

Emily Wanamaker

*The Summer in Gossensass* Program Notes

Since its initial production in Munich in January of 1891, Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* has baffled both viewers and directors alike. Its staccato, fragmented language, as well as its constant use of subtext to describe factors that affect the characters involved (rather than stating them outright) confused its first audiences, and even its first performers. Directly at the center of all of this confusion is the title character of Hedda Gabler, who is a puzzlement all her own. Hedda spends the play attempting to manipulate the characters around her, ultimately building a trap that she cannot escape by any means other than a "beautiful" suicide. Her seemingly contradictory actions throughout the course of the play have resulted in similarly contradictory approaches and interpretations toward her character. In particular, the characterization of Hedda over time can be seen growing and changing in conjunction with the rise and fall of feminist movements throughout the past century.

During the time of its original publication and many early productions, Hedda was regarded as little more than a demon - "a Circe" who takes pleasure in the destruction and manipulation of those around her. Both directors and actresses cast in the role expressed confusion at the behavior of the character, with a large number of actresses declaring a lack of interest in the role due to the strangeness of her actions. The singular exception to this reaction was that of American actress Elizabeth Robins, who, in partnership with fellow actress Marion Lea, produced the first English language production of *Hedda Gabler* in London in April of 1891, with Robins in the title role of Hedda and Lea in the role of Thea Elvsted. Robins's portrayal was the first to spark positive reactions from audiences toward the character. Her performance was highly praised by writers such as Henry James and George Bernard Shaw, who noted it for its theatrical power and Robins's "alert intensity," intelligence, and ability to blend the tragic and demonic elements within the character together into a seamless performance. Even critic Clement Scott, who was notably opposed to Ibsen's work, wrote of his own "morbid attraction" to Robins's "sublime portrait of heartlessness." It was this performance that inspired a number of actresses to take on the challenge of the role over the subsequent few decades: Minnie Maddern Fiske, whose 1904 American performance stressed Hedda's coldness, sarcasm, and calculating mind; Alla Nazimova, whose 1906 American performance emphasized Hedda's sexuality and passion, leading to a critic referring to her Hedda as an "orchid of a woman;" Eleanora Duse, who, in London in 1905, portrayed an intense, quiet, and resigned version of the character; and Mrs. Patrick Campbell, who created an emphatically pregnant, malignant Hedda who fired her pistol at audience members at the beginning of the play. The play remained popular throughout the 1920s, with productions that branched either toward the original view of Hedda as a "conventional vampire," feeding off the destruction of the others, or productions that emulated the previous performances in their interpretations of the character. However, it was through this series of performances that the influence of the first wave of feminism can be seen in the character of Hedda Gabler.

Prior to the beginnings of the feminist movement in the latter half of the 19th century, women were expected to maintain their "natural" duties of keeping the house and raising children. Women were considered biologically more intuitive, self-sacrificing, and tender than

men, naturally disposed to the tasks of marriage and motherhood. The ideal woman was expected to be the “angel in the house,” a sexually passive and refined being who oversaw the preservation of a sanctuary of peace in the home. This predisposition made the ideal woman morally superior to her male counterpart. In order to maintain this superiority, it was considered necessary to keep women away from the realms of economics and politics. A young woman’s education was focused on social values and objectives over academic goals, encouraging them to become “cultivated homemakers.” The first wave of feminism pushed against these societal norms, demanding that women be provided with equal educational opportunities as men, as well as equal economic and social standings. It was in the midst of this movement that *Hedda Gabler* was first produced, and within Hedda, the struggle of the middle class woman of this period can be seen - if the acceptable, limiting codes of behavior were modified, what rules would the “new woman” be expected to follow? The first production of the play to present Hedda as a victim of this oppressive society, rather than a destroyer of it, occurred in 1924 under the direction of Betty Hansen, who also performed the title role. It was also during this period that Elizabeth Robins, by that point a prominent figure in the feminist movement, began giving lectures on acting and on Ibsen, during which she highlighted her approach to Hedda’s character.

It was into this world that Maria Irene Fornés was born on the 14th of May, 1930, in Havana, Cuba. Fornés immigrated to the United States with her mother and sister after the death of her father in 1945 and became a US citizen in 1951. Dissatisfied with her first job at the Capezio shoe factory, Fornés took classes to learn English, eventually becoming a translator. By the time she was 19, Fornés developed an interest in painting, and she began her formal education under the tutelage of abstract artist Hans Hofmann. In 1954, Fornés met writer and artist model Harriet Sohmers, and the two became lovers. During the same year, Fornés moved to Paris to live with Sohmers, as well as to continue her studies of painting. In later interviews, Fornés describes that a good portion of her time during her studies was spent trying to “get herself” to paint, and that she did not find the process coming to her easily. In Paris, Fornés saw a French language production of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, and, although she did not understand the language and had never read the play, she was deeply moved by the production, thinking “Why did I have to see this to think I could do it?”. As a result, Fornés abandoned her studies in painting and shifted her focus creative writing. After her relationship with Sohmers ended in 1957, Fornés returned to New York, and in 1959 was joined by fellow writer Susan Sontag, whom she had met in Paris. The two began a romantic relationship that lasted for seven years. The couple encouraged each other to write, and Fornés produced her first play in 1961, titled *The Widow*. Her next play, *There! You Died*, was first produced in 1963, but was soon renamed *Tango Palace* in 1964 for its production in New York City’s Actors Studio. This play focused more on the characters rather than the plot of the story, a feature that became common in her writing as it evolved. With *Tango Palace* Fornés also established her practice of directing the initial production of her plays, which she eventually deemed as her method of finally “completing” a script. Her work began to grow in popularity and renown in the avant-garde community, and her first musical, titled *Promenade*, which premiered in 1965, was awarded Fornés’s first of a total of nine Obie awards. Fornés often drew from her experiences to influence her plays - many of her plays draw from her Cuban identity, and for many years, she was the leader of the Hispanic Playwrights in Residence Lab at INTAR, a theater focused on producing

the works of Hispanic playwrights. Additionally, although Fornés never identified as a playwright who focused specifically on being a feminist playwright, her feminist proclivities are clear in many of her plays, which, according to Elisa Bocanegra, a former student of Fornés, give “voice to voiceless women,” and that “in her work, it feels like these characters are breaking through and speaking for the first time ever.” These trends continued in Fornés’s writings over the next three decades, during which time she was awarded with eight additional Obie awards, a Playwrights USA Award, A New York State Governor’s Arts Award, a Robert Chesley Award, and a PEN/Laura Pels International Foundation for Theater Award.

Over the course of the 1960s, a resurgence of interest in the play *Hedda Gabler* reemerged, brought on by the experimental production of the play first produced in 1964 under the direction of Swedish filmmaker and director Ingmar Bergman. In this production, Bergman greatly simplified Ibsen’s set, reducing it into two small rooms placed as far downstage as the theater would allow, essentially trapping Hedda onstage for the duration of the play. Bergman additionally showed Hedda’s suicide onstage, during which Hedda, after carefully arranging herself into a beautiful position, slumped grotesquely to the floor once she fired the gun. After this production, two schools of thought in regards to the play emerged: one tended toward this more experimental side of production, using the play to emphasize specific aspects of Hedda’s situation; the other tended toward the more naturalistic approach more common in previous decades, which looked upon Hedda as an acting challenge for a great actress. It was into this debate that Fornés first introduced *The Summer in Gossensass*, which was produced for the first time in 1995 as the concluding attraction of the 20th anniversary season of Women’s Project and Productions, a company dedicated to producing plays by women. This play successfully takes Fornés’s feminist ideals and uses them to showcase both the importance of Henrik Ibsen in creating a place for women in theatre in the 19th century as well as the importance of the women who were responsible for creating the 1891 production of *Hedda Gabler*, Elizabeth Robins and Marion Lea, both of whom were extremely active in the first wave feminist movement. The play celebrates the intellects of these women, as well as that of Lady Florence Bell, who was a close friend of Robins with whom she often collaborated in the writing of plays in later years. Additionally, through this play, Fornés highlights the difficult process of creating a piece of art and the struggles that come with it. Through her versions of Robins and Lea, however, Fornés gives the audience a view of Hedda that has not been seen before - as a result of their work, the audience is given a glimpse of the power of Hedda Gabler had she not been bound into a loveless marriage in a world where she could not manage to be the person she desired - a world in which Hedda is not seen as simply a vicious, manipulative demon, but rather as a woman who is simply seeking for a life in which she can thrive.