



The Master Builder by Henrik Ibsen
Adapted by Matthew Ira Swaye
Directed by Adam Webster

REVIEWS

Chicago Tribune

THEATER REVIEW

Truncated Ibsen packs full measure of emotion

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Special to the Tribune

Published September 19, 2006

This story contains corrected material, published Sept. 19, 2006.

Henrik Ibsen, like so many playwrights before and after, wrote as if paid by the word. Today's audiences are a restless bunch, however, and sometimes shorter is sweeter.

Locally, theatergoers have a pair of truncated Ibsens to choose from: "The Last Two Minutes of the Complete Works of Henrik Ibsen," through Saturday at the Northlight Theatre; and a 65-minute version of "The Master Builder," from New Leaf Theatre at the Lincoln Park Cultural Center.

The zanier and superior of the two is the Neo-Futurist's deconstruction of Ibsen. What is clear upon seeing "Complete Works" is that this Norwegian wasn't one for limp endings. He preferred conclusions that snapped audiences to attention, and his plays--all 26 of them--close with dramatic flourishes that involve at least one person meeting his or her maker.

Part of Northlight's new City Series, the production is the brainchild of Greg Allen, the Neo-Futurist founder with a keen sense for blending the intellectual with the antic and preposterous.

He's brought back the same, excellent, six-member cast that originated the show in 2005 in Andersonville, and performed to swell reviews in a later New York production. Regardless of your familiarity with Ibsen, the show is a hoot.

Condiments and a box of silverware become puppet actors for an obscure 1855 work called "The Feast of Solhoug." Merrie Greenfield adopts a hilarious accent--think backwoodsman with marbles in the mouth--for another lesser-known play, "Brand." In "Catiline," Greenfield and bombastic Steve Walker writhe on the floor in a murder-suicide, both refusing to die in a scene of high comedy.

Ibsen's better-known works are handled deftly, as well. "Ghost" amps up the creepy (and humorous) mother-son relationship; "A Doll's House" is played straight (and therefore all the more unsettling); "Hedda Gabler" is performed, quite disturbingly, sotto voce; and in "The Master Builder," an action figure falls to his death from a church steeple.

Of course, we never actually see that terrible fall in New Leaf Theatre's production of "The Master Builder," adapted to almost a third of its original length by Matthew Ira Swaye.



Halvard, the narcissistic architect of the title (who has an unseemly taste for pretty young things) is considered a stand-in for Ibsen himself: self-centered and horrified by the up-and-coming talents nipping at his heels.

In Swaye's version, the developments are swift--Halvard is seduced by a Lolita-esque teenager, who eggs him on to climb the steeple--but director Adam Webster's pacing is slow and methodical, despite the trim length.

"The Last Two Minutes of the Complete Works of Henrik Ibsen," runs through Saturday at the North Shore Center for the Performing Arts, 9501 N. Skokie Blvd., Skokie. Tickets cost \$35-\$38 and are available at 847-673-6300 (the phone number as published has been corrected in this text).

"The Master Builder," runs through Oct. 21 at the Lincoln Park Cultural Center, 2045 N. Lincoln Park West. Tickets cost \$12-\$15 and are available at 773-274-9026.

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Time Out Chicago / Issue 82: Sept 21--Sept 27, 2006



The Master Builder

New Leaf Theatre at Lincoln Park Cultural Center. Adapted from Henrik Ibsen by Matthew Ira Swaye. Dir. Adam Webster. With ensemble cast.

★★★★★

In the notes to his Ibsen adaptation, Swaye explains, "I wanted to infuse the dialogue...with a naturalness, a terseness and an immediacy." Well, it's terse, at least. In reducing the three-act *Master Builder* to one hour-long act, Swaye gives us the main plot points but few of the plot's points. So we're left just big-time bemused as to why Swaye, who's neither updated the text nor offered a insightful interpretation of it, has bothered. His primary contribution to Ibsen's drama of Halvard Solness—struggling to maintain his dominion as No. 1 architect, when young Hilda dangerously reminds him of his lost glory—is to have Solness finger her. Why it didn't occur to Swaye that the many words left on the cutting-room floor just maybe had a purpose (like, say, plot and character development) is baffling.

Under Webster's stiff-as-starch direction, the actors' bodies and voices seem to be in a race for rigidity. Stranger still is the design, with canvases thrown on the floor that seemingly suggest architectural sketches; like the play itself, they provide the actors only the danger of tripping. Yet Nick Keenan has devised an effective sound scheme (splicing classical music with sounds of furious sketching).—*Novid Parsi*



IBSEN FACTO The Master Builder turns over a New Leaf.

NEW LEAF THEATRE