and robust figure was fitting, but the "joie de vivre" that she is supposed to possess was not quite apparent in the opening moments of the play to the

extent that when Oswald (Elliott Smith) declares that she is the only one who can save him he appears far more demented that he ought to. Elliot Smith's performance was a commendable satirization of the limp and sickly artist who is struggling with an oedipal relationship with his mother. He manages to illicit a bit of sympathy from the audience through the sincerity of his performance.

The second half of the play is more lively and dynamic perhaps because less time is spent recounting past experiences and more time is spent getting on with the plot at hand. The satire is far more clearly tackled by director Francois Barbeau in this act. Oswald wants to marry Regina who, it turns out is his half sister, the product of an illicit relationship between the late Mr Alving and a maid in the house. Oswald is also suffering from an ailment which weakens him. as it happens, the ailment is syphilis, the same disease that killed his father.

In the meantime, Mrs Alving plays out the oedipal relationship between mother and son. she does not want to lose a son that she has had to keep away from her for years. In the end, she gets her wish. Regina turns out to care little for Oswald, and choses to abandon him to his disease and move in with her mentor the Pastor Manders, while Oswald manages to convince his mother to poison him with morphine as soon as he becomes incoherent.

Our last tableau is of Oswald falling into an insane reverie

chanting "the sun...the sun..." and Mrs Alving weeping over him crying "Oh no! Oh no!" A bright sunrise lights up the glass conservatory behind them. Melodrama to end this comedy of manners, but melodrama that has very little impact on our emotions. Quite simply, the wealthy are getting their just deserts even if the clergy gets off scott-free despite their complicity in the creating this facade of social superiority.

With a carefully crafted naturalistic set (reds and blacks all over), very evocative music to open each act (Geordie

Haley) and a second act that appears to begin to define an approach to the text, *Ghosts* is a play worth seeing. However, the performance of Shirley Douglas as well as the lacklustre handling of the lengthy monologues by Douglas and Hewitt in the first act were great disappointments. If Ibsen were alive today, I would be presumptuous and suggest that he cut the monologues and focus more on the present action. But he is Henrik Ibsen after all, and that in itself should inspire awe.

## CHSR-FM PLAYLIST TOP 40, WEEK ENDING MARCH 31st

TW	LW	ARTIST: Title (Label)	WO	HP
1	2	R.E.M.: Out Of Time (Warner)	3	1
*2	1	THE TRAGICALLY HIP: Road Apples (M.C.A)	6	1
3	3	DINOSAUR JR.: Green Mind (Blanco-y-Negro)	4	3
*4	9	BLACKPOOL: We The Living (Justin)	4	4
5	12	MORRISSEY: Kill Uncle (Sire/Reprise)	2	5
*6	16	VARIOUS ARTISTS: West Coast Music - Unsigned Talent (W.C.M.-U.T.)	3	6
*7	3	NUMB: Christmeister (Oceana/Onslot)	5	3
8	7	FRONT 242: Tyranny For You (Epic)	6	2
9	10	MANUFACTURE: Voice Of World Control (Nettwerk)	3	9
10	6	THE REPLACEMENTS: Dont Sell Or Buy, Its Crap - EP (Sire/Reprise)	5	5
*11	5	DREAM WARRIORS: And Now The Legacy Begins (Island)	6	5
12	8	ENIGMA: MCMXCAD (Charisma)	4	8
*13	28	MURRAY MCLAUGHLIN: The Modern Age (Capitol)	2	13
14	13	PAUL SIMON: The Rhythm Of The Saints (Warner)	2	15
15	34	THE FIXX: Ink (M.C.A)	6	9
16	18	INFORMATION SOCIETY: Hack (Tommy Boy/Reprise)	4	15
17	17	SONIC YOUTH: Dirty Boots - Live EP (D.G.C)	4	18
18	24	PALE SAINTS: Half-Life - EP (4AD)	1	19
*19	NE	RANDOM KILLING: Kicked In The Nuts (Resistance)	1	20
20	NE	FRONT LINE ASSEMBLY: Caustic Grip (Wax Trax)	2	21
21	29	ROGER MCGUINN: Back From Rio (Arista)	8	4
22	11	JESUS JONES: Doubt (Capitol)	4	23
23	27	HAVANA 3AM: Havana 3am (I.R.S)	2	24
24	33	THE SKATENIGS: Chemical Imbalance (Wax Trax)	4	21
25	21	ADAMSKI: Dr Adamski's Musical Pharmacy (M.C.A)	4	19
26	19	ASWAD: Too Wicked (Mango)	5	27
27	31	AZTEC CAMERA: Stray (Sire/Reprise)	4	28
*28	30	TERRY ODETTE: Without Wings (Wart)	5	10
29	14	BRIAN ENO/JOHN CALE: Wrong Way Up (Opal/Warner)	1	30
30	NE	VARIOUS ARTISTS: Tame Yourself (Rhino)	1	31
*31	NE	CRASH TEST DUMMIES: The Ghosts That Haunt Me (Arista)	1	32
*32	NE	CYBERAKTIF: Nothing Stays - EP (Wax Trax)	9	6
33	20	POP WILL EAT ITSELF: Cure For Sanity (R.C.A)	1	34
34	NE	THE LA'S: The La's (Polygram)	2	35
35	40	THE BUCKPETS: Mercurutones (Island)	2	36
36	39	THE JUDYBATS: Native Son (Sire/Warner)	5	22
37	25	SOHO: Goddess (Atco)	1	38
*38	NE	GREG HOSKINS AND THE STICK PEOPLE: Moon Come Up (True North)	1	39
39	NE	BOOK OF LOVE: Candy Carol (Sire/Reprise)	1	40
40	NE	THE DIDJITS: Fuck The Pigs (Touch and Go)	1	40

\* = Canadian Content  
TW = This Week, LW = Last Week, WO = Weeks On Chart, HP = Highest Position  
Chart Compilation based on frequency of airplay. Music Director: Dave Keighley

## Mess O'Blues

by Christopher Watson

Trying to fill out the revues - here are some of the lesser attended gigs of late.

Mess O'Blues - the openers for the Hip. Perhaps more at home in a smaller, more intimate venue this band is for blues lovers only. The guitar laid down by Heath was simple but on the rhythm. He more than makes up for finesse with charisma, once he gets going. Moving to Joel on mouth harp, boy can he play! The wild lead is the perfect augment to the basic chords. The duo loves what they're doing and shows real promise, but they need to relate to the audience more. In a venue the size of the cafeteria, people want to be talked to, and to know that you're singing for them. Appreciation for this band increases with the amount of soul you have.

Another duo, who played during St. Thomas' Gender Studies Week, was Kori Gorman and Rob Chesea. Although I've seen them play more at ease, this is a pair to watch. Once their practice and confidence between songs is up, they will kick come but. They have a very protest/broken heart song sound and their original stuff is real professional caliber. Rob

is an incredible guitar talent with an earthly rain of voice. Kori is the perfect complement, holding the simpler chords but kicking out some pure and loud vocals that blend beautifully. The match musically and vocally is uncanny. Their use of harmony is precise and innovative, as they cover Sinead to Jane's Addiction. Definitely worth money.

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