

# HEDDA GABLER

WRITTEN BY HENRIK IBSEN  
ADAPTED BY KIRSTEN BRANDT



KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

Kirsten Brandt  
*Executive Director (NCT)*  
Produced by the Department of Theatre

**nct** NEVADA  
CONSERVATORY  
THEATRE

PRESENTS

# HEDDA GABLER

Written by Henrik Ibsen  
Adapted by Kirsten Brandt

with

Director  
Norma Saldivar

Scenic Designer  
Andrew Taylor+

Costume Designer  
Hannah Prochaska+

Lighting Designer  
Andee Roby+

Sound Designer  
Mary Alice DiRienzo

Technical Direction  
Aya Giardina+

Props Coordinator  
Danielle Aikens+

Props Artisan  
Momo Sugawara++

Fight Director  
Andrew Callahan+

Intimacy Coordinator  
Sean Boyd

Production Stage Manager  
Maira Kowalski+

+Member of the MFA Professional Training Program with the Nevada Conservatory Theatre  
The run time of this performance is approximately 1 hour 40 minutes. There is one intermission..



September 27- October 19, 2025  
HFA Black Box Theatre  
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# SYNOPSIS

*Hedda Gabler* paints the portrait of a woman, born to affluence and a bustling social circle, caught between societal expectations and personal longings. Newly married to middle class intellectual George Tesman, Hedda finds herself restless and trapped in his provincial world – a world that feels smaller than her ambitions.



Nick Case as George Tesman and JoAnn Birt as Hedda Gabler in NCT's 2025 production. Photography by Shahab Zargari.

With her husband absorbed in his academic career, an old classmate and an ex-lover reenter her life. Now surrounded by these complicated ties to her past, along with a society eager to measure her against conventional ideals of femininity, Hedda struggles to assert her power in a world that offers her few choices.

Hedda's tale is a glimpse into the affects of rigid social structures, and the choices a person will make for freedom.

## CONTENT WARNING

Please be advised that this production contains references to gun violence, suicide, and emotionally abusive behavior. It also explores themes of restrictive gender roles and societal pressures.



# DIRECTOR'S NOTE

## NORMA SALDIVAR



Throughout theatrical history, playwrights have tackled difficult subjects to reveal truths about the state of the world and the society in which they find themselves. Ibsen is renowned for his magnification of human behavior among the middle classes of the 19th century. At a time when performative displays of entertainment was all the rage, he deepened theatrical offerings by diving deep into a detail of

storytelling, which included intimate moments defying societal mores and psychological neuroses. Ibsen drew instances that were complex and challenging to theatregoers at the time.

Victorian society's behavioral lines were to be strictly followed no matter the circumstances. Behavioral constructs were designated to keep members in line and to ensure that order was always the outcome. The silent agreement created a maze of actions where people had to sublimate their natural instincts, put aside their personal inspiration, deny their ambitions, and resign themselves to living a life only partially realized. There was no allowance for gender differences or defying circumstances to achieve success. No deviation was tolerated or accepted if it did not include the approval of those that found himself or herself - through birth or inheritance - at the top.

Women were quite often suspect for their natural proclivities and their personal ambitions. Any desire to venture outside of the parameters allowed by society led to severe consequences for indiscretions that even at times were not theirs to own. No different than today, ambition to advance, to contribute to community and family were complex and required understanding the limitations of society for both men and women. Ibsen asks us to observe the individual(s) with their autonomy and free will and observe how they maneuver in a restrictive world.



In *Hedda Gabler*, Ibsen bands together a group of individuals so drawn to succeeding and their need for power. He gives us several examples of the many ways society can dictate behavior if it means survival. Yet he emphasizes the conflict between the individual's nature and how to capitulate for the sake of avoiding "scandal and shame". Being true to one's self is difficult in a society when being strong, vocal, energetic, righteous, and innovative can cause a societal ignominy.

Each production of any Ibsen requires a translator who can honor the core essence while appealing to audience. This production begins with a beautifully crafted translation by Executive Director Kirsten Brandt that bridges to our modern audience. In addition, we have, through all elements of this production, attempted to provide clues and insight into the arc of Ibsen's HEDDA GABLER. From the orientation of the room, the visual and auditory contributions, to the acting and all of the details in building this world, we have designed the show to reinforce the meaning of this play's core theme. We hope that you will acknowledge the great contributions of the many students and staff who have worked on this production and its sister production of Steve Martin's *The Underpants* playing in rep.

Many thanks for to all for their dedication, determination, and artistic contributions.



JoAnn Birt as Hedda Gabler and Andrew Callahan as Eilert Lovborg in NCT's 2025 production. Photography by Shahab Zargari.

# ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT HENRIK IBSEN (1828-1906)



Often called the “father of modern drama,” Henrik Ibsen shook up the theatre world with plays that dared to question such social norms as marriage, gender roles, and morality. Born in Norway, Ibsen started as a struggling playwright and even worked as an apothecary’s apprentice for a time. His works, such as *A DOLL’S HOUSE*, *HEDDA GABLER*, and *GHOSTS*, challenged 19th-century audiences, sparking both outrage and admiration.

What makes Ibsen enduring is how contemporary his work still feels. His characters are not simple heroes or villains, but complex individuals wrestling with questions of freedom and identity. In *A DOLL’S HOUSE*, Nora’s decision to leave her family ignited scandal in 1879, yet her search for independence continues to resonate with modern audiences. Plays like *GHOSTS* confront uncomfortable truths about hypocrisy, morality, and the consequences of silencing dissent. Through such works, Ibsen transformed theatre from polite diversion into a mirror held up to society—one that revealed, often unflinchingly, its deepest contradictions.

Ibsen himself inspired almost as much interest as his plays. He spent nearly 30 years living abroad in Italy and Germany, partly in self-imposed exile, and only returned to Norway later in life as an established cultural icon. Known for his sharp wit and often cold demeanor, he was also famously stubborn. Though he was often asked to cut or soften his plays for censors, he always refused.

Today, Ibsen’s influence stretches far beyond Norway. Subsequent playwrights, including George Bernard Shaw and Tennessee Williams, built upon his foundation of realism and social critique in storytelling. His legacy reminds us that drama at its best does not only entertain, but also demands that we examine ourselves and the world around us. More than a century after his death, Henrik Ibsen’s voice as a playwright demands to be heard.

# ABOUT THE ADAPTER

## KIRSTEN BRANDT



Prior to joining UNLV Kirsten Brandt was associate chair and artistic director of the department of film and theatre at San Jose State University. Brandt is an interdisciplinary artist and educator whose practice embraces inquiries into gender, technology, and politics. An award-winning theatrical director, playwright, and producer with over 20 years of experience, her passion lies in igniting the imagination of audiences through visceral storytelling and visual poetry to encourage dialogue and ethical engagement.

She served for six seasons as Artistic Director of Sledgehammer Theatre, where she directed over a dozen plays and wrote *Berzerkergång*, *The Frankenstein Project* and *NU*. She was the Associate Artistic Director of San Jose Repertory Theatre, where she co-wrote the book and lyrics to a new musical version of Hans Christian Anderson's *The Snow Queen* with Haddon Kime and Rick Lombardo. With Anne-Charlotte Hanes Harvey, she adapted and directed Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* at the Old Globe Theatre. Her telematic, multi-site play *The Thinning Veil* was produced at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her play *CODED* about women in computer gaming had its world premiere at City Lights Theater in San Jose. Her play *Blind Fury, the Untold Story of the Queen of Hearts*, premiered at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2025.

Her other plays include *The Mechanic's Daughter*, *The Waves* and an adaptation of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. As a director, Ms. Brandt work has been seen at San Jose Repertory Theatre, The Old Globe, TheatreWorks, La Jolla Playhouse, San Diego Repertory, Santa Cruz Shakespeare, North Coast Repertory, Arizona Theatre Company, Utah Shakespeare Festival, Marin Theatre Company, City Lights Theatre and others.

[www.kirstenbrandt.com](http://www.kirstenbrandt.com)

# DRAMATURG'S NOTE

## "THE ONLY WAY SHE KNOWS TO"



"Hedda... Gabler! Hedda *Gabler!*" whispers Ejlert Lövborg to the play's protagonist upon reconnecting with his former love interest, now married to another man. Indeed, Hedda never really transforms into Hedda *Tesman*, the last name of her new husband, who just splurged on a spacious villa and a lengthy honeymoon trip, counting on the money yet to come from a pending professor's appointment.

But this couple is obviously sharply mismatched: Hedda is a member of the social elite of Norway's capital, Christiania (now Oslo), treated like royalty as a young woman by her father General Gabler, and now skilled heir to his guns – an unusual break with traditional gender roles at the time. For a woman seeking thrilling experiences, however, her marriage is a not just a step down, socially – into a less prestigious family who needs to sign mortgages to sustain her demands for a lavish lifestyle – but also a plunge into social boredom. Tesman, a scholar of "the domestic industries of the Low Countries in the Middle Ages" couldn't be more of an antithesis to his new wife. A "specialist," in the belittling definition Judge Brack offers of him, he managed to combine their recent grand tour with a research trip that yielded a full trunk of archival documents: they clearly attract him more than anything else in his life. Hedda, however, is adamant she requires more "generalist" entertainment and enjoys Brack's company, who offers to become the more stimulating third vertex of a social, if not (yet) openly sexual triangle.

Interestingly, the most expected conflicts in this play are soon deflated: Tesman is neither jealous of other men Hedda had previous flirts with, like Lövborg, nor of current social acquaintances; and although Lövborg has recently written a book that has become a sensation and surpasses Tesman's yet unpublished one on a similar subject (with another even better one forthcoming), he is uninterested in competing for Tesman's post at the university. Thus, financial ruin is easily dodged by the Tesmans. Instead, the most impactful events all stem from Hedda's unbridled desire for power over others' lives.

For an author like Ibsen who perfected the art of indirect allusion in regard to socially unpleasant topics, this play's secret is in fact the most domestic: the forbidden words – never pronounced but always implied – are “mother” and “children.” If Tesman is slow to acknowledge that the remaining two empty rooms in their new house could be occupied by newborns rather than bookshelves, Hedda positively declines to confirm the conjectures of her new family members, who read her recent florid appearance as a sure signal of her pregnancy. If Nora in the same author's *A Doll's House* (1879) abandoned her children to regain her freedom as an independent agent, Hedda (1891) actively refuses to accept that her more nurturing role become a reality. Instead, she fantasizes about molding Lövborg's destiny, whom she now decides to tempt to relapse into his former destructive habits in hopes to induce him to a beautiful, albeit tragic ending.

Yet, her (almost) perfectly conceived scheme, as you will see, doesn't really go according to plan: a manuscript forever lost gets a chance at resuscitating, a former enemy turns into an admiring friend, a new triangle is formed, and Brack turns out to be more dangerous than expected. Hedda has no choice but to escape in the only way she knows to.

–SteBos–

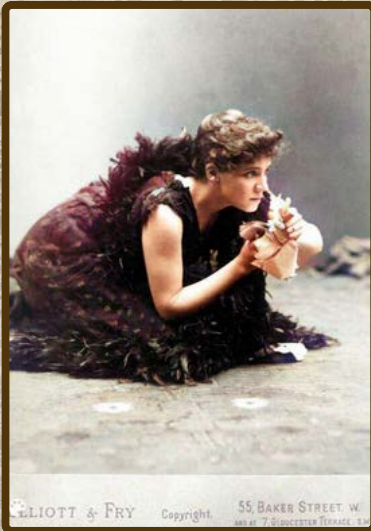


JoAnn Birt as Hedda Gabler and Andrew Callahan as Eilert Lovborg in NCT's 2025 production. Photography by Shahab Zargari.

# PRODUCTION HISTORY

In the 1890s, *Hedda Gabler* burst into Victorian drawing-rooms with the force of a bang – sometimes literally.

The playwright was already an international sensation – and also an international scandal, thanks to his daring “problem plays” dramatizing social conflicts. In particular, he was notorious for *A Doll’s House*, where the shocking ending featured not a reconciliation between wife and husband but instead the female protagonist walking out on her marriage. The controversy (and gossip) was so intense that one Swedish woman is said to have sent notes to her lunch guests specifically ordering them not to talk about Ibsen.



Elizabeth Robins as Hedda Gabler.  
London, 1891

Why were Ibsen’s characters – especially his women – so striking? Traditional Victorian norms demanded that fictional women act as “angels in the house” – idealized helpmeets, modestly bringing joy to those around them, fulfilled by the domestic sphere. But as the century came to an end, Ibsen and his admirers were pushing to tell new kinds of stories – stories about men and women who were less idealized and more carefully-observed, about conflicts that were not the highflown adventures of melodrama but instead the petty, intense squabbling of the everyday.

Could the small social miseries of middle-class people in Norwegian drawing-rooms – annoying relatives, unfulfilled ambitions, lost loves and dreams – be transformed into the subject of high tragedy? Ibsen thought so, and his audiences knew that it was as fascinating as it was shocking.

*Hedda Gabler* premiered in Germany in 1891, and shortly afterward, it was in print and on stage all over Europe and America. The play had been hastily translated into English so that it could appear in England and America as soon as it was published in Scandinavia; back in Ibsen’s home country of Norway, it was performed in modern-day Oslo (then called “Christiania”).

One of the greatest points of debate was *Hedda Gabler's* heroine. No one could make up their mind about her. Some were appalled: one early reviewer called Hedda "the wickedest woman in the whole range of the European drama," even as he conceded that she also seemed "very real." Others were more sympathetic. The novelist Henry James argued that Hedda could seem disagreeable at one moment and graceful at another, and that this was part of Ibsen's genius, that she was simply herself. He said, "She suffers, she struggles, she is human."



Minnie Maddern Fiske as Hedda Gabler and George Arliss as Judge Brack in the 1904 revival of *Hedda Gabler* at the Manhattan Theatre. By American theatrical photographer Joseph Byron (1847–1923). Courtesy Library of Congress.

Ibsen's subtle, realistic, opaque characters made him an instant hit with actors, who flocked to challenge themselves in these complicated new roles. In England, the actresses Elizabeth Robins and Marion Lea – future suffragettes who had just founded their own independent theatre – put on *Hedda Gabler* and starred opposite each other as Hedda and Thea. A decade later, in America, Minnie Fiske told the *New York Times* that Ibsen's plays fascinated her because his characters needed to be interpreted by actors and audiences. Directors, too, were drawn to Hedda. In Russia in 1906, experimental director Vsevolod Meyerhold chose to stage *Hedda Gabler* with a daring new approach to theatre that emphasized symbolism and stylized movements.

*Hedda Gabler* has continued to draw people ever since. From Asta Nielsen's silent film appearance in 1925, to Ingrid Bergman's performance in the famous 1962 film, to Tessa Thompson's modern 2025 interpretation of Hedda, *Hedda Gabler* has never been far from our view. And now, to you: what will *you* make of Hedda and her world?

# THEMES OF HEDDA GABLER

## THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN SOCIETY

Although the role of women in Western society has shifted somewhat over the past two centuries, allowing women more autonomy and choice than most other times in history, the late nineteenth century (when Henrik Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* was written and is set) was filled with deep restrictions for them. In many European countries, women were legally and socially defined in terms of their relationships to men: as daughters, as wives, and as mothers. Respectability for women was closely tied to marriage, and their social standing, financial stability, and even personal identity were bound to marriage and the husband they managed to secure. Though education for women was becoming more common, professional opportunities remained limited, and any woman who sought independence, intellectual freedom, or public influence often faced social condemnation.

In this context, marriage functioned less as a romantic union and more as a societal contract. Women were expected to embody domestic virtues – modesty, obedience, and devotion to keeping a home and taking care of a family. Self-determination was not encouraged in women of Hedda Gabler's social class. This meant that intelligent, restless women like Hedda could find themselves profoundly unfulfilled by the narrow lives offered to them.

The heart of the play lies in Hedda's dissatisfaction with this type of life. She marries George Tesman for security and social standing, not for love, which fulfills expectations for a woman of her time. What we see, however, is that, although Hedda is seemingly achieving everything a woman of her time could want, she feels trapped. She is a woman with vitality and ambition, which her society offers her no legitimate outlet for. Thus, she finds herself stuck within the boundaries of her role as a wife, and her eventual manipulations can be seen as desperate attempts to gain agency in a system designed to deny her autonomy.



JoAnn Birt as Hedda and Savannah Libatique as Thea in NCT's 2025 production.  
Photography by Shahab Zargari.

The play was written in the same era as the early women's suffrage movement, in which women were increasingly demanding the right to vote and hold a more visible presence in society as a whole. In the decades since, progress has been made in this regard, but the play continues to speak to contemporary audiences by highlighting the tension between societal expectations and individual identity that continues into modern times.

Today, we continue to see women navigate pressures to conform to ideals of beauty, motherhood, and marriage that may not align with their true desires and inner selves. Indeed, we have seen, in recent years, prominent public voices attesting that there is something inherently wrong with women who choose paths that don't prioritize marriage and motherhood. *Hedda Gabler*, then, becomes not only a portrait of one woman's struggle, but a broader commentary on how restrictive roles can suffocate human potential. Ibsen, therefore, challenges audiences to consider how much of our identities are shaped by societal demands, and what we lose when individuals are denied the freedom to define their own lives. It is a truly timeless theme.

#### INTERESTING FACTS

- A woman's right to vote in the United States was not recognized until 1920. During this time, women began the "flapper" fashion trend, featuring short hair and short skirts, which was supposed to represent rebellion against modesty expectations.
- During World War II, women entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers when many men were sent overseas to fight. After the war, women were pressured to return to homemaking, but this experience left a lasting mark.
- During the mid-twentieth century, only about 50 years ago, women gained access to fundamental cornerstones of autonomy, such as control over reproductive choices, the ability to open bank and credit card accounts in their own name, and representation in government.

In *Hedda Gabler*, Hedda and Thea have very different responses to the same types of societal expectations. It's interesting to consider what both their lives might have looked like had they been allowed to explore their places in society beyond what had already been established for them.



# THEMES OF HEDDA GABLER

## THE ROLE OF MARRIAGE IN SOCIETY

Marriage has been a hallmark institution of Western society for centuries, shaping not only private relationships, but also social order, inheritance-based property rights, and, of course, public standing. Historically, marriage was less about romance and more about the above-mentioned social structures. By securing a strong marriage, a person could secure wealth and status (and, for men in particular, legacy). This view on marriage was the dominant one for much of the nineteenth century, when Ibsen wrote *Hedda Gabler*, and so the stability that marriage provided often mattered more than love. Up until recent years, then, marriage was understood to be more of a social contract than anything else, in which men provided financial support and material goods, while women provided domestic labor and heirs.



Nick Case as George Tesman and JoAnn Birt as Hedda Gabler in NCT's 2025 production. Photography by Shahab Zargari.

Throughout the twentieth century, though, greater emphasis has been placed on romantic love as the foundation of a marriage. Additionally, the women's rights movement of this century expanded opportunities for women, allowing them to seek lives that did not revolve around marriage and childbearing. Instead, they were able to step into independence and treat marriage as an addition to, rather than the core of, their lives.

In *Hedda Gabler*, Ibsen critiques the constraints of marriage as a social institution. Hedda marries Tesman only because it is the expected next step for a woman of her time. Thus, she quickly discovers its limitations – a life of predictable duty accompanied by the absence of personal freedom. The play explores how marriage can offer security while simultaneously stifling individuality. Hedda's manipulations and self-destructive choices reflect her discontent, and also offer audiences a broader view of the struggles that arise when society ties a person's worth to marital status.

# THEMES OF HEDDA GABLER

## VICTORIAN PROPRIETY

When we think of the Victorian era (1837–1901), a few things probably come to mind – the Industrial Revolution, Charles Dickens, and a strong emphasis on morality, to name a few. This was a time largely defined by rigid codes of conduct regarding propriety, and an almost obsessive concern with appearances. Respectability was the highest social currency – meaning, if one wanted to be considered honorable, they needed to adhere to strict expectations of behavior, dress, speech, and lifestyle. The social order was derived from marriage and family reputation, and so scandal or deviation from accepted norms could permanently damage one’s standing. Gender roles were especially important – men were expected to be providers and public figures, while women were expected to embody modest, obedient housewives.

For a woman like Hedda Gabler, these societal rules were a cage. Although intelligent and ambitious, she lived in a culture that afforded women few choices. Her marriage to Tesman, while providing security and social standing, also traps her in a role she secretly despises. Victorian propriety demanded that she smile, host, and eventually bear children – all things which she felt stifled her hunger for influence and freedom.



Nick Case as George Tesman and Andrew Callahan as Eilert Lovborg in NCT’s 2025 production. Photography by Shahab Zargari.

The repressive nature of the Victorian era did not only weigh on women like Hedda – it had the capacity to shape the mental health of both men and women across society. The constant pressure to maintain appearances, suppress strong emotions, and conform to rigid roles often led to anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation. While women were denied autonomy and intellectual outlets, men were discouraged from expressing vulnerability or “weakness.” As a result, people frequently internalized their struggles or disguised them behind “respectability,” creating a culture where psychological suffering was widespread but rarely acknowledged.

# MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS

One thing *Hedda Gabler* offers us is a spotlight on the devastating effects that repression and isolation can have on mental well-being. Hedda's life, shaped by the rigid propriety of her era, leaves her feeling trapped, powerless, and unseen. Her manipulations and destructive impulses can be read not only as personal flaws, but also as symptoms of a deeper psychological despair.

While Hedda lived in a different time and place than we do (and a fictionalized one at that), the issues she represents remain urgent today. Many people still struggle under the weight of social and familial expectations that can restrict authentic self-expression. Further, stigma around mental health – much like the silence around Hedda's distress – can prevent individuals from seeking the help they need. Her story reminds us of the danger of ignoring emotional suffering, and the importance of creating spaces where people can express their struggles without fear of shame or judgment.



JoAnn Bird as Hedda Gabler and Andrew Callahan as Eilert Lovborg in NCT's 2025 production. Photography by Shahab Zargari.

Modern conversations surrounding mental health awareness seek to counteract these silences we have seen throughout history. We now understand that mental illness is not a weakness, mentally or morally, but a human reality. With this, we now know that open dialogue, education, and access to resources are critical for people who are struggling.

## Resources

If themes of mental health and suicide in this play feel personally resonant, it is important to know that resources are available for you or anyone you know who may be struggling.

In the United States, the Suicide and Crisis Lifeline can be reached by calling 988 or visiting [988lifeline.org](https://988lifeline.org). These resources provide immediate, confidential support.



# LEARN MORE

## Discussion Questions For the Classroom:

- How does the repression of emotion and individuality in *Hedda Gabler* mirror the ways stigma around mental health can still silence people today?
- In what ways might Hedda's outcome have been different if she had access to the kinds of mental health resources available in modern society?
- How do societal expectations, both in the Victorian era and in our own time, shape the ways people express (or hide) their struggles?
- Suicide in literature can serve as both a personal tragedy and a social critique. How does Hedda's death illuminate flaws in her society, and what might Ibsen have wanted his audience to reflect upon?
- How can theatre, as a medium, encourage awareness, empathy, and dialogue around mental health issues that are often left unspoken?



JoAnn Bird as Hedda, Andrew Callahan as Lovborg, Nick Case as Tesman, and Savannah Libatique as Thea in NCT's 2025 production. Photography by Shahab Zargari.

## Further Reading and Resources

### On Hedda Gabler and Victorian Society

- *Ibsen's Women* by Joan Templeton – Explores the roles and expectations of women in Ibsen's plays.
- *Henrik Ibsen and the Birth of Modernism* by Toril Moi – Discusses Ibsen's critique of social norms and the development of modern drama.

### On Mental Health and Literature

- *Madness and Civilization* by Michel Foucault – Examines historical attitudes toward mental illness and society's treatment.
- *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980* by Elaine Showalter – Looks at connections between gender, repression, and mental health throughout history.