

A TOWERING PLAYWRIGHT: HENRIK IBSEN



Henrik Ibsen's plays struck nineteenth-century Europe like bolts of theatrical lightning. Born in 1828, the Norwegian writer revolutionized drama, scorching outmoded morés to coax newer truths from their ashes.

His works reflected, with both candor and nuance, a society fractured in its views on religion, class, and women's rights. Above all, the playwright championed personal freedom: each individual's duty to defy convention and "sail under his own flag."

Ibsen's dramatic development coincided with the heyday of two earlier dramatic forms. "Romantic melodrama" stormed with bombastic soliloquies, while suspenseful unraveling of secrets drove the "well-made play." Absorbing some aspects of both genres, Ibsen also radically transformed them—pruning his plays of their artificialities and greatly enriching their emotional scope.

The playwright's first works, based on Norse sagas and ballads, mostly failed with the public, but the dramatist soared to national prestige with his verse epics, *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* (1867). The playwright, whom the critic Georg Brandes dubbed the "hammer and benefactor of the North," next abandoned poetic form for the social realism of prose. Affirming his new commitment to raising social questions, Ibsen shocked and galvanized Europe with plays such as *Ghosts* and *An Enemy of the People*. His most famous play, *A Doll's House* (1879), ends with housewife Nora leaving her family on a mission of self-discovery: her door-slam was heard around the world.

With *The Master Builder* (1892), Ibsen crowned a cycle of plays delving the hidden depths of the subconscious. In this play, *The Wild Duck*, *Rosmersholm*, *Hedda Gabler*, and others, Ibsen showed how, like *The Master Builder's* visionary architect Halvard Solness, we all too "fight against the dark forces within ourselves." Ibsen died in 1906, leaving behind over two dozen plays. Like Solness's church over the town of Lysanger, his shadow towers majestically over Western drama.

—MAYA CANTU, PRODUCTION DRAMATURG

MASTER BUILDERS AND MISTRESS-MUSES



FROM TOP: MARTHA "MAMAH" BORTHWICK CHENEY, EVELYN NESBIT, AND ALMA MAHLER.

Reaching for the sublime, artists have always found inspiration in shapely, female forms. Like the nine goddesses of Greek mythology, Hilda Wangel is a muse, stirring her "Master Builder" with her youth and spirit. Just as she pushes Solness to build his "palaces in the sky," three women achieved their own form of immortality as muse to great architects in the early twentieth century.

The building of Taliesin, Frank Lloyd Wright's famed summer estate in Wisconsin, was in part inspired by his liaison with the free-thinking suffragette Martha "Mamah" Borthwick Cheney. The married Wright, commissioned to design a house for the electrical engineer Edwin Cheney, fell in love with his client's wife and fled with her to Europe in 1909. There, the lovers listened for what Wright called "the song in the deeps of life." When they returned to America, Taliesin offered a retreat from intense public censure. The romance ended terribly in 1914 when Mamah and her children were murdered by a servant, who set fire to the house.

Evelyn Nesbit became the unwitting central figure to another tragic scandal. The teenaged chorus girl was the muse to Stanford White, a titan of Gilded Age architecture who designed such landmarks as Madison Square Garden, and she also stoked the fires of artists like Charles Dana Gibson. Though married himself, White kept a second apartment, outfitted with strategically placed mirrors and a red velvet swing, where he entertained young women. In 1906, Nesbit's millionaire husband Harry K. Thaw—driven crazy by the thought of his young wife posing on the swing—fatally shot the architect.

German architect and Bauhaus school founder Walter Gropius dazzled fin-de-siècle Vienna when he fell for Alma Mahler, the beguiling "serial muse." Alma, a gifted composer, was better recognized for her magnetic allure to artists. Also famed for a tempestuous affair with the painter Oskar Kokoschka, she married Gropius, the composer Gustav Mahler, and the writer Franz Werfel (who called her his "guardian of the flame"). While the Gropius union was to prove unhappy for both, Alma gave vital encouragement to the architect at the start of his career—and burnished both of their legends.

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