



ROSE BOWL ADJUDICATION

Name of Company: Amateur Players of Sherborne

Name of Production: HEDDA GABLER

Venue: Sherborne Studio Theatre

Date: Friday 28th March 2025

Adjudicator: Caroline Whitehead

Dramatic and Bold

This Henrik Ibsen play explores the complexities of human desires and the consequences of suppressing them. I have seen it once before at the National Theatre where the core of the interpretation focused on Hedda's narcissistic personality, her lack of empathy with both male and females in her world and her despair at being left out. I personally feel that this is only part of the story. I have always felt that Hedda was hugely vulnerable underneath that hard exterior and just wanted to be noticed for who she really was. Her insecurities come about through her inability to let anyone in and that thirst for power was a screen for her lack of confidence without it.

So, I was truly delighted when your director also brought out that aspect of the main character. These conflicting sides of Hedda were well developed and, although more complex to portray, were finely tuned in this performance. Some try to simplify Hedda's mental health as a psychotic personality disorder, but I think it's far more subtle than that. She is trying to find her way in life, find her safe place, a place where she can make a difference and feel truly loved. Losing her power, in the end to Judge Brack, was the final straw and she couldn't see a way past that.

Ibsen was ahead of his time in his exploration of the various, complex characteristics of women and it is easy to forget that it was written in 1891, a time when women were mostly portrayed as domestic creatures wanting nothing more than a stable family life. This play really does pioneer a new era of strong and powerful female characters.

Staging

You have a delightful, but small, performing space in the Studio and you did well to make the best of the stage area that you had, with just one entrance and exit. What a good idea to use the back of the auditorium for the garden entries and exits. And the window was a good addition, although you might have made more of the lighting through that to create the appearance of the various times of day. That said, the downstage section with the fire worked well, particularly when Hedda was moving in to control Thea at the start of the story and also at that dramatic moment when the book draft was being destroyed. A change in the lighting state for those moments might have added to the seclusion required for those scenes.

I liked the atmospheric music you used at the start and that blue lighting state created a mysterious mood for the opening scene, which of course was fraught from the outset with the exchange between Berthe and Juliana before the married couple emerge from their extended honeymoon. What should have been a happy homecoming was already being heralded as a difficult transition.

At the outset I was concerned that the dialogue was being played in a rather static way and there was awkwardness that I felt didn't quite feel natural, but that soon dissolved and each character got into their groove, both physically and tonally.

Costumes were well designed and everyone looked comfortable in them, except Thea of course, who is never really comfortable in her own skin. Hedda's costumes were particularly well thought through – she needed to be elegant but not feminine.

I've mentioned the lighting already and really my only concern was the attention to detail in the changing light of each time of day, where you could have made more of that. The whole play takes place across only a few days and so, despite it taking place in an apartment, the changes in mood from day to night and then into day are critical.

The final scene with Hedda's final resignation and suicide was very well played by all and I liked the faces of shock and horror on the remaining characters' faces. It's a difficult end to get right and the timing was just right.

Juliana Tesman

You are the first with dialogue and it's a tricky thing to do. At the outset I thought you were a bit stiff with Berthe, but that didn't last long. As the story unfolded, and particularly in your scenes with your nephew Jørgen, you became more relaxed and there was a real affection between you. As you began to realise how tense his marriage had become already, I sensed you desire to wrap him up and alleviate his pain, which was an important nuance. You are supplementary to the main plot, but of course you are important as a safe haven for Tesman and this adds to Hedda's anguish. You played the part of Juliana with accuracy and sensitivity.

Berthe

These cameo roles can often be overlooked. You are quietly in the background, keeping house for the Tesmans and trying not to be judgmental. My guess is that you harboured a quiet affection for Jørgen and a resentment of Hedda. But this play isn't about that and you carried out your duties with the resignation that this role required.

Jørgen Tesman

A lot of this role is about what you don't say and where you don't move and you had obviously thought about that thoroughly. Jørgen is already feeling unsteady in this marriage, even after only a few months. He has taken on more than he knows how to control and he can't see a way to make his new wife happy. As with many academics, the challenge of managing a complex human relationship often feels insurmountable. He retreats into his comfortable place of exploring history whenever things get too tricky. Of course, this just fans the flames of unhappiness in his new wife, who he doesn't truly understand at all. I particularly liked the hesitations in your dialogue and the hesitations in your physical moves towards Hedda and indeed all other characters on stage, barring Auntie J.

There was an innocence to your portrayal of Jørgen which worked really well. Many of the cutting remarks from Hedda, and loaded remarks from Judge Brack went over your head and perhaps that was a good thing. There were some things in that triangle that you were better off not knowing.

Your facial expressions were well thought through and these were markedly different for each of the main characters in your life – love (and concern) for Hedda, care for Auntie J, respect for Judge Brack, admiration for Løvborg and a growing affection for Thea. In a small performing space, you are very exposed to these nuances and you demonstrated a dedication to getting these expressions just right. That worry for the woman you loved and then the joy of imagining she was expecting your child were both heartbreaking.

Hedda Tesman

I have seen your performance of Rita in *Educating Rita* and so I knew we were in for a treat watching you interpret this major role. Hedda is such a complex character and I have already said that I was thrilled that you managed to show us the whole range of emotions churning inside her. On the surface she was controlling, selfish, power crazy and manipulative. Under all of that, she was frightened, vulnerable and sad. Once she began to see that her power was being taken away, she crumbled and that was sensitively portrayed. Your early manipulation of Thea was a really powerful moment and your caress of her hair became the signal of your desire to always have the upper hand with her. Your unspoken jealousy of the relationship she had with your ex-lover Løvborg became evident and the power that Judge Brack finally had over you were both subtle emotions to get across but they did in a vivid way and this enhanced the pain of the story.

My favourite moment was the moment when you were challenging Løvborg to take the drink and chose a path away from Thea. This was a dramatic moment that had us all on the edge of our seats – Would he? Won't he – and your determination and Thea's terror was palpable.

Your voice was perfect for this role and echoed through the space and your assertive struts around the stage supported all that we were beginning to understand about this character. Many will have wondered why you ever married Tesman but of course we soon learn that this was a cry for help – to buy some respectability and security – a price that proved too high. For without love, none of that matters...

Thea Elvsted

As a stark contrast to Hedda, your nervous entrance was perfect. Thea lacks confidence; she has married a bully and her self-esteem was at an all time low when she fell for Løvborg. At the point she comes into this story, she is running away from one and looking for the other – all desperate measures. Of course, she should have trusted her initial judgement with Hedda but falls under her spell. Of all the characters in this story, I think she comes out of it all rather well. You can imagine that her work with Tesman leads to better things between them. What impressed me was the contrast that you achieved in your tone of voice compared to Hedda and your constant eye movements that conveyed the discomfort you were feeling. That rhythm in your delivery and your tenuous body language were perfect for this role.

Judge Brack

So, you love power too! And in this story, you pretty well held on to it. You were manipulating poor innocent Tesman, you were wielding power over Hedda and your lack of interest in the plight of poor Løvborg combined to create a rather unlikeable character. Perhaps the only missing piece for me was the lack of charisma, particularly where Hedda was concerned. We knew there was an affair, but I didn't see the spark of attraction between you. Maybe you could have turned up the charm with her at the outset and this would have made that sudden change, when you revealed you know where she came from, when your harder, ruthless edge emerged all the more powerful.

You hold all the cards at the end of the play and that non-chalance when you were leafing through a document on your chair after those threatening moments with Hedda underlined your unlikeable character. The power you had over Hedda was yet another factor in her demise and you seemed to enjoy that. I find it interesting that you have the last line in the play. I would have thought that you of all people, would know that people actually "do things like that!"

Eilert Løvborg

I think this character is rather pitiful. Like many artists and writers of the turn of the century, things were not great economically and many were reliant on the sponsorship of the upper classes. Løvborg clearly has his challenges but seemed to have found a saviour in Thea and this resulted in some great new work and a fresh, sober start. Of course, reuniting with Hedda was always going to end in disaster and that is exactly what transpires. I hope you could look down and see that Thea was working with Tesman to resurrect your work, although maybe you would never get the credit for it even after death. There lies the plight of many artists of that time I fear.

I liked the vulnerability you showed in your face and your mannerisms. From the moment that you entered the stage, there was a real contrast in your appearance, your demeanour and your vocal tone. This was important because of the effect that had on Hedda as she compared you to her new husband. And so the plot unfolds.

The tension between you and Thea and Hedda on that sofa was expertly handled and was the point at which we all knew that there was no happy ending here.

This was a very powerful play and I am sure it had a profound effect on all those who came to see it in your lovely theatre space. Well done to the Director and everyone involved in the production. Another success to add to your tally.

Thank you for your warm welcome.

CJW

06/04/2025