

Curtains

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People study Henrik Ibsen for their entire lives and never fully come to grips with the complex Norwegian dramatist.

So it comes as no surprise that some of the playwright's subtleties have eluded the Open Door Theatre, a youthful San Francisco-based touring company that is now performing *Hedda Gabler* at the Marin Community Playhouse. The company features three producers whose ages range from 21-25, and that may not be enough years to get a handle on Ibsen.

This is a solid production, but it lacks Ibsen's appreciation for nuance. For example: Hedda and Aunt Juliana don't get along. When her aunt leaves, Hedda goes to a window and says, "The leaves are golden and withered." That's supposed to be a reference to her elderly relative, as well as to the seasons. Because the timing of the production is off, however, and because Hedda's eyes do not seem to be following Juliana through the window, the double-entendre is lost.

Hedda Gabler herself is a multi-faceted, difficult character, a late 19th century woman determined to fly in the face of social conventions. She smokes, flaunts her sexuality and collects pistols — and the women of her time simply did not do such things. But she's more than a rebel. She has principles, too — although her sense of morality seems to be based primarily on aesthetics, wanting things to *look* good. Her persona, unfortunately, is a riddle which Erin McCalla, in the title role, never quite solves. She makes a good try of it, but appears to sketch the character, rather than drawing it out fully.

There's another slight problem with the acting. Margot Castellon, as Aunt Juliana, is the first person in the show to speak — and she has what sounds very much like a

Scandinavian accent. For a moment, it appears that Ibsen will be presented in tones of his native Norway. But no — Castellon's inflection turns out to be her very own, and everyone else talks with British accents! Ibsen is confusing enough without making him multi-lingual.

That's the bad news about *Hedda Gabler*. But there's also a lot of good news.

Gilbert Johnson's set, dominated by a large, brooding portrait of General Gabler, evokes the Victorian period. So do Mark Jones' costumes, which feature ladies' gowns with pockets large enough to stuff a pair of slippers into.

And there are two acting performances that deserve kudos. Michael Cawelti as George Tesman, Hedda's scholarly husband, manages to express the foibles of the English upper-middle class without reducing his character to total ridiculousness. James K. Lewis, as Judge Brack, brings to the part a cynical appreciation for the law that he may have picked up in a 1979 candidacy for San Francisco County Sheriff.

Moreover, director Andrea Gordon catches on to Ibsen's tricks a little better in the second act, when the production takes a turn for the ironic. Hedda, for example, walks toward Eilert Loevborg's manuscript, which is hidden in a desk. . . then reverses her direction in mid-step, and brings him a loaded pistol instead. Now, *this* is Ibsen.

Overall this is a show that deserves more attention than it received on opening night, when only twenty-one persons attended. Twenty-one? Why, Ibsen is capable of that many ramifications on a single theme.

Hedda Gabler runs August 20-22, 27-29 at 8 p.m. in the Marin Community Playhouse off Kensington Road in San Anselmo. Call 456-8555 for reservations.