



Insights

A Study Guide to the Utah Shakespeare Festival



*H.M.S.
Pinafore*

Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival's stages.

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The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespeare Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly.



Synopsis: *Ghosts*

Mrs. Alving, widow of the admired and respected Captain Alving, has been living on her husband's estate with her maid Regina, carrying on her husband's philanthropic projects, such as a recently completed orphanage. She is aided in this by the primly proper Pastor Manders, whom she once loved and who disapproves of her "freethinking" ideas. Her son Oswald, who has been leading an artist's life in Paris, returns home for the dedication of the orphanage, which burns to the ground before the ceremonies.

Returning exhausted from the fire, Oswald reveals to his mother that he is suffering from a venereal disease, the origin of which he does not understand. When he declares his intention to marry Regina, Mrs. Alving is forced to reveal what she has previously confessed to pastor Manders: Captain Alving was in reality a dissipated sensualist masquerading under the guise of gentility; all his reputation and philanthropy were the result of her own industry, and Regina is actually his illegitimate daughter. Oswald realizes that his disease is heredity in origin and obtains from his mother her promise to administer a deadly drug to him should he become insane. As the play ends, Oswald's mind disintegrates completely under a final seizure, and Mrs. Alving must decide whether to give her son the poison as she has promised or let him go on living in a state of idiocy.

About the Playwright: Henrik Ibsen

From Insights, 1990

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) is recognized today as the father of modern drama, having almost single-handedly revolutionized it into a vehicle for social comment as well as his own moral and spiritual insight. Born in Skien, Norway, and early accustomed to poverty and loneliness, young Ibsen was apprenticed to an apothecary and hated it. He turned to writing moderately successful poetry as a compensation, and eventually made his way to Christiania (Oslo) where his first play was published in 1850. There and in Bergen he studied dramaturgy, and in 1857 became director of the Norwegian Theatre in Oslo. Overworked and unhappy, he resigned in 1862 to have the time to write. Up to this time he had written nine unsuccessful plays, but now one masterpiece followed another. His first writing style was poetic drama, and two of his masterpieces, *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, exemplify his best early efforts.

A few years later he apparently came to feel that the future of dramatic literature was not in poetic language, but in language that closely resembled everyday speech, and he turned to writing prose drama, exploring troublesome social situations with the hope of arousing audiences to do something about the problems. *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts*, and *The Pillars of Society* presented such startlingly new realism that the public was outraged, although Ibsen restored his reputation with a comedy of sorts, *An Enemy of the People*.

Losing something of his crusading zeal in later years, his last group of plays, including *The Wild Duck* and *Rosmersholm*, become symbolist drama, containing exquisite poetry and deep explorations into the unconscious mind. *Hedda Gabler*, a profound character study, and *The Master Builder*, ironic and pessimistic, concluded his major creative work.

Ibsen spent much of his life in voluntary exile from Norway, admittedly seeking less hostile shores. When he returned in 1891, public opinion of his works had turned. No longer an abomination but a giant of modern drama, he enjoyed a decade of extravagant success in America and Europe.

The poor and lonely pharmacist's apprentice became himself a respected "pillar of society," complete with frock coat and gold-rimmed spectacles, who was proud to see the son of his marriage in 1858 to Susannah Thoresen enter the diplomatic service. Ibsen dressed meticulously and liked to display the orders of merit that governments and royalty bestowed upon him. When he died in 1906 following a paralytic stroke, he was given a ceremonial public funeral, attended by the King of Norway. Ibsen could sing like a thrush and croak like a raven--sometimes simultaneously.

Ghosts: Tragedy and Liberation

By Kay K. Cook

From *Midsummer Magazine*, 1990

In Act Two of Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts*, Oswald Alving reveals the source of the illness that has brought him home to die: *vermoulu*. His doctor has told him, "you've been worm-eaten from birth" (63; the source for all quotations from this play is the Michael Meyer translation in *Drama and Discussion*, ed. Stanley A. Clayes, Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1978). Helene Alving thus confronts the awful truth that one's "ghosts" cannot be laid to rest and that one's fate cannot be avoided by prudently acquiescing to social convention. The oppressive effects of a stultifying society and of a "socialized" religion where appearances are everything has led Mrs. Alving to preserve her marriage at all costs; the terrible irony is that she learns she has preserved it at the cost of her son's life. Her union with the philandering Captain Alving, which she endured through a sense of duty, has thus become life-taking rather than life-affirming, degenerative rather than regenerative. And, yet, her son's revelation is both her tragedy and her liberation.

It is well known that Ibsen wrote *Ghosts* (1881) in answer to the uproar created by *A Doll's House* (1879), when the protagonist of that play, Nora Helmer, walked out on her husband and children. The last we hear of Nora is the door slamming shut as the play closes. Ibsen has suggested that in the wake of the reception of *A Doll's House*, the creation of Mrs. Alving, a woman who stayed in an oppressive marriage, was inevitable. "After Nora, Mrs. Alving of necessity had to come," Ibsen noted (Keith May, Ibsen and Shaw, St. Martin's Press: New York, 1985, 60). In a gesture ringing of "you asked for it," Ibsen created the play in which "the sins of the fathers are visited on the sons"; the specific sin in this case is venereal disease.

As *Ghosts* opens, Mrs. Alving is preparing for the ceremonies to dedicate the orphanage she has constructed in Captain Alving's memory, who has been dead for ten years. She has been delighted by a surprise visit from her son, a Paris artist, who has announced that he has come to spend the winter with her. Shortly after the play begins, Pastor Manders, who has overseen the official business of constructing the orphanage and who will dedicate it the following day, arrives. Pastor Manders is no stranger to the Alving household; it becomes quite clear that it was he to whom Mrs. Alving fled shortly after her marriage to Captain Alving. Manders reminds Mrs. Alving that twenty-eight years ago he dutifully sent her home to her husband: "I was able to dissuade you from your frenzied intentions. . . . It was granted to me to lead you back on to the path of duty and home to your lawful husband" (52).

During the course of the play, Mrs. Alving reveals to Pastor Manders the true nature of her marriage after she returned home. For the sake of appearance, she convinced her husband to move to the country, where his debauched ways might be concealed, and she sent her son Oswald to boarding school so that he would never learn the truth about his father's dissolute life. "I wanted to make sure that my own son, Oswald; should not inherit anything whatever from his father" (54). Helene Alving sacrificed herself by partaking of the drinking sessions with Alving, in the privacy of their home, and struggling with his violence as she nightly put him to bed. All the while, she took over the family business, made charitable donations in her husband's name, and wrote to her son of his father's philanthropic deeds.

Mrs. Alving has even been able to conceal the captain's indiscretion of impregnating the housemaid, who is sent away with a bundle of money and whose daughter, Regina, the product of his indiscretion, has lived with, been educated by, and now serves as the maid for Mrs. Alving.

With the dedication of the orphanage, built with the exact sum that Captain Alving possessed when she married him, Helene believes that she is finally able to rid herself of the burden under which she has lived all these years; the orphanage will be the final act of atonement; the ghosts of the marriage will be put to rest.

Yet, revelation is the nature of the play, and while Manders is shocked by the revisionist history of the Alving marriage, Mrs. Alving is the one who receives the greatest shock, that of the ill-

ness of her only child. As the orphanage burns to the ground (a result of carelessness with a candle), the play proceeds toward more revelations. Oswald learns that his father led a dissolute life and that Regina, whom he had become very attracted to, is his half-sister.

The play ends shortly after Oswald has elicited a promise from his mother to administer a lethal dose of morphine to him when the disease overtakes his mind. The closing scene depicts Mrs. Alving in the throes of her anguished decision, while her son, suddenly reduced to a catatonic state, mutters again and again, "The sun, the sun." We do not know whether Mrs. Alving will relieve her son's misery or whether she will let him continue to live in this literally mindless state.

When Ibsen submitted *Ghosts* to the Danish Royal Theatre in 1881, it was rejected and was subsequently rejected and vilified by all the Scandinavian countries, until August Lindberg created a fairly well received touring production in 1883. It was launched into the rest of the world, however, amidst outrage and derision: "The critical controversy and even hostility that frequently attended the many . . . productions of *Ghosts* during the 1880s erupted into a veritable firestorm of denunciations and moral outrage when the play at last reached the stages of the three world capitals--Paris, London, and New York--in the nineties" (Frederick J. Marker and Lise Lone Marker, *Ibsen's Lively Art: A Performance Study of the Major Plays*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1989, 92-93).

Early critical response, then, is clouded by controversy over the appropriateness of the play's subject matter. Directorial choices that focused on Oswald as protagonist didn't help. Critics believed that Ibsen's purpose was to show the ravages of venereal disease and denounced the play as filthy; performances were met with "shrieks of execration" (Marker, 92).

Added to the controversy over the perceived subject matter was Ibsen's experimentation with dramatic form and characterization. The playwright's innovation in acting, setting, and lighting was equally as shocking as the subject matter. Andre Antoine, for example, introduced in his 1890 production of *Ghosts* a "new style of acting in which, according to Emile Zola's dictates, the actors should 'not play, but rather live before the audience'" (Marker, 93). Thus *Ghosts*'s early notoriety resulted from both form and content; audiences disconcerted with the subject matter were also disoriented by the "realism" that diminished their sense that they were watching actors playing parts. To see and hear actors who "became" their characters was shocking,

Moreover, Ibsen once again had boldly confronted "the woman question," and, similar to the character of Nora in *A Doll's House*, Helene Alving was and continues to be a source of controversy. It wasn't long before most directors recognized her as the true protagonist of the play, and with the shift in focus from Oswald to his mother came the debate over whether Helene was cruel and calculating throughout the play or strengthened and enlightened at the end.

In his review of the criticism of the play, John Chamberlain sides with those who perceive Helene Alving as a cold controller and possessive mother: He quotes critics who describe her as "a savage predator in a horrifying world" (Hans George Meyer), and who characterize her as a "child devouring mother" (Meyer and David Thomas) (177-78). Chamberlain himself suggests that "Mrs. Alving's most seriously negative aspects are too kindly passed over" and concludes that if she suffers with stoicism, she "may also be almost literally murderous matriarch" (101).

The grammatical awkwardness of this last sentence suggests the extent to which Chamberlain pushes this interpretation. Moreover, the critical assessments discussed above have little basis in the play; all three critics are fairly hard pressed to put their characterizations of Mrs. Alving to the textual test. All three critics fail to consider the structure of the play, for example, which unfolds in a "Sophoclean" manner; that is, the Mrs. Alving at the beginning of the play is not the anguished mother we see at the end, just as Oedipus, having had his veil of ignorance lifted, is drastically changed. Furthermore, characterizing her as cold and calculating tends, interestingly enough, to

exonerate Captain Alving, the true agent of the son's illness. It is he who has infected the son, not the "devouring" mother. Helene Alving has made mistakes, but clearly not ones as fatal, physically or psychologically, as Captain Alving's.

In *Ghosts* Mrs. Alving's light-hearted and determined spirit progresses toward a recognition of her own culpability in the course of events that has led to her son's illness. Seemingly indomitable as the play opens, Mrs. Alving banters with Pastor Manders, and clearly possesses the upper hand over this stuffy relic of the church, whose third sentence has something to do with "duty."

Although he is there strictly on the business of the orphanage, Pastor Manders, upset by the "free-thinking" books Mrs. Alving has been reading, feels moved to remind her that her "fatal spirit of willfulness," led her to disown "her duties as a wife" (52). Manders is moved to elevated religious rhetoric as he piously condemns the woman who fled to him twenty-eight years prior: "For verily Mrs. Alving, as a mother you carry a heavy burden of guilt. This I have regarded as my duty to say to you" (53).

After which Helene Alving lowers the boom, so to speak, and reveals all to the self-righteous, spiritually blinded pastor.

It is significant that these two characters are pitted against one another as the play opens, because it is through them that change, or lack thereof, is measured. That Pastor Manders has grossly misinterpreted the Alving's relationship for twenty-eight years comes as a great shock to him, but has little impact on the way he will continue to conduct his life. Enlightenment does not bring self-knowledge. Therefore, the last we see of the good pastor is his being led blindly by Regina's adoptive father, Engstrand, to take the funds for the now-burned orphanage and put them into a "sailor's home," a euphemism for nothing less than a brothel (admittedly a more fitting memorial to Captain Alving). If there is change at all in Manders, it is that he has reduced himself to the level of Engstrand. Their complicity in covering up the fact that Manders's carelessness was the source of the accidental fire ends in their colluding to create the "sailor's home."

The fire that destroys the orphanage has quite a different effect on Helene Alving. Occurring at the end of Act 2, it culminates the scene in which Helene has the first recognition of the complicity by keeping up appearances at all costs. Oswald has introduced to her the notion of the "joy of life," a concept that has escaped her completely. Contrasting "here" (the oppressive Norway, the oppressive house) with "out there," Oswald states that in Paris: "They feel it's wonderful and glorious just to be alive. Mother have you noticed how everything I've painted is concerned with the joy of life . . . , light and sunshine and holiday.

That's what makes me afraid to be here at home with you."

Mrs. Alving. "Afraid? what are you afraid of here with me?"

Oswald. "I'm afraid that everything in me will degenerate into ugliness here" (67).

It is as though Helene Alving has heard the term 'joy' for the first time in her life. The word strikes her on a psychic level and triggers the recognition that will allow her to strip away the facades she has been living behind. The destruction of the orphanage is then merely a tangible symbol of Mrs. Alving's recognition that ghosts are not exorcised by erecting institutions to placate society. She tells Oswald: "You spoke of the joy of life; and that seemed to throw a new light over everything that has happened in my life. . . . [Your father] hadn't a single friend capable of knowing what the joy of life means; only idlers and drinking companions-- . . . And I didn't bring any sunshine into his home" (70-71).

The terrible irony is that at the point Helene Alving does bring the sunshine in, symbolically and literally, her son succumbs to the illness that plagues him. Her decision of whether or not to administer the morphine is her greatest test.

Sandra Saari locates “three tests” designed to free Mrs. Alving “from the social and religious dicta of the past”: telling Oswald about the debauchery of his father, preventing an incestuous union between Regina and Oswald, and administering the lethal dose of morphine. “Her free will becomes a major consideration in the play. From this perspective, the plot concludes precisely at the moment of Mrs. Alving’s greatest existential choice” (in John S. Chamberlain, *Ibsen The Open Vision*, Athlone: London, 1982; 73-74).

When confronted about the characters of Nora Helmer and Mrs. Alving, Ibsen often protested that he was not consciously promoting women’s rights in his play and, in fact, wasn’t quite sure what was meant by that term; his interests, he said, were with human rights. Clearly, however, women are a subset of the category “human,” and Ibsen saw plainly the consequences to society of their oppression. In his notes to *Ghosts*, he writes: “These modern women, misused as daughters, as sisters, as wives, not educated according to their talents, barred from their vocation, robbed of their inheritance, their minds embittered—

Ghosts: “Give Me the Sun”

From *Insights*, 1990

At daybreak in a dark Norwegian valley at the head of a gloomy fjord, a young man who has struggled vainly for light and happiness sees the distant morning on far-away peaks. He speaks flatly to the woman who moments ago had made a decision to face the truth; thereby, she thought, guaranteeing this happiness: “Mother, give me the sun.”

And again Henrik Ibsen sums up man as he has come to sense himself in the twentieth century: his hopes and fears, his understanding for the world, and his intuition of his place in this world.



In about 1877, Ibsen shifted from writing romantic dreams (including *Peer Gynt*, which is likely his best-known work) to writing realistic dramas which presented problems of social importance, and he did so in an unorthodox manner that could not be ignored. With *The Pillars of Society*, *A Doll's House*, *An Enemy of the People*, and particularly with *Ghosts*, Ibsen became the first spokesman and most influential dramatist of modern theatre. He was a hero to progressives and anathema to conservatives.

With publication in 1879 of *A Doll's House*, which was a reflection on woman's dependent status in society, Ibsen drew a storm of protest against his heroine Nora's leaving her husband, and in fact the play was not performed for several years without an alternate ending which Ibsen agreed to write in which Nora stayed home for the sake of the children.

Ghosts was a logical sequel to *A Doll's House*, and when *Ghosts* was published two years later in 1881, Ibsen was pilloried as perpetrator of the greatest scandal of modern times. In the earlier play a wife left her home after discovering that she was the useless property of her husband and had been reared in ignorance of the world outside his interests. For this Nora had been roundly denounced as having behaved "unnaturally."

In *Ghosts*, Ibsen reversed his situation. By heeding the clergyman, Pastor Manders, and not leaving her husband, Mrs. Alving became guilty of an act far more "unnatural" than anything that could have been charged against Nora. In this case, the play exposed social traditions that sanctioned a loveless marriage to a debauched husband who left his wife with a son doomed to hereditary venereal disease. Irony could go no further than Mrs. Alving's reward for obeying conventional precepts. The wages of "virtue" are paralysis for the son and desperation for the mother. Mrs. Alving, in fact, becomes a Nora who stayed. It is not difficult to understand why the play should have outraged the circumspet, for whom the mere mention of Oswald's "social disease" on stage would have been sufficient provocation.

Yet *Ghosts* is important for reasons other than the scandal it caused. In many ways it is the most powerful of Ibsen's plays. It is a remorseless morality play on the "sins of the fathers," being exemplified by the presence of hereditary disease in the son; but the failure of the mother and the pastor, who had been in love with her, to recognize that outworn ideas and standards of conduct are even more deadly ghosts--because they stand in the way of love--is likewise an essential idea of the play.

No other of Ibsen's plays so infuriated his public. In Norway the leading newspaper declared, "This book has no place on the Christmas table of a Christian home." In England *Ghosts* was castigated as "An open drain; a loathsome sore unbandaged; a dirty act done publicly." Discussions of the play inevitably became discussions of divorce, venereal disease and mercy killing.

A century has passed, and time has vindicated Ibsen's exploration of human ideas and emotions. Society has corrected some of the abuses against which Ibsen preached, yet his expressed wish remains valid: I would like "to depict human beings, human emotions and human destinies upon a groundwork of certain social conditions and principles of the present day." In *Ghosts*, the rising sun casts its luminous rays on a dark drama of guilt and retribution.

Ghosts: Phantoms Within

By Steven P. Sondrup

From Souvenir Program, 1990



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When in the fall of 1881 Ibsen sat down to write *Ghosts*, he was already well known throughout Scandinavia and on the way toward having an international reputation that would eventually include being called by many the most important dramatist since Shakespeare. He had received many decorations and honors, had had the distinction of representing Norway at the opening of the Suez Canal, and had been awarded an honorary doctorate from Sweden's venerable University of Uppsala. He had written a number of plays dealing with Norwegian history and folklore as well as important figures from world history. Of the more than a dozen plays of this type, only *Brand* and its philosophical converse *Peer Gynt* attracted international attention and have remained of general interest.

It is one of the great ironies of literary history that Norway's most famous writer wrote most of the plays upon which his reputation rests while living abroad. In 1864 Ibsen became so frustrated with what he perceived as an unbearable narrow-mindedness on the part of his fellow Norwegians and so angered by the ethically unconscionable refusal of Norway and Sweden to go to the aid of Denmark during the Dano-Prussian War that he left Norway. Except for short visits home, Ibsen and his family lived in Germany and Italy for the next twenty-seven years.

Ibsen was approaching his fiftieth birthday and dividing his time between Munich and Rome when he turned away from historical themes and began writing the realistic prose dramas about contemporary life upon which his fame now rests. These plays all deal with social problems which remain as pressing today as they were in Ibsen's day. Although each play is independent and complete in itself, each play also emerges out of, and develops from the preceding. Collectively they are often called Ibsen's social dramas, but in a very important sense they are anti-social dramas in that they critically investigate the various ways in which society impinges on the healthy and integrated development of the individual.

Following closely on the heels of *Pillars of Society* and *A Doll's House*, *Ghosts* is the third drama in this series. Ibsen once wrote to a friend that after *Nora*, the heroine of *A Doll's House*, Mrs. Alving had to come. *A Doll's House* had caused something of scandal in its portrayal of a woman deserting her family because she could no longer tolerate her husband's inability or unwillingness to recognize her fundamental rights as a human being. As Ibsen labored feverishly during the fall of 1881 to finish *Ghosts* so that it would be available in book form for Christmas giving, he did not anticipate the more heated furor that this drama would occasion. It was published in an edition of ten thousand copies but was immediately branded as scandalous, indecent and obscene—not a book to have around the house. Bookstores returned hundreds of copies to the publisher, and theaters throughout Europe refused to mount productions of the play.

Ghosts, curiously, had its world premiere the following year in Chicago in the original language before an audience made up largely of Scandinavian immigrants. Eventually hostilities subsided in Europe, and by the end of the decade performances were given in several cities. What so shocked and offended Victorian sensitivities was the dramatic treatment of hereditary venereal disease and Mrs. Alving's open rejection of conventional religion and morality as represented by Reverend Manders. The closing portrayal of Oswald's rapid physical and mental deterioration just at sunrise and Mrs. Alving's uncertainty as to whether she can provide the euthanasia she had promised raised questions that nineteenth-century audiences were scarcely prepared to consider and that remain problematic even to this day.

The Norwegian title of the play, *Gengangere*, is now universally translated into English as *Ghosts* but could just as well be rendered "Phantoms." Like many of Ibsen's titles, it has a double meaning. It alludes on the one hand to the sins of the fathers that are inflicted on their



children, here in the form of a syphilitic condition which Oswald has been told he inherited from his father. The term on the other hand refers, perhaps more directly, to old beliefs, ideas, and prejudices that haunt the mind and dominate society.

These psychological ghosts are no less real to Mrs. Alving than are the furies to Orestes. In a world that was moving ever more rapidly away from traditional mythologies and toward unbridled confidence in science, Ibsen masterfully accomplished the difficult task of creating ghosts that are believable. Such phantoms dwelling within surely provide at least one context in which modern tragedy is possible.



