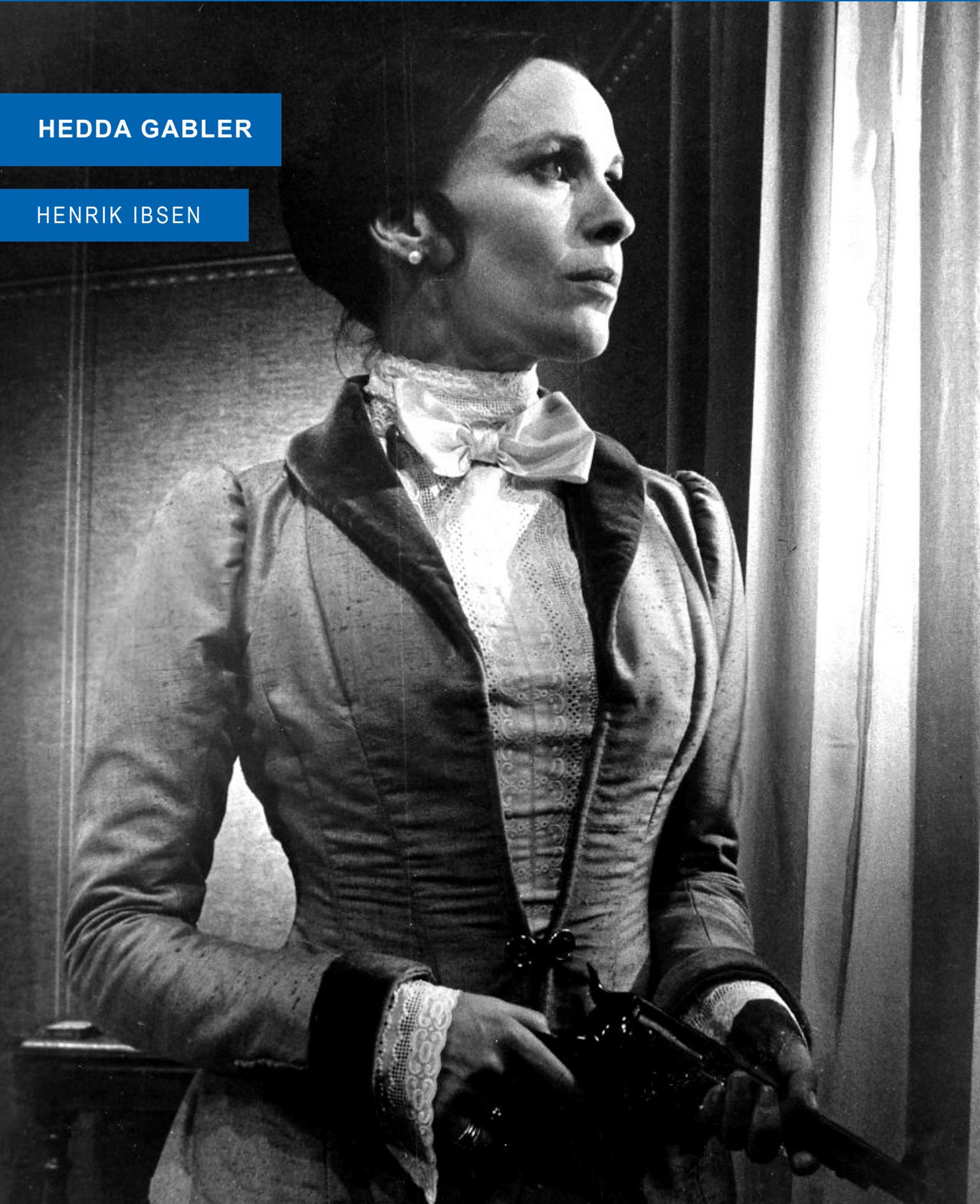


HEDDA GABLER

HENRIK IBSEN



INTRODUCTION

Hedda Gabler was written in 1890 and premiered in 1891 in Munich to unfavourable reviews. Some critics at the time called it a 'hideous nightmare of pessimism'. A production the following year at the Vaudeville Theatre, London, was more positively received by critics and audiences alike.

In Hedda Gabler [Ibsen] gives us a typical tragedy of modern life, and in the strange, sensitive, selfish heroine, he presents one of the most wonderful and subtle conceptions of woman in the whole range of dramatic literature. [The Sunday Times review of Hedda Gabler, 1891.]

The play revolves around the main character Hedda; an upper middle-class woman trapped in a conventional marriage with an uninspiring husband. She reacts against the constraints this brings with it and her violent actions are both tragic and appalling. The play swings between both tragedy and comedy. It was this unsettling attitude to human loss and life's extreme absurdity that shocked the audience of the original performance. Light is made of people's tragedy for Hedda's amusement. The absurdity of life and human reaction to it appears comic and at times almost farcical.

Hedda Gabler is placed in the last half of Ibsen's cannon of works. The early verse plays and lyrical works of *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* had given way to more socially critical works such as *The Pillars of Society* and *A Doll's House*. In these plays, Ibsen was beginning to put society under the microscope and explore what happened behind the closed doors of respectable family life and middle class marriage. This is most clearly seen in the earlier work, *A Doll's House*. The doll, Nora, leaves her husband and children at the end of the play to pursue finding out who she really is as an individual: not a mother, not a wife, not a daughter but a woman.

This established Ibsen's reputation as a controversial playwright of his time. He explored the consequences of passion in *Rosmersholm*, where the two major characters act upon their passion but end their lives in a suicide. The isolation and stripping away of identity of domestic life explored in *A Doll's House* and the illicit passions of *Rosmersholm* come together in *Hedda Gabler*, creating an explosive mix of imagined passion and realities of everyday life. These

cannot be reconciled and ultimately lead to the final and brutal death of the pregnant Hedda at her own hands with her father's pistols.

CONTEXT OF HEDDA GABLER

Ibsen's first audiences were not used to plays that analysed their society and deconstructed the systems that scaffolded their lives. Plays before had followed the predictable qualities of the 'well-made play'. To some extent they had created a safe and protected experience for their audience. Although the action of *Hedda Gabler* pays respect to Aristotelian convention, in that it takes place within one time frame and location (early morning to the following evening), it is here that it departs from the expected tradition. Ibsen's open-ended, unresolved and often complicated plot, with its forever changing motivations was new for its time. Ibsen used naturalism and symbolic action to convey his ideas. Audiences were unaccustomed to seeing their own 'dirty linen' acted out in public. The structure of the play sees each of the four acts build to a climax, only for Hedda herself to conclude them with extreme action. Whether it be brandishing her father's pistols to worry her anxious husband:

TESMAN: (runs to the doorway and calls after her) For heaven's sake, Hedda dear, don't touch those things. They're dangerous. Hedda – please – for my sake! (Act One) p. 34

or burning the manuscript and thus killing Thea Elvsted and Eilert Loevburgs' 'child':

HEDDA: (she throws a few more pages into the stove). The child Eilert Loevborg gave you. (throws the rest of the manuscript in) I'm burning it! I'm burning your child! (Act Three) p. 84

These moments only add to the overall tragi-comedy. We are encouraged to laugh along with Hedda at poor Aunt Juju and her unfashionable hat. Yet we are acutely aware of the pain it causes her to be mocked so, and how keen the maiden aunt is to please Hedda Gabler, the daughter of General Gabler! This juxtaposition of pain and laughter are set to confuse and torment the audience.

Ibsen's work has laid down an inheritance for other writers and playwrights.

- Freud recognised the phallic symbols of the pistols and the Electra complex exhibited by Hedda's devotion to her dead father. This is most clearly seen in the symbolic presence of the imposing portrait of him that oversees all her relationships with other men.
- Luigi Pirandello declared, '*After Shakespeare, I unhesitatingly place Ibsen first!*'
- Arthur Miller refers to Ibsen's influence upon his work.
- David Hare, Edward Bond and Harold Pinter have used the focus on society and the detail of his characterisation in their work. The latter also developed the comedy much the same to reinforce life's cruel ironies.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Ibsen's careful characterisation in his play shows a clear understanding of how class and status influence decisions. The many moods and passions within each character are evident. Learners will need to understand the changing motives, both as a reaction to the plot but also as a result of their inner failings and unfulfilled dreams.

HEDDA TESMAN (NEE GABLER)

Hedda is the main character in the play. It is interesting that although she begins the play married to George Tesman, she is remembered for her maiden name. It is the person she was before the play that sets her dominance and presence to the audience – a daughter of a famous General who, as his post determined, was treated like the aristocracy. She has been involved in society events, having been escorted to ballrooms by Judge Brack in the past.

Her marriage has long been anticipated in high circles. Yet she has married Tesman. He is an academic and lacks any of the flair and social etiquette of her class. Her marriage to

Tesman is one of expectation – she hopes he will gain the professorship and thus will be able



to maintain her position in society.

She continues to assert the standards from her old life. This is seen in the demands she has placed on the furnishing of the new house, which Aunt Juju has had to fund. Everyone works to keep her in the manner she is accustomed to. However, with all this she is still bored by life and trapped in the house she desired on a whim. She spends a lot of the play amusing herself at others' expense and sharing these jokes with Judge Brack and, more often nearer the end of the play, out loud only just unheard or half heard.

She dreams of things she is too feckless to attain and would rather play cat and mouse with easy targets, such as Thea Elvsted, than really reach for her dreams. She becomes lost in her own fantasies, which is evident in her portrayal of the flawed Loevborg whom she envisages as a Dionysian hero dying valiantly and with honour for his art or love. But she fails to realise these attributes are only in fiction and real people are not flawless. Her own tragic and melodramatic suicide is unpredicted and shows how she disregards true value in life. Even at the end, she wants to claim the final incredulity from everyone, including Brack: *'But good God! People don't do such things!'* and from us the audience. Her boredom and lack of purpose serve as a destructive lesson to us all.

GEORGE TESMAN

George Tesman is Hedda's husband. Not of her class, although his potential as an academic and would-be professor raises him up the social rankings. He is content with his life and very excited to have gained Hedda as his wife. This is still a society where the woman was the possession of the husband. He has been mothered through his life by his maiden aunts and perhaps now will expect the same from Hedda.

He has spent his honeymoon researching for a book and endlessly collects information but does not seem to produce anything. Unlike his rival Loevborg, whose creativity produces a work of art, Tesman produces a lot of well cross-referenced materials! This is not a pastime Hedda can participate in. However, it does show, unlike her, that Tesman is passionate about something and has a purpose, even if that purpose does not produce an end result.

At the end of the play, he sits down to recreate Loevborg's work with Mrs Elvsted. This act

replaces Hedda in his life with her rival, Thea.

JUDGE BRACK

He has high status in society and has been a friend of Hedda and Tesman for some time. His occupation as judge brings him respect and influence, which he is ready to use when it suits his needs.

Described as *'wearing outdoor clothes which are elegant but a little too youthful for him'*, this suggests a man trying to hold on to a life that is quickly passing him by. He is getting

too old to be the 'bachelor' and entertains himself flirting with Hedda. He too is bored with life and amuses himself with little games. It is him who sees this quality in Hedda. However sordid, he dreams of the 'triangle' with the Tesmans.



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THEA ELVSTED

Thea went to school with Hedda. But we learn that Hedda bullied her and threatened to burn her hair. This jealousy Hedda had in youth is continued through into her adulthood as she delights in destroying Thea's work.

Of a lower class than Hedda, Thea has experienced hard times and has worked as a governess and housekeeper. In this class position she has more in common with Tesman and Aunt Juju than Hedda.

Having apparently married her employer for convenience, she became involved with Eilert Loevborg when he became tutor to her stepchildren. This relationship seems to be one of adoration and shared dreams. She works to make notes and copy out his manuscript. Together they are united in a common cause and the eventual completion of the 'child' – Loevborg's book. Her natural empathy for others and maternal qualities set her in direct opposition to Hedda in the play.

EILERT LOEBURG

Previously an academic rival of Tesman's, Eilert Loevborg is both a genius and tortured soul. His demons prevent him from fully achieving his goals. Like Hedda, it is the inability to complete the dream that finally leads to his death.

Having been 'saved' from his demons by Thea Elvsted and devoting his life with her to the creation of his new work, it is his arrival back in town that seals his downfall. He is led back to drink and debauchery on Hedda's persuasion. Perhaps she does this as a way to eliminate him as an obstacle for the professorship or, more cynically, to fulfil Hedda's dream of him as a Dionysian hero – tortured and dying for his art. It is his shame that allows him to further spiral out of control. Instead of having a heroic suicide, which Hedda tries to facilitate by giving her pistol to him, he is shot in the groin by a prostitute at a brothel. This is a pathetic and shameful end for Hedda's one-time suitor and imagined 'God'.

AUNT JUJU / AUNT RENA / BERTHA

These characters represent Tesman's past. They have brought him up, mothered him, embroidered slippers each year and in doing so, set up expectations of domestic life that Hedda will not be able to, or want to, fulfil. They are of a domestic class, perhaps fulfilling their own aspirations of motherhood through the anticipated arrival of George's own children with Hedda.

Aunt Juju – the innocent victim of Hedda's mocking in Act One – has a vocation to care for others. This is not only Aunt Rena (whose death is protracted to humorous effect), but even strangers who she will take in and care for. She is willing to sacrifice herself for others. Tesman says in Act One (p. 9), '*will you never stop sacrificing yourself for me?*'

Bertha, once a valued maid to George, is now abused and disrespected by Hedda. She serves to show the audience how class and status neglects the individual and she, whilst oppressed, is much more content than those like Hedda. Both are trapped in their social classes, but by accepting her lot and finding a purpose in life, her destiny differs greatly from that of her mistress.

ISSUES

These are some of the issues highlighted within the play:

CLASS/STATUS

Hedda Gabler raises the importance of social standing. Ibsen wanted the audience to see it in all its hypocritical glory. It is clear from near the beginning of the play when Aunt Juju talks admiringly about Hedda, '*General Gabler's daughter! Think of what she was accustomed to when she was alive!*' (p. 2).

This sets Hedda apart from Tesman and his aunts. Hedda's privilege as the daughter of the General gave her equal status with the aristocracy, although it might have always 'grated' that this wealth and status was not inherited. Tesman's social destiny is similar in that education, rather than military service, will raise him up from the simple middle class.

The division between Hedda and Aunt Juju is clear in her refusal to call her by the nickname George uses – '*I'll try to call her aunt Juliana. That's as far as I'll go.*' (p. 15) – and it is as though anything more would be beneath her.

The hypocrisy of the social etiquette is revealed when Aunt Juju is deemed to have arrived too early for it to be appropriate and is mildly rebuked for this, yet Judge Brack is forgiven for his presumption:

BRACK: May one presume to call so early?

HEDDA: One may presume. (p. 28)

This is just the beginning of the impropriety acted out by the classes who should know better. Furthermore, Hedda's sexual innuendo and playfulness with Brack perhaps goes beyond someone newly-wed and of her standing in society.

EMANCIPATION UNATTAINED

Ibsen litters his play with examples of unfulfilled potential:

- Hedda's boredom comes from a lack of purpose and mission in life – a purpose that Aunt Juju thinks might be solved by the arrival of a child. This thought repulses Hedda and only drives to trap her further in her own dead end. *'I have no leanings in that direction Judge. I do not want any – responsibilities.'* (p. 45)
- Tesman has spent six months working on his research, yet it too may never come to anything.
- Judge Brack seems content to please himself visiting *'houses where I may go as a – trusted friend'* (p. 39) and playing with the idea of a love triangle which he considers *'a delightful arrangement for all parties concerned'*.
- Loevborg reaches for his dream, but it is his own character flaws that prevent him from seizing the rewards that lead to his self-destruction.
- It is perhaps only Thea Elvsted who is happy just being a part of someone else's dream, even though the destruction of the manuscript has destroyed *'the one thing that's made her life worth living'* (Act Three, p. 82).
- Poor Aunt Rena is eventually saved from interminable sickness by death.

DUTY / RESPONSIBILITY

These issues establish the divide between those who play by society's rules and those who don't. Aunt Juju of course takes great pains to behave appropriately. Even on the death of her sister she has to *'dress her and lay her out as well as I can. She shall go to her grave looking beautiful.'* (p. 87)

George reciprocates with his flitting to and fro between his duties as the man of the house, his familial duties towards his aunts and his commitment to his work.

It could be seen that Hedda on the other hand, fails to uphold her responsibility as a wife to George. In her death she even denies him the child she is carrying. She horrifies the audience who struggle to see how a mother could perform such an act – as a mother she had a duty of care towards her unborn child. These thoughts are echoed in Brack's last words, '*People don't do such things!*' (p. 104)

SECRETS

What happens behind the closed doors and windows of others' houses is opened out for us to see in this play. We are taken behind the façade of polite society. Hedda is trapped in this world. She opens and closes the French windows, moves to engage in conversation just out of earshot of others. She perpetuates the activities of illicit secrecy and moves around her space furtively one minute, stalking her prey the next.

Yet it is the hidden half-truths that lead the plot into its twists and turns that finally trap Hedda. The use of the 'back doors' (p. 35) by Judge Brack even hints of a secret rendezvous or forbidden assignation. The evening also complies by providing the darkness in which George acquires the manuscript and Hedda burns it.

ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

Ibsen was appalled by the first interpretation of the character of Hedda. He thought Clare Heese's acting style was too exclamatory and as a result, the subtlety and playfulness of Hedda was lost. This might have contributed to some of the damning reviews. However, over time, the main character has been interpreted in many ways, showing her complexities and such performances have earned the play new respect. This would be something for learners to consider when developing their own interpretations.

STAGING THE PLAY

With regard to staging, many interpretations have been explored. Some, like Meyerhold's production in 1906, focused on an expressionistic or stylised portrayal of the action and set. The aim was to present a symbolic representation of the play and its set design reflected this. A large armchair was downstage and served as a throne for Hedda. The upstage wall reflected colours to convey Hedda's inner moods. It would be useful for learners to explore which stage shape is best for a production of *Hedda Gabler* and how different acting styles might influence the response to the play by an audience.

The production of *Hedda Gabler* at the Salisbury Playhouse in 2016, directed by Gareth Machin and designed by James Button, returned to a more naturalistic style. The set designer incorporated Ibsen's original intentions evident in the stage directions. On a proscenium arch stage, smaller seating areas were created within the main room so that the audience could see all the different areas of action at once and see the juxtaposition of the scenes at a glance.

For example, when Brack and Tesman went to have a drink and smoke in Act Two (p. 58), they withdrew to the inner room and the audience could see this action whilst Hedda remained with Thea and Loevborg. This established a tense atmosphere, as Kirsty Bushell playing Hedda tempted Loevborg to have a drink. The anticipation that someone could walk in on this was palpable and highlighted how Hedda manipulates the use of the space throughout.

In the final scene Hedda has no control over her space any more. She can't even play her piano without disrupting Thea and Tesman. In this production the actress walked around restlessly, not able to sit by the cosy fire, as Judge Brack was there. At this part of the play he has trapped her in her own lie and is blackmailing her. The movement of the actress around this space created the intense feeling of entrapment and led ultimately to her suicide. This appeared to be her only way to escape – the trap that had been sprung. The designer had considered carefully the playwright's intentions, with his use of large French windows that could be opened to bring in light but then closed firmly to create a prison, where Hedda scratched at the windows as if trying to escape.



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