

A Doll's House – review

Young Vic, London

by Susannah Clapp, *The Observer*, Saturday 14 July 2012



At a time of crisis audiences are ready for a drama of urgency. More than any other dramatist, Henrik Ibsen is on both a social and psychological edge. Startlingly, one country that acknowledges this fully is China, where the Norwegian is central to the idea of modernism. But the British stage needs him too, and this summer we have him all over the place, with a trio of plays opening in the same week. Two are top-notch.

When Carrie Cracknell was in (joint) charge of the Gate in Notting Hill, she specialised in

blending dance with drama. She brings that skill to her mesmerising *A Doll's House*, which has an utterly distinctive rhythm, a constantly changing tempo. It floats. Hattie Morahan's marvellous Nora seems to be wafted uncontrollably from one place and person to another, from playing the doll to being the creature who finds herself slamming the door on husband and children.

The early scenes move as if everyone is caught up in a paralysing dream. The light is soft. The colours are muted. Morahan is supple and wheedling. A real live baby (so unexpected that the little thing looks not so much real as surreal) is carried on. Ian MacNeil's set of small rooms revolves between scenes like a slow-motion merry-go-round. Suddenly in Nora's dance the stage is arrested by glare and harshness and defiance. Morahan's face becomes fixed and lit up like a white mask; she is dressed in flamenco scarlet. Then in the final scene she unravels on a long sob, her words at times no more coherent than her actions. This is not a steely act of rebellion – she is washed out with tears and despair – but an instinctive, impromptu run for her life: you can hardly believe, any more than her husband does, what she's going to do.

It's no surprise that this should be a night for women actors. For Morahan, of course, but also for Susannah Wise, who as Kristine Linde has from her first word a forceful candour and absolute ease that cuts away the years between 1879 and 2012. Dominic Rowan grows from a stiff start as Torvald into a wonderful drunk scene, a sexual encounter which, when interrupted, caused one audience member not merely to sigh but groan with pain, and an exceptionally funny imitation of the horrors of knitting: "There's something Chinese about it."

Rowan, like everyone else, is greatly helped by Simon Stephens's agile new version, which is quick and clear and full of subtle touches: Torvald's belittling endearments for his wife include not the usual frisky "squirrel" but the far more lowering "hamster" – perfect for a woman trapped in a domestic wheel of domesticity. As they are by MacNeil's superb design. He perches the nicely painted pastels of Nora's house – full of small rooms and corridors through which the heroine slips like an experimental creature in a lab – beside a rougher staircase that belongs to the world outside. He's echoing his revolutionary design for *An Inspector Calls*, another play in which a harsh external world taps on the door of a protected domestic circle.

