

PJC REVIEWS

***GHOSTS* (1881)**

By: Henrik Ibsen

Directed by: Richard Eyre

Viewed at Trafalgar Studio/1, Whitehall, on 31 January 2014

Reviewed by: Penelope J. Corfield,

after viewing with Tony Belton, 31 January 2014

Ghosts at Trafalgar Studio/1 is a superb production. It's directed by Richard Eyre and wonderfully acted by a strong cast led by Lesley Manville, making the most of a rare leading role for the 'older woman'. It's also magnificently presented on a stage with walls that are in turn enclosing and transparent – in conscious homage to the spare yet light-filled domestic interiors depicted by the Danish artist Vilhelm Hammershøi (1864-1916).

Yet in this play Henrik Ibsen's ultimate message is so bleak that it leaves the audience stunned. It's all about the dead weight of the past and the terrible effect of having chosen respectability over joy and love. Helene Alving [Lesley Manville] and Pastor Manders [Adam Kotz] have lived in denial. She tried to leave her wealthy but debauched husband, but the man she truly loved sent her back. Parson Manders may be assumed to have had a sincere religious faith which overrode his passion for Helene Alving, but he comes over as something of a wimp who is afraid of social censure – a difficult part to act attractively. Either way, their decision leaves them to suffer bleak and joyless lives.

But it gets worse. The sins of the father are visited upon the following generation. It's blatantly unfair. But so the play unfolds. The tender young love dawning between Helene's son Oswald [played with great naturalness by Jack Lowden] and the family maid Regina Engstrand [a spritely Charlene McKenna]

is blighted not only by his inherited syphilis but also by the revelation that they are half-brother and -sister. Their lives have been spoiled by the 'dead hand' of history, through the casual debauchery of the late and unlamented Captain Alving. The self-seeking manoeuvres of the mischief-making carpenter Jacob Engstrand [Brian McCardie], who had hitherto been assumed to be Regina's father, are relatively minor sins in comparison. At the denouement, Oswald collapses in a painful seizure, immediately after having appealed to his mother to kill him. Mutely, she holds out a handful of fatal pills, as a radiant sun rises outside the house ... and the curtain falls.

Unlike at the conclusion to *A Doll's House* (1879), which Ibsen wrote immediately before *Ghosts*, in this play there is no trace of redemption for the main characters. Perhaps Regina, who has finally walked out slamming the door, will make something of her future life, without her embryonic lover Oswald. But the Alving, mother and son, are both doomed. He will either live incapacitated or die young. And she will have wasted her life in a sterile bourgeois conformity. Even her maternal love, which has hitherto shielded Oswald from the truths about his father, cannot save him.

Indeed, Helene Alving speculates, late in the play, that she herself may have contributed to the disasters of her life. Perhaps her own rigidity pushed her husband into philandering. And perhaps through fear of social censure, she then connived at things that she should have revealed much earlier. Perhaps the social hypocrisy that blighted her life has infected her own behaviour. Life with total disclosure would be impossible. People need some privacy, even in the closest of relationships. But living permanently with dire secrets leads to people becoming 'ghosts', consumed by the past and unable to enjoy the present.

In Ibsen's original script, the mother is left hesitating at the end: 'No no no ... Yes! ... No no'. It is left unclear as to which option she will choose. Ibsen, when asked later, said he did not know. The director Richard Eyre, however, removes any doubt in this production, for which he has adapted the

text. Helene Alvings words of hesitation are omitted. Not that saving her son would be much better as an option in the long term. But, in this version, there's not even a sliver of hope or even options.

What does the audience make of that? On the night, we were caught between admiration and stunned silence. It was difficult to applaud jovially. Of course, plenty of plays end sadly or badly. The finale of R.C. Sherriff's *Journey's End* (1928), when all the soldiers have left the dugout for a certain death on the battlefield under German bombardment (signified by an ear-blasting soundtrack) is also massively sombre. Umpteen tragedies end with dead bodies on stage as well as off. Many of Chekhov's plays conclude with a dying fall. Yet somehow, in these other examples, there is some catharsis. Audiences can react with enthusiasm and delight. In this case, perhaps because the play is so intimate, it seems too unrelievedly sombre to generate a positive response. I suppose it is ultimately the unfairness of Oswald's fate that jars. He had not denied love. And he appreciated the joys not only of life but also of work – as he explained to his mother.

It's paradoxical that as a historian I often complain that people underestimate the power of deep continuities from the past. Yet here's a play which is all about that theme. Helene Alving declares:

It's not only the things that we've inherited from our fathers and mothers that live on in us, but all sorts of old dead ideas and old dead beliefs. ... They're not actually alive in us, but they're rooted there all the same, and we can't rid ourselves of them.

This sombre speech is reminiscent of Karl Marx's diatribe in his *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852): 'the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living'. In this case, however, I was reminded that history always offers some other options. There are changes, both gradual and revolutionary, as well as continuity.

Ultimately, I left the theatre, applauding the cast and director, but appalled by Ibsen's bleak moral judgment on the love-deniers. It happened to be raining very heavily as we left the theatre. But the sun will also rise ... and syphilis would become, well after Ibsen's time, a disease which is treatable or, better still, avoidable.