

[theatre]

Acting keeps Gamm's 'Doll House' afloat

by John Rogers

There is something simultaneously provocative and anesthetizing about setting Henrik Ibsen's 1879 domestic drama, *A Doll's House*, in 1959 American suburbia, which is what director Fred Sullivan Jr has done in the Gamm Theatre's current production.

The relocation clues us into Ibsen's visionary critique – of gender relations, domestic ennui, and stifling social pressures – while selling short the play's fascination, which comes from its earnest and exhilarating proto-feminism. The process of re-contextualizing plays may be rewarding to directors and actors, not to mention set-designers, but it robs the audience of the opportunity to be transported and disoriented to strange, even alien, landscapes.

In this production, the characters, and not the concept, are what

move us. Jeanine Kane plays Nora Helmer, a housewife who is happy with her domesticated life only because she has so thoroughly convinced herself that it is what she wants. She is not delusional. She has simply come to believe that the things that might really satisfy her – emotionally, intellectually – are entirely unattainable. Her husband, Torvald (Steven Kidd), recently promoted to manager at the bank where he works, cannot imagine those things. He believes in the dutiful life, measured by achievements and appearances.

The drama in the story derives from a secret Nora has kept from her husband – a loan she took out years ago in order to pay for a convalescent trip for him when he was gravely ill. She has never told him about the loan – he assumed the money came from her father – and, in an improbable twist of fate, the first employee he fires as bank

A DOLL'S HOUSE

The Gamm,
172 Exchange St,
Pawtucket
www.gammtheatre.org
Runs thru Feb 20

manager is Nils Krogstad (Tony Estrella), the unscrupulous man who made the loan in the first place.

Krogstad shows up at the Helmer's home on Christmas Eve to fight for his job and threatens to spill Nora's secret if she doesn't persuade Torvald to take him back. Nora must decide between telling the rupturing truth and maintaining her comfortable, constricted life.

As Krogstad, who has none of Shylock's poetry or power, Tony Estrella is sympathetic and nuanced. His performance is more desperate than destructive. Jeanine Kane, a resident actor at the Gamm, usually portrays characters in control. She was alluring as Beatrice in last season's *Much Ado*



About Nothing and delightfully sinister as Mrs. Cheveley, the blackmailer in Oscar Wilde's *An Ideal Husband*, in 2008. Here, she portrays a woman losing her grip, and her performance, particularly in a fierce fight with her husband toward the end of the show, is riveting. Steven Kidd plays Torvald as an innocent rather than an oppressor. Whether in 1879 or 1959, he is clearly unprepared for the changes to come. Kidd's charm is expansive, but one can't help

wishing he would forget about the audience for a while. Some of his quieter scenes with Kane seem to be played with a wink, as though everyday, subconscious forms of sexism are more difficult to portray, and need more softening, than the extraordinary emotional explosions at the play's climax. But worldviews are in the very atmosphere of an era; and it is this atmosphere that is so difficult to conjure, and so risky to breathe.

Four Play Feels Pretty Good @ The Go.Go

by Robert Barossi

Sometimes inventive ideas come from the things you'd least expect. Take a pickle for example, just one of the five elements included in Elemental Theatre's annual festival of short plays collectively titled *Go.Go 5*, directed by Alexander Platt. The collective gave Providence writers 6 short weeks to compose a play of any length for submission. Out of the 31 to take this challenge, four were chosen.

All plays had to include these five elements: a bone, a moment of intense light, something important going unheard, a mistaken identity, and of course, one glorious pickle.

Writer Rob Grace went straight for the jugular and skillfully used the pickle element for the title and setting of his play, *The Pickle Shop*, a brief but poignant play exploring the damaging effects that the American economy has on one's identity. The main character,

an immigrant woman, played by Casey Seymour-Kim, who calls herself "the crazy pickle lady," is a perfect depiction of the free market's slaughtering of the value of people.

Jill Blevins' *Wake* is a short play about the surfacing of dark family secrets in response to their father's death. It's filled with intense, gripping moments that will engulf your attention and the characters are strongly built here. Ruth, the daughter and black sheep of the family is overflowing with anger and confusion as she gets bequeathed with nothing but her father's ashes. The question is, why does she get the ashes and her brother gets a trust fund?

George Brant's *Baby Talk* is a comedic story about the extremes a woman and her boyfriend are willing to go to attain perfection through their child. D'Arcy Dersham plays Lisa who's married to Paul, played by Dave Rabinow and though their scenes are frantic and funny there are some honest moments where Lisa proclaims

GO.GO 5

Elemental Theatre at
Perishable, 95 Empire
St, Providence.
Runs thru Feb 13
elementaltheatre.org

her disappointment in herself and in her spouse. In the end, this short play teaches a sweet lesson

about how love sees past imperfections

A Brief History of the Earth and Everything In It by Dave Rabinow is a hysterical, yet controversial, play where a third grade drama club puts on a musical that argues the case of creationism. Their aim is to undermine the Christian culture of the school. Though the topic of what they are singing about is potentially divisive, the characters and music in this play make it light-hearted, creative and the acting is hilarious — especially since it is played by adults. A crowd favorite character is Turner, an adorable British lad, played by Seymour-Kim who so aptly embodies this funny tike's quirky personality. And you don't



want to miss seeing Presley Turtledove, a pig-tailed, manatee obsessed, outrageously funny girl played by Kelly Seigh.

Though each of these plays have entirely different plots, they all touch on a universal truth that binds them together: the characters are on a quest to find their own identities.

D'Arcy Dersham of Elemental says this unplanned emergence of a theme happens every year.

"Somehow people are always struggling with the same things. There are always areas of confluence."

It's interesting to see what emerges when you give a group of talented playwrights five elements to fashion a story with.

"What we are exploring is the act of creativity," Dersham says.

To see the work of these local playwrights' imaginations is worth stepping out in the snow for.