

THE NEW WOMAN IN THE NEW WORLD: IBSEN IN AUSTRALIA 1889-1891

EILEEN HOARE
MACQUARIE UNIVERSITY

JANET ACHURCH WARD (1864-1916) was to become one of the most important actresses of the 19th century, largely due to her definitive role as Nora in the inaugural professional production of *A Doll's House* in London at the little known Novelty Theatre on June 7th, 1889. The first of the three so-called 'intellectual' actresses to perform Ibsen in England—the others were Elizabeth Reynolds as Hedda Gabler and Florence Farr as Rebecca in *Rosmersholm*—Achurch became a household name overnight.

Achurch and her husband, Charles Charrington, introduced *A Doll's House* to Melbourne audiences just three months after their first performance in London, subsequently touring Australia and New Zealand and presenting the play to more people and on a more regular basis than I would think has been done anywhere since.

Reviews of *A Doll's House* and other plays in the Charrington repertoire and related articles in the press addressed social values under discussion at the time. The most frequently discussed issues were the position of women in society, the marriage question and the notion of Australia as a classless society unencumbered with the shackles of tradition.

The first two reviews of *A Doll's House* in Melbourne, appearing in very different-looking publications—one in a magazine format, the other a broadsheet newspaper—catering for quite different readerships, taken together reveal certain contradictory characteristics of Australian society. By their very nature, they exposed attitudes to class prevalent in the community. The first review, in *The Bulletin* of 21st September, 1889 went to great pains to show that it was down-to-earth and spoke directly to the people. It reinforced the notion of a classless, egalitarian society by suggesting that the "free and independent monsters" in the upper gallery and the "large and fashionable congregation" in the stalls were unified when they gave a "hearty Australian welcome" to the visiting performers, even though the gallery members had disrupted the performance. Australia was a free country and everyone was encouraged to free expression. The reviewer suggests this was not an introspective society, and the audience wasn't prepared to subject themselves to a "cranky sermon", nor had the least interest in listening to two people, who "talk across the table about psychological matters."

The second review, in the *The Sydney Morning Herald*, was conscious of what it thought to be appropriate audience behaviour, and decency in general. The tone of the writing was formal, middle-class and bourgeois, as it harked back to Mother England as its model. This even applied to responses to

the staging. “Such a beautiful stage set would have been greeted in London with a hearty burst of applause”, writes the reviewer, while the set in Australia was greeted “with a silence which was the customary reward in this country for artistic and lavish scenery.” The reviewer describes proudly how well the audience “listened to and watched with the most profound attention” but drew a distinction between the “large and brilliant audience” in the stalls and the “unseemly and unmannerly” occupants of the gallery. The worst thing was that their behaviour was “unjust to a stranger.” There was an expectation of a proper code of behaviour for visitors, particularly from England. Existing rivalry between Sydney and Melbourne was implied in the writer’s criticism of members of the gallery who behaved “with a rudeness unknown in a Sydney theatre.”

In my research on the early performances of *A Doll’s House* in Australia, I came across an interesting journalist writing for *The Bulletin*. *The Bulletin* had only started in 1880, and the journalist was given a prominent role as early as 1886. I will focus on the *The Bulletin* and the *New Woman*, which seem to be quite contradictory and alien to one another, but remarkable in their commonality.

In her book, *The New Woman*, Sally Ledger writes:

[t]he New Woman of the *fin de siècle* had a multiple identity. She was, variously, a feminist activist, a social reformer, a popular novelist, a suffragette playwright, a woman poet; she was also often a fictional construct, a discursive response to the activities of the late nineteenth century women’s movement (1997, 9).

Before all these, it is the actress who is excluded from Ledger’s list, and it is Janet Achurch in her role as Nora, who is credited with being the first New Woman.

Ledger writes that the dominant discourse at the *fin de siècle* concerned the New Woman. Often under attack as a “threat to the human race”, with suggestions she might be an “infanticidal mother” or, at the very least, “sexually abnormal”, the subject of this discourse called for a counter discourse and the New Woman began to speak on her [own] behalf.

The first production of *A Doll’s House* occurred five years before the term came into usage. It was just one of the many labels which were attached to new ways of thinking which affected the whole of the western world between 1880 and the outbreak of the First World War.

The term was attributed in England to Sydney Grundy’s play *The New Woman*, which opened at the Comedy Theatre in London in 1894 but was not at all sympathetic to the New Woman. The irony of this play, with its “underlying” hostility to the newly educated woman painted in a grotesque way, is that the roles are played by women, who, as actresses were themselves ‘New Women’. One of the actresses was Gertrude Warden, whose character Victoria Vivash smokes and wears her hair short. This is the same Gertrude Warden who played Mrs Linde in the first season of *A Doll’s House* at the Novelty theatre.

The poster publicising the comedy was of a “rather severe young woman in black, pince-nez perched on her nose” (Jenor 1891). In the background on the wall in a cabinet was a large latchkey, in the foreground, a smouldering cigarette, both recognisable symbols of the New Woman’s ‘advanced’ nature.

Many single women migrated to Australia in the mid to late 19th century, bringing new ideas about changing social attitudes with them. New Woman was christened in 1894 but the idea was well and truly in the air long before that. As far away as Australia, the debate was raging about the changing woman, and whether this modern woman would corrupt society or not. Vague scientific evidence

was often cited as proof of the detrimental effects of the changing circumstances for women. Charles Jenor writes in *The Bulletin* on 14th March, 1891 concerning female suffrage:

[p]hysiologists assert that a marked depreciation is noticeable in the offspring of those families in which it has been the custom to educate the female to the level of bluestockings. The perfection of mental capacities in the mother is gained at the cost of her physical attributes (1891).

Giving the women the vote would help develop these “mental capacities” and set up this unfortunate set of circumstances. Jenor feared any change to the electoral system in favour of women could only be a retrograde step. He writes: “[t]he only apparent danger in the present system of electoral dispensation lies in the women having not too little but too much power.” He warns that it is “simple suicide to develop a high standard of female education since no possible benefit can accrue to society thereby”, and concludes that no-one “would desire to see woman transformed into a ‘male female’”. It is difficult to establish who Jenor is, but, given the inclusive policy of *The Bulletin*’s editors, this is not surprising. Writers were from all walks of life, and included “Australians, Englishmen, Americans, itinerant bushmen-cum-writers, metropolitan journalists, university scholars, teachers and travelled Artists” (Stewart 1982, 188). The result was a paper “eclectic in its tastes and criticism” (1982, 188)

This egalitarian approach meant the journal often sent out contradictory messages. John Docker writes that *The Bulletin* dominated the 1890s and its voice was a masculine one which marginalized women and feminism culturally, socially and politically. Nora, in *A Doll’s House* in the early *Bulletin* reviews falls short of their idealized notion of women. Yet one of the most outspoken critics of the play was a regular columnist for the weekly and a woman.

Alexina Maude Wildman wrote under the pseudonym, “Sappho Smith”. Although the name is common, it is tempting to imagine she chose Smith after James Smith, one of the most prominent critics who dominated the 1880s. He had been editor of *The Australasian* (1860s), a comprehensive and conscientious literary paper (Stewart 181). The original Smith had written what were considered uplifting critiques to educate his reading public. *The Bulletin* pursued the same aesthetic mission and tried to provide uplifting material while abhorring the lack of taste to be found in Sydney. It then found a better way: it changed its role to be conversational and entertaining. Wildman was employed in 1886 to write a column in such a vein.

To support an enigmatic persona, with her tongue firmly planted in her cheek, Wildman created a name to deliberately keep her readership guessing. The paradoxical twist is that while “Sappho” speaks of a new expressive sexuality, Smith (alias James Smith) represents Victorian patriarchal sensibility especially since by the 1890s he was well advanced in years. Philip Parsons writes:

[w]hile always appreciative of technical ability, Smith judged the success of a performance by the way the actor conveyed the moral and ethical inferences to be drawn from the playwright’s work. His authority declined in later years, when he was unable to accept new modes of interpretation (no reference provided).

That Sappho (f. 630 B.C.) was a Greek lyric poet and leader of a female literary group on the island of Mytilene now known as Lesbos would have been lost on many of *The Bulletin*’s readers. The term lesbianism, with its connotation of “female homosexuality” had not come into usage until the late 19th century. The earliest by-line for *The Bulletin*’s theatrical column was: “for I am nothing if not critical.” Iago’s words warn the reader to be wary of trusting what appears in the column.

Wildman adhered to the colloquial style of writing popular in *The Bulletin*, but at the same time

presented as an enigmatic character. Her appearance, education and self-expression seemed to resonate as the new independent woman despised by Jenor. She was described as a “clever girl in short skirts and was one of *The Bulletin*’s “strengths in the early 1890s”, working for them for ten years from the age of eighteen.

Wildman was, by today’s standards, very young to hold such a position as a regular columnist, and perhaps as a result, she presented herself as much older. Her column was headed by a drawing of an ugly, sour, old woman. She herself died young in 1896 of tuberculosis at the tender age of 28.

Her commentary ran over three columns. In it, she satirised Sydney’s provincial society with an astringent wit and sharp eye for the grotesque. While she seemed to reserve her most caustic criticism for her own sex, she attacked what was artificial and pretentious in society. She was sharply critical of the society woman, and certain behaviours of her own sex she found to be hypocritical.

She had no tolerance for faddish behaviour and her criticism of the blind unquestioning adulation of the Melbourne women, who were “gone” on Miss Achurch, was aimed at the women not the actress. She describes Miss Achurch as the “new actress, who talks for three hours in a dreadfully tiresome play. Her surprising attack appeared the week following the first reviews of the play in Melbourne. She writes: “Miss Achurch, I hear, belongs to the artistically untidy school, cuddles her knees, and disturbs the conventionalities, etc.” This is basically a response to gossip, although she concedes that Janet is at least, intelligent.

A year later, in 1890, when she actually meets Achurch at her Sydney season, she forgoes any derisive description of her, focussing on her costumes, a constant feature in her column:

Miss Achurch, who so superbly plays Nora Helmer, wears Norwegian costume, the electric-blue cloth gown edged with fur in the first act being a dressmaker’s marvel—as is the terra cotta and brown fur frock worn during the next soulful rise of the curtain.

In this light, Sappho Smith describes her as a “Woman’s woman” surrounded by adoring females in her dressing room. With great theatricality, Janet asks her not to kiss her as her face is covered in Vaseline which she has just applied to remove her make-up. In another cryptic moment, Sappho writes: “I hate to see one woman kiss another. Such kisses are matter in the wrong place—just like clouds under the finger-nails. Perhaps she is satirising attitudes to same-sex relationships, but again with a subversive yet comic touch.

Alexina Wildman could well be described as a New Woman. Her physical presentation was enough to earn her that title and her writing in the guise of Sappho Smith indicates that she represented a new, gutsy, forthright woman’s voice. However, she was not that easily categorised as she took a fairly unpopular stance, at least with women when she supported an opposing view to what was described as the “one-sided” response to *A Doll’s House* during the play’s Sydney season, where no-one defended Torvald’s position.

Although he is presented as having “coarser instincts than she(Nora) bargained for”, Sappho argues for the many “moderately good men” who have married a woman found to be a “little short of an angel”, who only married for some “ulterior motive, love of money, luxury, a home—dozens of things.” She writes: “it is the very nature of things under modern conditions that woman’s “love” should be far more mercenary than man’s.”

Supporting Ibsen’s argument that women are forced to behave in such a way because of their position in society, Wildman writes: “I have been cruelly told that I have been unconsciously furnishing

reasons for the crusades of the Ibsenites against the prevailing state of things.” In other words, both men and women have to change if society is to advance at all.

I would like to finish with reference to some of the debate in the press. As had been the case in Europe and England before, there was also vigorous discussion in Australia surrounding the play. In the *Sydney Morning Herald*, “Two Views of *A Doll’s House*”, a male view and a female view were posited. While the male could see the value of “a possible mental and spiritual companionship”, moving beyond viewing the wife as a “doll”, “drudge” or “charming hostess”, he is uncomfortable by “the thought of the children” and what was to happen to them.

The writer of ‘the Woman’s View’ argues Nora’s position. She quotes Anna the nurse to support Nora’s claim that she is not suitable to raise her children who she feels would be better off with their nurse and father.

Old Anna, when she was young Anna, had, like many another, abandoned her own baby to come to nurse that of a stranger. Why? Because she “could not refuse so good a place,” she had to think of her child. And though she had never seen that child from babyhood to womanhood, old Anna, earning here wherewithal to keep it in comfort, deems herself a better mother than if she had stayed with the little one and thereby starved it.

The woman writer looks forward to a time when there will be no “separate code for the sexes” and “marriage means love-partnership with communion of soul, not legal bondage with social advantage.” This will only happen when “women have learnt their duty to themselves.”

I will conclude with her tribute to Janet Achurch not only as an actress, but in her role as the New Woman.

While Miss Achurch will always be gratefully remembered by every true woman whose heart has throbbed in response to the ringing tones of her noble utterance; gratefully remembered as one who has dared to defy conventional thought, and help her sisters to recognise their mournful shortcomings and their glorious possibilities: gratefully remembered by one woman at least, as the most soul-stirring, subtle actress it has been my lot to witness in Australia.

References

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From many years' experience of teaching and engaging in the creative arts, **Eileen Hoare** always remained interested in the physical and creative nature of performance; and in particular how contemporary theatre and performance can change society.

Her ten years of working in Performance Studies at Macquarie University and her many years' involvement in youth to adult drama have only served to reinforce her view that performance and theatre practice empower individuals and groups to perform their stories and ideas, and despite the ephemerality of these presentations, something always remains.

Eileen passed away in January 2008, during the preparation of this manuscript, after a three year struggle with cancer.