



A Study Guide by Martin Andrucki  
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# ***A DOLL'S HOUSE, PART 2***

**by Lucas Hnath**

**Produced by The Public Theatre**

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## **AN AUDIENCE GUIDE**

**by Martin Andrucki**

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**Bates College**

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**IBSEN'S PLAY:** *A Doll's House, Part 2* is, of course, a sequel to Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, originally performed in 1879, and widely regarded as the first example of serious modern drama.

As Ibsen's play begins, Nora and Torvald have been married for eight years and have three children. We learn that early in their marriage, Nora borrowed a large sum of money from a shady character named Krogstad in order to pay for an extended trip to Italy where her husband could recover from a serious illness.

Because women couldn't borrow money on their own, and because Torvald was adamantly opposed to going into debt, Nora had to get her father to sign the promissory note. But he died before doing that, and so Nora forged his signature. Moreover, for the eight years of her marriage she has kept the loan a secret from Torvald, knowing that its revelation would provoke a marital crisis. But Krogstad threatens both to reveal her misdeed to Torvald and to make her crime public.

When Torvald discovers what Nora has done, he flies into a rage, declares that their marriage is over in all but appearance, and tells her that she is morally unworthy to continue being a mother to their children. Krogstad, however, has a change of heart, and withdraws his threat.

Relieved by the news, Torvald forgives Nora, declaring he will take her back into his heart as his "wife and child." Nora, disillusioned by Torvald's behavior, refuses this offer, tells him they have never been truly married, repudiates her vows, returns her wedding ring, and storms out the door. She will seek a new identity, one not requiring that she play the roles of wife and mother. The last thing we hear is the sound of the door slamming behind her.

**THE PLAYWRIGHT.** Lucas Hnath entered New York University in 1997, originally planning on a medical career, but ultimately switching his focus to playwriting. He won an Obie Award in 2016 for his plays *Red Speedo* and *The Christians*. (The Obie award is bestowed on work done off-Broadway, or O-B.) *A Doll's House, Part 2* premiered in 2017. By the end of the current season—2018-19—it will have been the most-frequently staged drama in the United States, with productions at 27 professional theaters, including The Public Theatre.

In an interview with *Vogue* magazine in June, 2017, the author said he was drawn to writing a sequel to Ibsen's celebrated original by the opportunity it gave him "to think about the subjects of marriage and divorce." He also was attracted by the fact that Ibsen's play is one that "everybody kind of at least sort of knows," which enabled him to take "something that already feels a little mythic, and then starting to play with that."

He recalled asking a group of people at a drama workshop what they "imagined Nora went off to do" after she left her home and family. "Almost everybody said that she went off to work in a factory or became a prostitute and died," Hnath reported. He took this as a challenge to create an alternate outcome for Nora, "completely other than what people were expecting. . . . I was going to say that she did great. There's something kind of fun and really exhilarating about that."

Although initially inclined to imitate Ibsen's style closely, Hnath ultimately decided to pull the play sharply away from the original in structure and language. "Instead of doing an Ibsen tribute band," he decided to shape his play as a "series of two-person showdowns, like a series of boxing rounds." And rather than have his characters speak in Ibsen's nineteenth-century voice, he chose to use contemporary language and slang as a way of helping "with the sense of humor . . . and getting the audience to think about the relationship between themselves and the dilemmas of these characters." All of which is part of his approach to the "play as a whole, which is to try to see through something that feels familiar and make it new again."

**THE SETTING.** The stage directions for Ibsen's play are lengthy and detailed, calling for a fully furnished Victorian household, complete with piano and porcelain stove. Lucas Hnath's script requires far less: "The play takes place in a room. It's quite spare. Some chairs, maybe a table, not much else. It ought to feel a touch like a forum. . . . And it's crucial there be a door." He also says that he "wouldn't be sad at all if the play were played in the round"—which means surrounded by the audience on all sides. So walls are optional.

Ibsen calls for lots of scenery, furniture, and props because his play is about the suffocating proprieties of Victorian domesticity, an emotional environment embodied in the choking profusion of *stuff* on stage. By the end of Ibsen's play, that domestic world has been demolished, and Hnath's spare forum-like interior is what remains.

The *American Heritage Dictionary* defines "forum" as, "A public meeting place for open discussion." In Ibsen's play, the Helmer living space was not only cluttered, but intensely private. It was the scene of family relations and, above all, of family secrets. In the sequel, that hiding place is gone, supplanted by a room that seems public and dedicated to "open discussion" rather than pretense and deception.

**THE PLOT.** As *Doll's House Part 2* begins, it's 1894, fifteen years after Nora left home. She returns to her old house not to resume her former life but to obtain a divorce that will finally and totally sever her from her family. In a sequence of scenes with people from her previous life— Anne Marie, her old housekeeper, Torvald, her husband, and Emmy, her daughter--Nora revisits her past, explores alternatives for her future, and attempts to find some solution for her present difficulties.

In the play's first scene, Nora and Anne Marie look for ways to break the ice that has thickened between them over the past decade and a half. Anne Marie cared for Nora when the latter was a child, acting as her virtual mother, and, since Nora's departure, she has been doing the same for Nora's abandoned children. As they talk, Anne Marie describes Torvald's fragile health and his worrisome state of mind, while Nora reveals what she's been doing since leaving home.

Far from having had a difficult time financially or emotionally, she has made a success of her new life. She has become an author of books about "the way the world is towards women and the ways in which the world is wrong" (21). These books argue that, "Marriage is cruel and it destroys women's lives," advocate that "women who are not happy in their marriages should refuse to honor the contract and leave" (23), and even go as far as to suggest that marriage be abolished. She has made a fair amount of money from these polemics and has achieved some degree of fame, though not as "Nora Helmer," since she writes under a pseudonym.

We also learn that her ideas have gotten her into hot water. One unhappy woman who took her advice and left her husband happened to be married to a powerful judge. He burrowed his way behind Nora's pseudonym and found out her real identity, which in turn led Nora to discover that Torvald had never filed for the divorce they had agreed to long before. And so, assuming she was a single woman, Nora has "signed contracts, done business, had lovers—all sorts of things that a married woman isn't allowed to do, that are illegal, that amount to fraud—This judge could make a lot of trouble for me" (30). So her reason for revisiting the doll house is to convince Torvald to file for that neglected divorce.

In the middle of their conversation, Torvald returns unexpectedly from his job at the bank, looking for a sheaf of papers he forgot to bring with him to work. He doesn't recognize his wife at first, but soon he and Nora fall into a bitter rehash of their old grievances. Anne Marie leaves, allowing them to deal with this uneasy reunion by themselves.

Nora fills Torvald in on her non-divorce problem, and he receives the news with little sympathy. Instead, Torvald is given an opportunity denied him by Ibsen in the original *Doll's House*: he gets to describe Nora's behavior as a wife and her abandonment of the family from his perspective; he tells his side of the story. "Having epiphanies is easy," Torvald says, referring to Nora's discovery of her marital unhappiness, "but actually doing something about it is— "(48). Is what? Is harder than just walking out the door, which he sees as the easy solution, "easier than staying and trying to tough it out with me—us toughing it out together—instead you run off and pretend that this is the same thing as being strong" (48). Resentful of what he views as Nora's self-indulgent behavior, he refuses to sign the divorce papers "because you don't deserve for this to be easy" (50).

Torvald leaves and Anne Marie returns, launching a second scene between her and Nora. Anne Marie expresses her anger at Nora's past and present conduct. In the course of their conversation, Nora

outlines the options open to her in her present circumstances. The first possibility is to sue for divorce herself, a course of action not ordinarily available to women. To succeed, therefore, she would have to make up a story about Torvald's "awful" treatment of her, a course she rejects because it is "ugly and wrong" (52). The second option would be to capitulate to the offended Judge's demands by retracting and disavowing all of her writings. This, too, she finds unacceptable, a betrayal of everything she has struggled to achieve. But Anne Marie has a third suggestion: Nora could enlist her daughter, Emmy, to plead her case for a divorce with Torvald, who is far more likely to accede to her entreaties than those of his estranged wife.

At this point, Anne Marie leaves, and Emmy arrives, initiating a long scene with her mother, whom she treats with surprising coolness and equanimity. "I feel no animosity towards you" (65) she tells Nora, and even suggests that "things turned out better because you weren't around" (70). Moreover, she completely rejects her mother's critique of marriage, suggesting that her ideas would lead to lives empty of long-term, loving relationships. She underlines her disagreement by informing her mother that she is engaged to a banker, a man much like her father, who would decline to marry someone whose family is tainted by scandal. Thus none of the options for solving Nora's problem appeals to Emmy, since they would involve unwelcome attention that would alienate her fiancé.

The situation has become further complicated, Emmy explains, because Torvald has allowed everyone to think that Nora has died, thus avoiding the humiliation and disgrace of admitting that she deserted him. He has even accepted "government support" for bereaved families, which raises the possibility of prosecution for fraud should it be discovered that Nora is still alive—which would certainly happen if he sued for divorce.

So Emmy suggests a third option: Nora should just accept the fiction of her death, and go on living and writing under her pseudonym. Emmy, having influence at city hall, could arrange for the creation of a death certificate, insuring that the deception would not be discovered. Neither mother nor daughter fails to notice that Emmy would be following in Nora's footsteps if she participated in this act of forgery. Tempted by this option, Nora ultimately rejects it because, "this scheming, this lying—this is what I left behind" (88). She would be drawn back into the radically false existence she repudiated fifteen years earlier. Instead she resolves to face the judge and his accusations, and stand up for her convictions regardless of the consequences.

At this point, Anne Marie enters with Torvald, who is bleeding from the head. He has had an altercation with the clerk at the town office. Having had a change of mind, Torvald decided to file for the delayed divorce. However, the clerk, believing Nora to be dead, dismissed that idea as the product of some sort of mental aberration. Not finding a death certificate for Nora in his files, he was in the process of creating one when Torvald tried physically to stop him. This led to a wrestling match, which led to Torvald's banging his head on the pavement, which led to the bleeding wound he appears with. But he did file for and receive the divorce, and offers the resulting document to Nora.

But Nora, having decided to face the music with the judge, refuses to accept it. To do so would render her perpetually indebted to Torvald for being saved from her troubles. And she doesn't want to live burdened by that kind of debt to anyone. She doesn't want any trace of Torvald's voice in her life, especially if the voice is reminding her that she owes him something. Instead, she says, "I'm my best self

if I'm by myself" (106). As in Ibsen's original version, Nora ends the play by rejecting Torvald and walking out the door.

### **THE CHARACTERS**

**Nora** reveals herself most fully in choosing not to accept the divorce Torvald offers her at the end of the play. That rejection means that she will have to face the legal perils awaiting her in the person of the judge whose wife left him. But she refuses to sidestep those problems either by making final her divorce from Torvald or by faking her own death. "I'm ready to do this again—walk out that door and away from this house, off into the—and I know that I'm going to have to fight a lot of people all over again, and harder than I did before, and I might lose everything I have, but I've done that before and I can do it again" (107).

There is, of course, something admirable in her determination and courage, but it's not possible to ignore the extent to which this decision is focused entirely on herself and her psychological and emotional needs. We can't help recalling her determination to hear no voice but her own in conducting her life: "Once I could hear my voice, I could think of things that I wanted that had nothing to do with what anyone else wanted. . . . So I find that I'm best—that I'm my best self if I'm by myself."

Doing what you want regardless of what anybody else wants sounds like the description of a behavioral disorder. Does Emmy, engaged to a scandal-averse fiancée, want her mother to get involved in a public row with a judge over the abolition of marriage? Well, too bad for Emmy.

And too bad for Torvald that, in granting the divorce, he virtually admitted that he behaved fraudulently in allowing the fiction of Nora's death to become a virtual fact. As he says, his career is probably ruined. Tellingly, maybe, Nora accuses him of acting out of selfish motives: "I BET YOU WANTED TO BE RUINED. . . . YOU LOVE IT WHEN PEOPLE FEEL BAD FOR YOU" (98). A touch of what the psychologists call projection?

The question is, why does Nora change course, ultimately refusing the divorce that she came back to the doll house to secure? We need to remind ourselves that Nora has a bit of a histrionic streak in Ibsen's play, at one point imagining herself and Torvald enacting a scene from a romantic melodrama in which he plays the hero who rescues her, the fainting heroine, from Krogstad. In going out into the world and fighting her battle all over again—harder than before—is she in fact casting herself in the lead role in a gripping social drama, one in which her voice rises above all the rest?

**Torvald** makes two choices that help us to understand his character. The first is when he rejects Nora's request to make their divorce final. The second is when he changes his mind and grants her wish.

He explains his refusal as a kind of revenge on Nora for having simply abandoned their marriage without making any effort to confront their problems and try to solve them. That, he has come to believe, was the easy way out for Nora, though she wants to be thought of as having made the hard choice. So, he tells her, he will not let her have another easy escape by getting a divorce.

But then he reads the book Nora has written about their marriage. In it, he sees himself portrayed as an insufferable egotist, selfishly incapable of even seeing his wife, let alone really knowing and loving her.

“] e never [threatened my life],” Nora says in the book, “unless you count living with someone who can’t see you as life-threatening—which in a way it is” (93). Wounded by that description, Torvald reflects on the meaning of his life: “I think what it is I’m leaving behind—what mark I’ve made—and I think about how this is it. (*To the book.*) This is the story that’s told about me and that’s it, and I don’t want that to be it. . .” (93). So, hoping to achieve some measure of redemption, at least in Nora’s eyes, he decides to consent to the divorce.

Unlike Nora, who has been writing and selling books, making a mark on the social world, Torvald has spent the last fifteen years doing what he had been doing when Nora left: working in the same bank, living in the same house, raising his family. He has been stunned and paralyzed by Nora’s desertion while she has found a new life.

His first response to Nora’s request for a divorce, the firm “no,” was his way of continuing along the same well-worn path. His revised response, the surprising “yes,” is his attempt to derive at least some small benefit from the collapse of his marriage, to show that he, too, like Nora, could change. But Nora sees in his action just more of the same old Torvald: a man thinking only of himself. “I BET YOU WANTED TO BE RUINED,” she says. “YOU LOVE IT WHEN PEOPLE FEEL BAD FOR YOU. . . . HAVE TO TAKE CARE OF YOU, NURSE YOU BACK TO HEALTH—THAT’S YOUR WHOLE LIFE” (98).

He reminds Nora that she walked out the door demanding a “true marriage.” Now he realizes that he doesn’t “want to die having never had that experience” (104). Nora advises him to “go have it. I want you to have that” (104). It could be that his decision to grant the divorce was a first step toward entering into a true marriage with someone—a connection that would have been impossible were he still legally Nora’s husband.

**Anne Marie** has spent her life as caretaker of the Helmer family. Virtual mother to Nora and Nora’s three children, she now oversees what’s left of Torvald’s domestic life. Because of her long-standing and intimate involvement with the family, it is to Anne Marie that Nora first turns for help in her attempt to secure her long-delayed divorce. Nora’s appearance at the door as the play begins comes as no surprise to Anne Marie because Nora had written her a letter, announcing that she would be paying a brief visit to the home she abandoned. This led Anne Marie to make some mistaken assumptions about Nora’s intentions: “I just thought it would be nice if after all these years, you two could sit together and have a nice talk and have things be normal and nice and maybe even, who knows. . .” (31).

That unfinished sentence suggests that she has been entertaining thoughts about a reconciliation between the estranged couple, that she has been hoping to help repair the broken family whose members she has been nursing all her life. But when Nora makes it clear that she has no intention of patching up her marriage, Anne Marie becomes extremely angry, accusing Nora of putting her “in a bad spot,” making it look as if she and Nora were plotting something against Torvald, who is “all I have in this world, my only family” (52). “He takes care of me. He supports me. . . . because he’s grateful to me for sticking around after you ran off—for staying with him through a very difficult time—taking care of the kids—raising the kids—and looking after him—oh he was a mess!” (53). So, Anne Marie was the sustainer of the family, the one who rescued Torvald from his emotional devastation. “You have no idea, you can’t even begin to imagine. The silence. The not-eating. The very dark thoughts he’d think. The shame” (53). Nora’s visit changes in her eyes from a step toward reconciliation to a threat of further

family disruption. She wants Nora to leave, to return to her exile from the family, even if it means accepting Option Two, the judge's demand that Nora retract her radical ideas. "So, what—it makes you feel bad, just get over it. . . . you don't have to run with every feeling you have, you don't have to indulge—because some feelings make trouble—and here I am—forget how I feel—I have feelings too, but also my livelihood is at stake" (54).

Anne Marie understands deeply what it means to act in violation of one's feelings, because that's what she did decades earlier when she left her child in someone else's care to act as Nora's nurse and virtual mother. As she says in Ibsen's original, she was a poor girl who "had gotten into trouble" (Fjelde translation, 73), and was very glad to get a secure job caring for Nora. In other words, she was pregnant with no husband and no means of support, so necessity dictated that give up her child. It was either that, she points out, or "working in a factory and wearing my body down to the point of uselessness at an early age, or I could go out and be a prostitute" (59). What she did violated her maternal feelings, but she had no viable options, unlike Nora who, in her eyes, is being merely self-indulgent in refusing to take her medicine and apologize to the judge.

So the core of Anne Marie's character has been self-denial, as opposed to Nora, the champion of self-affirmation at any cost.

We learn virtually nothing about **Emmy** in Ibsen's original because she is a toddler in the play, and is only glimpsed a couple of times on stage, romping with her mother. So the author of *Part 2* is free to invent an entirely new character.

He has Nora remark that Emmy is much like her, dreaming the same immature dreams about love and marriage that she did when she was Emmy's age. She challenges Emmy's hopes for a happy life with her fiancée, asking her, "How much do you even know about marriage" (82). To which Emmy answers with surgical sharpness, "Nothing. . . because you left, I know nothing about what a marriage is and what it looks like. But I do know what the absence of it looks like, and what I want is the opposite of that" (82). So, paradoxically, Nora's repudiation of marriage is driving Emmy into the arms of a man rather like her father.

The other three characters are middle-aged or older, and have developed the fixed moral and emotional habits that we call character. Nora would have been in her late 20s or 30 when she walked out the door, which would put her in her early to mid-40s as the play begins. Torvald would be a few years older, and Anne Marie, who would have been 18 or 20 when she started caring for Nora, would now be in her 60s. Emmy, by contrast, would be about 18, leaving adolescence and entering into adult womanhood. She is just beginning to invent herself, to make the choices that will determine who she will become.

Which makes her advice to Nora especially revealing. Torvald, she reasons, can't grant Nora a divorce because that would open him to criminal charges: "it's fraud and Torvald could be tried—he could lose everything . . . and that's why he can't give you your divorce.... But. . . there is another option: You die" (77). That is, Nora must collude in the lie of her death. Emmy, we might conclude, is eager to kill off the mother who abandoned her, and whose potential to cause scandal now threatens her future marriage. Before she can begin building a self, she needs to eliminate the person who stands in her way. This is



symbolic matricide. Nora lied for eight years so that her marriage would be preserved; Emmy wants to propagate a lie into the indefinite future to insure that her marriage will take place.

**THEMES.** When Ibsen wrote *A Doll's House* in 1879, women's options in life were drastically limited and divorce was rare. In 2019, women's options are far more numerous and varied, and divorce has become commonplace. Ibsen's play was received with both praise and loathing, its detractors viewing it in much the same way the judge in Hnath's sequel views Nora's books. Hnath's play has not created any such controversy. Instead, it is generally hailed as an intelligent, thoughtful, and balanced exploration of the issues originally raised by Ibsen. (See, for example, reviews in *The New York Times* and *The New Yorker* magazine.)

And yet the playwright is walking on thin ice. *A Doll's House* has become a kind of sacred text, widely read and closely studied in many high school and college courses in literature and women's studies. The playwright is taking a serious risk in reshaping the character of Nora by filling in the missing details of her post-family life. Ibsen left her future open-ended; Hnath provides us with a decade and a half of that future, showing us a Nora who has changed and a family whose members view her critically.

Now middle-aged, self-confident, and professionally successful, Nora demonstrates that a woman can in fact make her way in a patriarchal world, though not without overcoming formidable obstacles and struggling against bitter adversaries. But she is no longer the victim she was in Ibsen's version. Instead, if there are victims in the sequel, they are the members of her family.

Torvald, devastated by Nora's departure, has fallen into a state of emotional paralysis. He has become what Nora was during their marriage: a person living a lie. Nora's lie was concealing her indebtedness to Krogstad; Torvald's pretending that Nora is dead. It is actually Torvald who is moribund, mortally wounded by shame and loss.

Because of her mother's desertion, Emmy has grown up knowing nothing about what marriage entails, for better or worse. All she knows is the emptiness of Torvald's life, and she wants no part of that. So she eagerly awaits a new life with her banker husband-to-be—who won't marry her if she is embroiled in any kind of scandal. Should this attitude be a warning sign about his character? If so, she can't see it because, we assume, she has no experience assessing the nuances of married life.

Anne Marie is afraid that Nora's return will throw a monkey-wrench into her safe life in Torvald's household. Will Torvald assume that she is plotting with Nora to undermine him in some way? Once again Nora is causing trouble, and Anne Marie will be its victim. Her whole life has been dedicated to cleaning up after Nora—literally as her nursemaid, and virtually as the housekeeper left behind to pick up the pieces after her departure.

In Ibsen's play we hear relatively little from Torvald in the scene in which Nora informs him that she's leaving, and what we do hear are mostly platitudes about home, family, and religion. Nora gets all the good lines, and lots of them—rousing shockers about the dishonesty of their marriage and her duty to herself. Ask any teacher who has discussed this play in class what his or her students think about Nora and Torvald. In most of those young eyes, Nora is a moral paragon, honest and brave, while Torvald is a

loser and a jerk. And so the judgments have stood for over a century. Meanwhile, Anne Marie and Emmy just don't come into the picture.

But Lucas Hnath paints a different picture, one in which Torvald is a far more rounded figure, a man who actually engages our sympathy, while Emmy and Anne Marie acquire compelling identities of their own. By showing us the toxic fallout from Nora's door-slamming decision, thus hinting at feet of clay supporting this cultural idol, the playwright has created a drama that richly complicates Ibsen's original.

### **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Are you familiar with Ibsen's play? If so, what are your opinions of the characters of Torvald and Nora in that version?
2. Is there one character in the sequel with whom you sympathize more than all the others? If so, why?
3. If not, why not?
4. If you are not familiar with Ibsen's original play, do you feel you were able to understand the sequel despite that lack of knowledge?
5. How would you describe Emmy's feelings about her mother?
6. Why is Nora not eager to see her children?
7. Why does Torvald change his mind, and agree to the divorce?
8. Nora says there are similarities between Anne Marie and herself. What are they? Do you agree with her?
9. Do you think the play shows that Nora has any regrets about leaving her family fifteen years earlier? If so, how so?
10. Will Torvald remarry?
11. Do you see any problems in Emmy's choice of a future husband? If so, why so? If not, why not?