

Jelinek's Ibsen: 'Noras' Past and Present

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Critical reaction to Elfriede Jelinek's first play, *Was geschah, nachdem Nora ihren Mann verlassen hatte oder Stützen der Gesellschaften* (*What Happened After Nora Left Her Husband or The Pillars of Societies*) can in no way be compared to the 'firestorm of critical debate and dissent' which met the world première of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (Copenhagen, 1879), the drama which provides the starting-point for Jelinek's 1977 sequel.¹ For a writer whose national and international reputation has largely, and unjustifiably, been the result of extensive controversy – her play *Burgtheater* (1985) assured her the name of 'Nestbeschmutzer' within Austria, and her novel *Last* (1989) more recently gained her bestseller status with its advertised claim to be 'feminine' pornography – Jelinek's first play is almost notable because of its scandal-free reception.² Partly as a result of this and partly because of the mostly negative reviews which greeted its première, it has not received the critical attention it deserves.

Against dismissive claims that *Nora* is merely a programmatic 'Lehrstück', 'ein Lehrstück wie aus dem Lehrbuch, fast leer inzwischen' ('a didactic play, straight out of a textbook and with nothing between the covers'),³ this essay will argue that Jelinek's theatrical début should be accorded greater importance in Jelinek studies since it presents at an early stage key components of the author's dramatic technique and political preoccupations. Firstly, the use of montage, the definitive characteristic of both Jelinek's dramatic and narrative technique, is prevalent in *Nora* and can be seen to offer interesting interpretive perspectives. Secondly, the 'woman question' is given a powerful new political and arguably also a contemporary dimension as the liberal humanist context of Ibsen's marital drama is exploded and replaced by an examination of material issues such as women's work, solidarity between women and their function as sexual commodities. Thirdly, the setting of Jelinek's play – 1920s Germany – is chosen by the author in order to imply a symbiosis between patriarchal capitalism and fascism, a connection which is established in a somewhat piecemeal and symbolic fashion. Jelinek's greatest achievement in *Nora* is that, in engaging with Ibsen as her intertext, she produces a complex discussion of feminist politics. While clearly serving to show how women are manipulated by the workings of capital, the play also functions as a critical confrontation with certain commonly accepted feminist axioms. To understand these layers of the text, a reading of *Nora* must be sensitive to its historical and political context.

The idea of writing such a sequel is not a new one. Those familiar with the reception of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* will know that virtually as soon as his play had been premièred, all manner of sequels appeared which sought to 'put right'

what was seen as the morally unacceptable or psychologically implausible ending of Ibsen's drama. With titles such as *Das Wunderbarste oder Der 4. Akt von Ein Puppenheim* ('The Most Wonderful Thing; or, the Fourth Act of 'A Doll's House') and *Nora's Return: A Sequel to 'The Doll's House of Henrik Ibsen'*, these versions had *Nora* either deciding that she could not bring herself to abandon her children and husband or returning to repent having done so.⁴ Jelinek is thus not the first playwright to opt for a cyclical structure for her sequel, neither is she the only one to have placed her protagonist within the framework of Marxist debate: the declared intention of the Danish playwright Ernst Bruun Olsen, with his 1968 treatment of this material *Wohin ging Nora, als sie hinausging?* ('Where did Nora go when she went out?'), was to make 'aus dem Protest Noras gegen die bürgerliche Ehe, gegen die verlogenen Moralkategorien der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft eine revolutionäre Tat gegen die Klassengesellschaft' ('to take Nora's protest against the bourgeois institution of marriage and against the deceitful moral categories of bourgeois society, and make of it a revolutionary act against class society'). Angelika Gundlach could not have been more wrong, however, when she said of Olsen's version that it was 'wohl die letzte Überlegung zu diesem Thema' ('probably the last word on this subject').⁵ The late 1970s saw two German-language sequels by women playwrights: Jelinek's own, and a 'backlash' alternative by the anti-feminist Esther Vilar, entitled *Helmer oder Ein Puppenheim* (*Helmer; or, a Doll's House*), which shows Helmer as a sensitive and caring 'Aussteiger'⁶ who gives up his job to look after his son and refuses to return him to a hysterical and callous mother who now has to provide the alimony. Premièred in Graz as part of the 'Steirischer Herbst' festival of 1979, Jelinek's play was then published in book form in 1980 and again in 1984. It was also published in a much modified and abridged radio play version in 1982.⁷

Having left her bank director husband, Torvald Helmer, Jelinek's *Nora* sets out into the big wide world to get a job. But with no formal education or references, her idea of embarking on a 'career' is too optimistic and she lands herself a job on the conveyor belt of a factory. Things at the factory do not turn out as *Nora* had expected; she decides that she is above the mechanical work she is required to do and that she will return to her children: 'Ich halte es hier nicht aus. ich [sic] muß in eine Umgebung gehen, wo meine Kinder auf mich warten. Nur mehr für die Kleinen will ich jetzt leben und so meinen Fehler wieder gutmachen' ('I can't stand it here. I must go to a place where my children are waiting for me. I shall make amends and live only for them from now on') (*Nora*, p. 15). *Nora* rejects the amorous advances of the lowly foreman: 'Ich liebe dich, *Nora*. Ich weiß von dem Augenblick an, da ich merkte, daß du das Beste bist, was ich im Moment erreichen kann, daß ich dich liebe' ('I love you, *Nora*. I know that I love you, I've known from the moment I realised that you're the best thing I can currently hope to achieve') (*Nora*, p. 12), only to succumb to those of the business magnate Konsul Weygang, who is attracted to her during a tour of the factory premises. He is entertained with some songs from the firm's choir – *Nora* sings the solo – and with a tarantella, which is also performed by *Nora*. Lured by Weygang's money and by the concomitant prospect of social betterment, *Nora* does not return home, but instead becomes Weygang's

mistress. She is later persuaded to disguise herself and employ her sexual wiles on her ex-husband Helmer, who holds valuable business information of use to the Konsul. Helmer is director of Conti-Bank, the main shareholder of the company Nora had been working for and which the Konsul wishes to purchase. (The 1992 production explained that he wished to build a nuclear power station on the site.) In their sado-masochistic encounter Nora whips Helmer until he divulges the fact that he has been boosting the saleable value of the land by spreading rumours that a railway line is to be built through the area. At this point Nora removes her mask and reveals her identity to Helmer.

Nora then pays a brief visit to the factory but fails to apprise her ex-colleagues of the speculation deals concerning their company which will result in its closure and in the loss of their jobs. She returns to Weygang, who, having no further use for her – she has provided him with the information he needed and has lost her sexual attractiveness for him – leaves her free to return to her husband. She is forced to take this step after an unsuccessful attempt at securing a living by prostitution. Weygang has acted swiftly, buying the piece of land in question, exposing Helmer's role in the scandal and causing him to lose his job at the bank. Nora's feeble threats to bribe him, therefore, are naive: 'Nora: Ich erpresse dich mit der Gewerkschaft, der Presse und nicht zuletzt mit dem Aufsichtsrat der Conti-Bank. [...] Weygang: Hörst du mir überhaupt zu? Ich sage, daß ich die in Frage stehenden Liegenschaften bereits gekauft habe. Helmer ist der Blöde' ('Nora: I'll use the union, the press and, what's more, the board of directors of Conti-Bank to blackmail you. Weygang: Are you listening to me at all? I tell you, I've already bought the property in question. Helmer is the idiot') (Nora, p. 56). Weygang provides the Helmers with a small textiles shop and the play closes with the couple listening to the news of a fire which has razed to the ground the factory which Weygang had bought. Weygang will claim on his insurance and is now free to develop the land as he chooses. The curtain falls on Helmer insisting that Nora leave the radio on: the fascist marching music is very much to her husband's liking.

That Ibsen is the key source of Elfriede Jelinek's montage is obvious from her title, which mimics two of Henrik Ibsen's: *Nora oder Ein Puppenheim* and *Die Stützen der Gesellschaft* (*The Pillars of Society*). Jelinek has given societies in the plural in order to suggest the double meaning of society and company or firm, as implied by the German *Gesellschaft*. Most of Jelinek's characters are taken from the former, but Consul Bernick of *The Pillars of Society* is transmogrified into Consul Weygang. The number of quotations and references which have been 'lifted' from the Ibsen original are too numerous to list in full. They include the tarantella dance and Helmer's reaction to it. Helmer's 'Why, Nora dear, you're dancing as if it were a matter of life or death' (*A Doll's House*, p. 106) becomes Weygang's 'Du tanztst ja, als ginge es um Leben und Tod' ('But you're dancing as if it were a matter of life or death') (Nora, p. 20). Even Nora's goal of self-liberation and personal fulfilment, 'I believe that before all else I am a human being, just as much as you are – or at least that I should try to become one' (*A Doll's House*, p. 147), is echoed in Jelinek's version, where Nora proclaims to her prospective employer what is, in Jelinek's new context, a naive

and apolitical goal: 'Das Wichtigste ist, daß ich ein Mensch werde' ('The most important thing is that I become a human being') (Nora, p. 8).

It is not just textual passages which are 'quoted' by Jelinek but ideas, too, which find their way into her play in a transmuted form. For example, Helmer admits to his wife that he sometimes secretly wishes she were threatened by some danger, so that he could protect her (*A Doll's House*, p. 133). In Jelinek, the women who work in the factory long to have such a man and contemplate the idea of deliberately injuring themselves in the machinery in order to capture the attention of some caring, well-to-do man (Nora, pp. 22–3). Such men are not much in evidence on the shop floor, however. It is possible that Jelinek's montage method might have deliberately turned the teasing rebuke of Dr Rank by Nora – she hits him lightly round the head with her silk stockings – into the very 'real' whipping of Helmer in the sado-masochistic scene (scene 13, Nora). To cite one last example, the heart of the business intrigue lies in the rumour surrounding the railway line, an idea which comes from Ibsen's *The Pillars of Society*, which is explicitly acknowledged in Jelinek: 'Bei der Spekulation handelt sich's um eine Eisenbahnlinie wie in dem Stück *Stützen der Gesellschaft*, auch von Ibsen' ('The speculation is all about a railway line, like in *The Pillars of Society*') (Nora, p. 32).

Such pointers are not merely intended for those who would otherwise be unaware of these quotations. As one of the many variants of the 'alienation technique' employed in order to stress the constructed and fictional nature of the stage action, they constitute a deliberate part of Jelinek's aesthetic strategy. All of Jelinek's plays incorporate material from other sources. Sometimes she provides a list of sources which she has used in her montage, as in *Clara S*; sometimes she acknowledges that she has employed this technique and leaves it to her critics to discover her sources, as is the case with *Burgtheater*.⁸ This 'meta-theatrical' element is stressed more in the stage version than in the radio version of *Nora*. Nora's opening lines in the former include: 'Ich bin Nora aus dem gleichnamigen Stück von Ibsen' ('I am Nora, from Ibsen's play of the same name') (Nora, p. 7). In the radio play, Nora does not claim to be Ibsen's Nora but is merely recognised by Weygang as having the same name as Ibsen's character (*Frauenhörspiele*, p. 178). But it is not only Ibsen who is quoted in this new context: Nora reads out loud from Freud and cites both Hitler and Mussolini on gender-related subjects. Jelinek has also acknowledged the use of management and business magazines in her montage. This provides one of the main sources of humour in the play since she has her characters use the jargon of capitalist economics when they speak about love and use the language of love when describing business plans: 'Das Kapital ist jedoch von allgrößter Schönheit. Nicht einmal Vermehrung beeinträchtigt seinen hervorragenden Wuchs' ('Capital, however, is of the utmost beauty. Not even multiplication detracts from its excellent stature') (Nora, p. 26).⁹ The growth of capital can only be a 'beautiful' thing, it would seem, but a woman 'growing' can only mean either that she is getting fat, or that she is pregnant, in either case 'amounting' to a decrease in attractiveness.

Although an understanding and enjoyment of *Nora* are fully possible with no prior knowledge of Ibsen's plays, it is clear that these quotations are more

than simply 'raisins in the cake' and that a structural analysis of the play cannot ignore them.¹⁰ Such an analysis is beyond the scope of the present essay and has been undertaken elsewhere.¹¹ Before looking more closely at the political context of Jelinek's play, however, it is useful to expose some aesthetic and political points of comparison regarding these two texts. Ibsen's Naturalist exploration of Nora's situation was concerned to present real people in all their psychological depth: "Ich schreibe keine Rollen, ich schildere Menschen", hatte Ibsen immer betont und sich geweigert, seine Figuren zu Sprachrohren irgendeiner politischen Richtung erklären zu lassen' ("I don't write roles, I portray people", Ibsen always stressed, refusing to have his figures proclaimed as mouth pieces for any political orientation).¹² Various lobbies had tried to cast Ibsen's play as a manifestation or proof of their ideas, most persuasively, of course, the women's movement. Both the claim that he was furthering the women's cause and the appropriation of his ideas by the Social Democrats, who saw his play as presenting some of their own criticisms of the bourgeois state, were vehemently repudiated by Ibsen, and successive generations of Ibsen critics have taken him at his word, at least on the first of these counts. Joan Templeton, however, is one critic who endeavours to redress the de-gendering of *A Doll's House* by those who argue that Nora is something of an 'Everyman': '... to say that Nora Helmer stands for the individual in search of his or her self, besides being a singularly unhelpful and platitudinous generalisation, is wrong, if not absurd. For it means that Nora's conflict has essentially nothing to do with her identity as a nineteenth-century married woman, a married woman, or a woman.'¹³

Remarkably, Elfriede Jelinek's play has been beset by exactly the same misunderstanding. At every opportunity Jelinek has stated her Marxist view of society and has tried to shake off the label of 'women's writing', or, more disparagingly in German, *Frauenliteratur*: 'Daß man mich [...] als Vertreterin von "Frauenliteratur" bezeichnet, kann ich nicht akzeptieren, obwohl ich meine, daß man sich der Frauen schon besonders annehmen muß' ('I cannot accept being described as a representative of "women's literature", although I do think that women deserve special attention'). In this interview with Josef-Hermann Sauter, she goes on to point out that 'wie man weiß, gibt es keinen Mann, der so arm, ausgebeutet und kaputt ist, daß er nicht noch jemanden hätte, der noch ärmer dran ist, nämlich seine Frau' ('as we know, there is no man who is so poor, so exploited and worn out that he doesn't have somebody else who is still worse off - his wife').¹⁴ This is a feminist condition which Jelinek places on her Marxism: certainly she believes that class struggle and the fight against capitalism are prerequisites for women's emancipation and that this will not be an automatic consequence of a socialist society, but she is also aware that women are at present consistently worse off in all classes and societies. Her favourite dictum is in fact reiterated by one of the factory girls in *Nora*, who says: 'Es ist keiner so niedrig, daß er nicht noch etwas Niedrigeres hätte, seine Frau' ('nobody is so low that he doesn't have something even lower than himself - his wife') (*Nora*, p. 22).

In line with these general principles, Jelinek insists that her play is 'nicht so sehr ein ausschließlich feministisches, als vielmehr ein politisches Stück, ein

Stück übers Kapital' ('not so much an exclusively feminist play but rather a political one, a play about capital').¹⁵ The distinction between political, on the one hand, and feminist, on the other, is indeed misleading, but it is not surprising that Jelinek has had to clarify her intentions, since *Nora* presents almost exclusively the oppression of *women*, both in the working and petty-bourgeois classes, using the 'Arbeiterinnen' ('women workers') and Nora respectively to exemplify these. The social situation of the 'Vorarbeiter' ('foreman') is not explored, and his lines focus entirely on Nora as an object of love and as a sexual commodity. But Jelinek does not present her female characters as somehow constituting a 'class' in their own right; the differences between Nora and her co-workers in terms of intellect and class background are made clear. As Evelyn Reed explains: 'to oppose women as a class against men as a class can only result in a diversion of the real class struggle.'¹⁶ The original text was severely cut for both the Graz and Vienna scripts and the passages cut were mainly the longer and more overtly 'political' ones dealing with questions of capital. This produced a leaner play, but one which, despite Jelinek's description of it as a play about capital, now looks to be more about feminism than about class issues. In an interview on the eve of the March 1992 production in Vienna, Wolfgang Herles asked some of the actors whether they did not find Jelinek's critique of capitalism dated and therefore no longer credible. Their response to this indicated that this aspect had been cut severely enough for them not to have to consider it - 'Die Kapitalismuskritik ist weitgehend rausgestrichen' - and they had understood the battle of the sexes in exactly the way Jelinek had intended: 'Irgendwo spielt bei uns auch eine Kritik an der Frau sehr stark mit. Es kommen hier die Männer nicht sehr gut weg, aber die Frauen auch nicht. Nora ist nicht nur ein Opfer' ('The critique of capitalism has largely been cut. We think there's quite a strong criticism of women, too. The men come off pretty badly, but so do the women. Nora isn't only a victim').¹⁷

To return to Ibsen's aesthetic 'manifesto', 'Ich schreibe keine Rollen, ich schildere Menschen' ('I don't write roles, I portray people'), it may be seen that Jelinek's own is diametrically opposed to this. She openly calls her characters, or rather figures, 'Schablonen, Bedeutungsträger, nur Repräsentanten' ('stencils, conveyors of meaning, mere representatives'), and explains that this is part of her exaggerated, 'black and white' style. Acknowledging her indebtedness to Brecht she explains that this exaggeration is carried out so as to produce a sharper picture of reality and one which is thus easier to understand.¹⁸ This is just one of the characteristics which Jelinek has borrowed from the Brechtian 'Lehrstück', with which her drama has been compared. Many of her characters bear generic names, and the main characters, although given individual names such as Nora, Weygang and Helmer, have a representative function, as do 'die Arbeiterinnen' or 'der Vorarbeiter'. Nora's self-introduction at the opening of the play, too, is reminiscent of the introductions by, for example, the 'Lehrer' ('teacher'), 'Ich bin der Lehrer' ('I am the teacher'), or by 'der junge Genosse' ('the young comrade'), 'Ich bin der Sekretär des Parteihauses' ('I am the secretary of the party headquarters') in *Der Jasager (He Who Said Yes)* and *Die Maßnahme (The Measures Taken)* respectively.¹⁹ As in the original opening to Brecht's *Der*

Ozeanflug (*The Flight over the Ocean*), Jelinek's radio play, *Ballade von drei wichtigen Männern sowie dem Personenkreis um sie herum* (*The Ballad of Three Important Men as well as the Circle of People Around Them*), begins with Lindbergh introducing himself: 'My name is Charles Lindbergh'.²⁰ As in Brecht this is an 'epic' device, a barrier between the stage and the audience designed to alienate and to promote critical reflection.

In the most recent production of Jelinek's play in Vienna (premiered on 8 March 1992), a Brechtian-style narrator introduced each scene after playing a few discordant bars on her violin. In addition, the Volkstheater producer Emmy Werner used a wide range of songs to punctuate the text; while the desired effect may have been alienation, however, the result was far from being so. The songs were mostly well known – ranging from 'Somewhere over the Rainbow' and 'Maria' (from *West Side Story* but sung to the name Nora), to 'Tomorrow Belongs to Me' (*Cabaret*). Often these were only small snippets, or first phrases, and served less to disrupt the action than to make the audience laugh. It is doubtful whether the Viennese public picked up on the producer's cynical parody of media reality in these songs and it is more likely that they enjoyed them for the brief 'sing-along' opportunity they afforded.²¹

Whereas Brecht conceived the 'Lehrstück' as 'an instrument of political and moral (but also aesthetic) education, designed to help the performers come to terms, in various ways, with the kind of problem represented in the action of the plays', the political and moral education of the actors themselves is not an express part of Jelinek's aesthetic programme.²² We have already seen that actors in the 1992 production reproduced more or less a Jelinekian understanding of the action. Petra Fahrnländer, however, who played Nora in the world premiere in Graz, had a very traditional understanding of gender roles and Jelinek's play did not help her to a more enlightened understanding: 'Emanzipiert? Was heißt das eigentlich? Sich gleichstellen mit dem männlichen Geschlecht? Das ist nicht möglich. Die Frau bekommt die Kinder, nicht der Mann' ('Emancipated? What does that actually mean? Being equal with the male sex? That's not possible. The woman has the children, not the man').²³

Emmy Werner came up with a brilliant strategy to make the part of Nora itself alienating. By dividing it among five actresses, she made it difficult for the audience to identify with Nora as a character and ensured that the stress for both actresses and audience fell instead on the many different roles which she has to play. *Nora* takes on the feel of a 'Stationendrama' as the first actress departs as wife, the next allows herself to be seduced by Weygang, a different one again lives with him, a fourth becomes the 'Domina' torturer, a fifth turns to prostitution and the last 'Station', the return to wife and mother, is played once more by the first actress. For Sibylle Fritsch, this division emphasises the contemporary relevance of Jelinek's play: 'Nora '92: eine multiple Persönlichkeit – die Fließbandarbeiterin, die Geliebte, die Domina in schwarzer Reizwäsche und Lederstiefeln, die Nobelprostituierte, die Heimkehrerin schließlich als Mutter, Hausfrau und Textilhändlerin zugleich, die Schizophrenie der Postmoderne, die allen Frauen Flexibilität und Rollenvielfalt aberverlangt' ('Nora 92: a multiple personality – production line worker, mistress, dominatrix in sexy

black underwear and leather boots, high class prostitute, homemaker and finally mother, housewife and textiles dealer all in one. Such is the schizophrenia of the postmodern age, which demands flexibility and a variety of roles from all women.') Fritsch finds the 'class war' language of Jelinek's play old-fashioned but feels that the political realities of the 1990s breathe fresh life into the 'scheinbar abgedroschenen Thesen von der Unterdrückung der Frauen durch Kapitalismus und Patriarchat' ('seemingly hackneyed theories of the oppression of women by capitalism and patriarchy').²⁴

Inspired by the political atmosphere of the 1970s, set in the 1920s and performed again, after a gap of eleven years, in the 1990s: just what are the temporal references in Jelinek's play and what function do they fulfil? The present-tense allusions to Hitler and Mussolini as men whose ideas were influencing political thought at the time are obvious references, as are the 'Anklänge an den frühen deutschen Faschismus' ('musical reminders of early German fascism') (*Nora*, p. 62). The anti-Socialist laws were in force in the lifetime of Jelinek's workers, it would seem. Eva, the brightest of the working women, and possibly Jelinek's only positive (i.e. politically aware) figure, reminds them of the books that were banned during this time: 'Erinnert ihr euch noch an die Zeit der Sozialistengesetze? Bebel's *Frau und der Sozialismus* und das *Kapital* von Karl Marx wurden als staatsfeindlich verboten' ('Do you still recall the days of the anti-Socialist laws? Bebel's *Women and Socialism* and Karl Marx's *Capital* were banned as subversive literature by the government') (*Nora*, p. 53). She also reminds them of comrades who died in the May Day demonstrations (*Nora*, p. 51). But the workers are not to be infected by Eva's cynicism and show a blind faith in the 'social democracy' (of Weimar) when she tries to convince them that there is substance in the rumoured closure of the factory (*Nora*, p. 49). Her prophecies do nevertheless seem a little before their time as she warns her colleagues – in the 1920s – that they will have to provide 'Gold für Eisen, dann Kinder für den Frontkampf' ('Gold for iron and then children for the front line') (*Nora*, p. 11).

In the radio play version, the 'Arbeiterinnen' protest 'Noch haben wir das Recht auf Nichtarbeit nicht errungen' ('We haven't yet won the right not to work') (*Frauenhörspiele*, p. 173), a comment which may seem at first sight to be merely a flippant remark, reversing the familiar feminist preoccupation with women's employment. However, when one considers that 'in 1915 the ADF [Allgemeiner Deutscher Frauenverein] ('General German Women's Association') [...] switched its sixty-year commitment to protective legislation and the right to work to "protection from work"', the workers' bourgeois aspirations seem more plausible.²⁵

The above are just some of the allusions which situate the political context of the play. Some of the allusions are common knowledge and will be recognised by the audience. Some specific ones, however, such as the reference to Hugo Stinnes, whom Weygang admires for his 'Zusammenschluß des Elektrizitäts-Trüsts von Siemens-Schuckert mit den Kohle- und Eisenzufuhren der Rheinelbe zu diesem Superkartell' ('joining the Siemens-Schuckert electricity trust and the Rheinelbe coal and iron supplies to make that super-cartel')

(*Frauenhörspiele*, p. 176), will be more likely not to be familiar. The point, with all these references, is to recreate a 1920s atmosphere of financial intrigue. Industry in this period was becoming increasingly concentrated in the hands of large state monopolies and it was quite usual for bankers to hold government positions and thus be extremely instrumental in the buying, selling and expansion of such industrial concerns. In addition, they would have played a crucial role in the securing of American loans for allocation to large companies.²⁶ Setting the play in modern dress, as happened in the 1979 production, clearly makes a nonsense of such culturally and temporally specific references. Critics have pointed out that some of Jelinek's characters are based on well-known businessmen, a fact which underlines the possible contemporary relevance of her play. Gerald Grassl suggests this is the reason why, initially, no West German theatre was interested in staging Elfriede Jelinek's play: 'Obwohl Elfriede Jelinek das Stück im Auftrag eines BRD-Verlags geschrieben hatte, konnte es bisher in keinem Theater der Bundesrepublik placiert werden, da Wirtschaftsmagnate, die im Stück vorkommen, zu gewissen realen Mächtigen "zu starke Ähnlichkeiten" hätten' ('although Elfriede Jelinek wrote the play for a West German publisher, up until now no West German theatre has come forward to produce it, since the business tycoons in the play bear "such striking similarities" to certain real-life power-brokers').²⁷ One of the men has been identified as Hanns-Martin Schleyer, the president of the West German Federation of Industries, and of the Employers' Federation, who was taken hostage in September 1977 by the Red Army Faction and brutally murdered two weeks later. Given the tip by the playwright herself in the programme leaflet, Lothar Sträter completes the detective work but is appalled by the conclusion he is forced to draw:

Vollends ärgerlich wird es aber, wenn die Autorin im Programmheft ihren allmächtigen und bösartigen Konzernherrn, den Konsul Weygang, als eine Mischung zweier existierender Personen bezeichnet mit dem Zusatz 'von denen die eine nicht mehr existiert, sie ist tot'. Solche kaum verschleierte Denunzierung eines Mannes, der ermordet wurde, führt zu der beklemmenden Frage, ob Frauen wie Elfriede Jelinek, wenn sie mehr Macht hätten, wirklich eine Humanisierung der phallogozentrischen Welt erreichen würden.²⁸ [my emphasis]

[It gets really annoying, however, when, in the programme, the author describes her all-powerful and malicious big business man, Consul Weygang, as a mixture of two existing people, adding, 'one of whom doesn't exist any more, he is dead'. Such a thinly-veiled denunciation of a man who was murdered leads us to the uneasy question of whether women like Elfriede Jelinek, if they had more power, would really have a humanising effect on the phallogocentric world.]

If it is difficult to prove contemporary parallels such as these, the contribution made by the play to debates of the 1970s, '80s and '90s surrounding subjectivity, the individual and feminism is a much more tangible one. Jelinek's Nora labours under the illusion from the very start that the most important thing is to become

a 'Mensch' ('human being'), a project which is doomed to failure. For Nora, the petty-bourgeois housewife, sees her emancipation on an individual level and fails to show solidarity with the other factory workers. Only such solidarity could have led Nora to a fuller understanding of her own alienation and to a fight against the ruling class and its system of rule, capitalism. As the play stands, however, Nora's individual rebellion against her own private circumstances is shown to be fruitless. There is only one moment when it appears that Nora might initiate collective action, but her rallying cry 'Ihr müßt verbrennen, was euch unfrei macht!' ('You must destroy whatever robs you of your liberty') (*Nora*, p. 52) belies her participation in the emancipatory struggle. Jelinek's protagonist does not have a Marxist understanding of her situation. She identifies men as her oppressors, and does not direct her criticism at the 'real' enemy: the entrepreneurs, bankers and government ministers, in short, the bourgeoisie. Nora advocates radical means to attain her liberal goal of self-fulfilment, as she implores others of her sex to turn to violence: 'Die Geschichte der Frau war bis heute die Geschichte ihrer Ermordung. Ich sehe nicht, wie man Ermordung wieder ausgleichen kann, wenn nicht durch einen Akt neuerlicher Gewalt!' ('The history of womankind to this day has been the history of her murder. I don't see how you can compensate for murder other than with renewed violence') (*Nora*, p. 51). But it is not only the radical stance that Jelinek is attacking and her criticism of 'the humanist school' is more pointed still. As Tobe Levin explains, the 'bankruptcy' of liberal humanist conceptions of the free subject is made plain when an 'Arbeiterin' misunderstands the addition of a crèche and library to the factory's facilities as something like the culmination of human progress since the French Revolution. The women are in fact being distracted from taking possible industrial action to prevent the closure of their factory; the crèche is an empty promise and will never have to be built. Levin explains how Nora, too, is duped by the humanist view: 'Claiming, "by working for wages I wanted to transform myself from object to subject. ... And most importantly, ... to become my own person" [*Frauenhörspiele*, p. 171] she echoes the humanist school whose bankruptcy becomes even clearer as both terms, "person" and "woman", are emptied of meaning.'²⁹

This attack on liberal humanism and on its understanding of feminism is ultimately what makes Elfriede Jelinek's play so effective. The name 'Nora' has come to epitomise women's attempt to emancipate themselves and go out into a man's world to fight for recognition and equal rights. But Jelinek demystifies Nora's heroic status and shows her attempt at self-liberation to be misguided. It is not enough to simply liberate oneself from husband and family. 'Endlich ein Stück, das mit der Frauenfrage nicht erbaulich umgeht', Sigrid Löffler exclaims, welcoming at long last a play 'das sich traut, den Softi-Männern und Manzi-Mädchen ihr liebstes Gedankenspielzeug wegzunehmen und kaputtzumachen – die aufmüpfige Zwitscher-Nora' ('At last a play that doesn't make something edifying out of the woman question, a play which dares to take the favourite hobby-horse of wimpish men and women's libbers away from them: rebellious, chirpy little Nora').³⁰ As has been shown by the 'false consciousness' of the 'Arbeiterinnen', however, Jelinek not only deconstructs radical and liberal

humanist feminisms, but also cautions against a too simplistic Marxist understanding of women's oppression. Nora's hope of transforming herself from object to subject through waged employment indicates a twofold misconception on her part. She is labouring under the liberal understanding of subjectivity and under a misunderstanding of the Marxist promotion of women's waged work. This, as Marx and Engels argued, can only be 'the first condition for the liberation of the wife'.³¹ Women's employment, Jelinek's play clearly shows, can only be a first step towards female emancipation and is certainly no automatic solution to their problems.

It can be seen that *Nora* is much more complex than has hitherto been suggested. Parallels between the historical model of 1920s capitalism and its emerging political champion, fascism, and any contemporary economic and political developments are, certainly, difficult to reconstruct. *Was geschah, nachdem Nora ihren Mann verlassen hatte* is important because it helps to establish Elfriede Jelinek's literary-political agenda. In her writing she is concerned throughout to demystify, whether the object of her critique be pornography, her native Austria, the role of the media, or, as is the case here, feminism itself. It is a feminist play, but one which warns against a certain kind of feminism, a liberal humanist feminism, which will ultimately force any 'Nora' back into the hands of her patriarchal capitalist husband.

Notes

1. See Frederick J. Marker and Lise-Lone Marker, *Ibsen's Lively Art* (Cambridge, 1989), p. 46. To avoid confusion, I shall refer to Jelinek's play as *Nora* and use the English title *A Doll's House* for Ibsen's play. References to Ibsen are to *The Collected Works of Henrik Ibsen*, edited and translated by W. Archer, 11 vols (London, 1906), vol. vii.
2. For the controversial reception of these works, see my 'Problems with Porn: Situating Elfriede Jelinek's *Lust*', *GLL*, 44 (1991), pp. 405-15; and 'Demythologising the Austrian "Heimat": Elfriede Jelinek as "Nestbeschmutzer"', in M. McGowan and R. Schmidt (eds), *From High Priests to Desecrators: Contemporary Austrian Literature*, forthcoming.
3. Andreas Rossmann, 'Die Domina als mißbrauchter Wirtschaftsspion', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2 April 1990, p. 35. The critic is using the homonyms 'Lehr' (from 'lehren', to teach) and 'leer' (empty) to suggest the worthlessness of what he sees as Jelinek's moralising endeavours.
4. See Angelika Gundlach's 'Nachwort' to her own translation, *Henrik Ibsen. Ein Puppenheim* (Frankfurt, 1978), pp. 143-5.
5. Both quotations are from Gundlach, *Henrik Ibsen. Ein Puppenheim*, p. 145. Olsen's play was not received very positively: see, for example, Manfred Rieger, 'Nora und die Hafenarbeiter', *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 14 August 1970, p. 9.
6. In this context, someone who opts out of the 'rat race'. Esther Vilar, *Helmer oder Ein Puppenheim. Variationen über ein Thema von Henrik Ibsen* (Frankfurt, Berlin, Vienna, 1981).
7. *Was geschah, nachdem Nora ihren Mann verlassen hatte oder Stützen der Gesellschaften* was first published in *manuskripte* 17, no. 58 (1977/1978), pp. 98-116, then by Sessler (Vienna and Munich, 1980) and finally in Ute Nyssen (ed.), *Theaterstücke* (Cologne, 1984), pp. 6-62. My quotations are from the latter unless otherwise stated.

- Quotations from the radio play version of this material are from a volume of radio plays by women writers published under the title *Was geschah, nachdem Nora ihren Mann verlassen hatte? Acht Hörspiele von Elfriede Jelinek, Ursula Krechel, Friederike Mayröcker, Inge Müller, Erica Pedretti, Ruth Rehmann und Gabriele Wohmann*, edited by Helga Geyer-Ryan (Munich, 1982), pp. 170-205; this will be referred to as *Frauenhörspiele*. English translations are my own.
8. *Clara S.* and *Burgtheater* are also published in Ute Nyssen (ed.), *Theaterstücke* (Cologne, 1984).
 9. This is her stated intention. See Sibylle Fritsch, 'Die fünffache Nora', *profil*, 11, 9 March 1992, pp. 92-3.
 10. This is indeed the premise of Herman Meyer's *The Poetics of Quotation in the European Novel* (Princeton, 1968); see p. 4.
 11. See my Ph.D. thesis 'Rewriting Reality: Elfriede Jelinek and the Politics of Representation' (Southampton, 1990), for a discussion of the important theoretical and political questions governing the use of quotation, borrowing, plagiarism and so on.
 12. Angelika Gundlach, *Henrik Ibsen. Ein Puppenheim*, p. 148.
 13. Joan Templeton, 'The *Doll House* Backlash: Criticism, Feminism, and Ibsen', *PMLA*, 104 (1989), p. 31.
 14. Josef-Hermann Sauter, 'Interviews mit Barbara Frischmuth, Elfriede Jelinek, Michael Scharang', *Weimarer Beiträge*, 27, no. 6 (1981), pp. 99-128.
 15. Quoted in Stefan Makk, 'Ein politisches Stück, ein Stück übers Kapital', *Kleine Zeitung*, Graz, 6 December 1979, p. 20.
 16. Evelyn Reed, quoted in Alison Jaggar, *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* (Brighton, 1983), p. 102. Josef-Hermann Sauter interviews Jelinek on the subject of her politics in 'Interviews mit österreichischen Autoren'.
 17. Wolfgang Herles, 'Fünf Wochen für fünf Noras', *Der Standard*, 7/8 March 1992, p. 12.
 18. See münchener literaturarbeitskreis, 'gespräch mit elfriede jelinek', in *mamas pfirsiche*, 9/10 (Münster, 1978), pp. 171-81.
 19. See Bertolt Brecht, *Fünf Lehrstücke*, ed. Keith A. Dickson (London, 1969), p. 45 and p. 64.
 20. *Ballade von drei wichtigen Männern sowie dem Personenkreis um sie herum*, in Elfriede Jelinek, *Die endlose Unschuldigkeit* (Munich, 1980), p. 17. See Brecht, *Fünf Lehrstücke*, p. xix for the Brecht quotation.
 21. 'Tomorrow Belongs to Me' was used more as a realist device. This was the song playing on the radio which Nora is told not to switch off. The fascist associations of this song - known to the audience through the film *Cabaret* - are likely to be more obvious than the 'marching songs' of the original. Far from leaving members of the audience with a bitter taste in their mouths, however, some of them walked out humming this catchy tune to themselves. I was left wondering whether they had completely missed the point.
 22. Ronald Speirs, *Brecht's Early Plays* (London/Basingstoke, 1982), p. 175.
 23. Quoted in Erna Lackner, 'Grazer Nora im Fernsehen: Wie sehr ist Petra F. eine Nora?' *Kleine Zeitung*, 27 November 1979, p. 18.
 24. Sibylle Fritsch, 'Die fünffache Nora', p. 92.
 25. See Prue Chamberlayne, 'The Mothers' Manifesto and Disputes over Mütterlichkeit', *Feminist Review*, 35 (1990), p. 17. This passage proves that the radio play is not simply a shortened version of the stage play since this idea does not feature in the latter.
 26. I draw my information here from Helmut Burg et al., *Der Imperialismus der BRD* (Berlin, 1971), and from extremely helpful discussions with Jill Lewis.
 27. Gerald Grassl commenting on a reading of the play, 'Frauen und andere Unterdrückte', n.p., 20 April 1978.
 28. Lothar Sträter, 'Die Abenteuer der befreiten Nora', *Mannheimer Morgen*, 16 October

1979. The reviewer is making a pun on the term 'verschleiern', which means 'to hide' or 'to veil'.
29. See Tobe Levin's analysis of the radio version, 'Jelinek's Radical Radio: Deconstructing the Woman in Context', *Women's Studies International Forum*, 14, nos. 1/2 (1991), pp. 85-97 (p. 91).
30. Sigrid Löffler, 'Nora, ganz ohne Puppenheim', *profil*, 42, 15 October 1979, p. 78.
31. Quoted in Paul Chao, *Women Under Communism: Family in Russia and China* (New York, 1977), p. 51.

Havel's Satirical Theatre

J. P. Stern

In what sense are Havel's plays avant-garde theatre? The term, it seems, was first used in Paris in 1845 by Gabriel-Désiré Laverdant, a disciple of Charles Fourier of pre-Marxist fame, and denoted an art – in literature as well as painting – which would have the same revolutionary relation to existing bourgeois art as the Communist revolution would have to bourgeois society. Baudelaire thought the term merely demonstrated the French critics' inveterate attachment to military clichés. Lenin called the CP 'the avant-garde of the proletariat', allowing avant-garde art to figure as an analogy to the revolution but no longer as one of its agents. And yet the fervent belief in art as a means of helping in the overthrow of the ruling class as well as a means by which to enlighten the proletariat – this fervent belief in the double function of avant-garde art persisted in Germany into the early 1930s.

The most important moment in the history of the avant-garde is the suicide of Vladimir Mayakovsky in 1930. It is the point – basely unacknowledged by Brecht, Becher, Seghers and others – when the Revolution's greatest surviving poet acknowledges the reversal of roles: the avant-garde is no longer an agent of the revolution, or even its analogy, but has been declared its enemy and socialist realism (an industrialised form of the old bourgeois realist idyll) has been enthroned as the one and only form tolerated by the regime. The poet Mayakovsky faces the consequences. He had lived just long enough to see the liquidation of every single independent-minded Russian poet who had failed to escape abroad.

It says a good deal for the intellectual and artistic inertia of Russian communism that when Václav Havel comes on the scene in Prague some thirty years later, the situation is apparently unchanged. The heirs of the revolution cultivate the literature of 'reálny socialismus' with its didactic message of factory solidarity, its clichés covering the proletarian fight against 'fascism', its psychology determined by the clichés of the class struggle, and its political content reduced to a few anti-American and anti-German slogans; and the literature of protest – once the literature of the avant-garde – has either emigrated or gone underground.

Václav Havel was born into a bourgeois family in 1936, the year before Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk died, and two years before the death of Masaryk's creation, the First Czechoslovak Republic. Havel's grandfather, an enterprising builder, came to Prague from the Moravian town where Havel's friend Tom Stoppard was born; Havel's father, a civil engineer turned architect and speculative builder, got into debt by putting up one of Prague's prettiest residential suburbs above the river Vltava, and he was popular enough with his workforce to retain a managerial job in the theatre and leisure complex he had built in town, even after the Communist takeover. The cosseted 'master's son' grew up, first in Prague, then in Moravia, with a feeling of undeserved privilege: 'It may seem

© Edinburgh University Press, 1993
Edinburgh University Press Ltd
22 George Square, Edinburgh
Typeset in Linotron Ehrhardt by
Koinonia Ltd, Bury, and
printed in Great Britain by
The University Press, Cambridge

A CIP record for this book is available
from the British Library.

ISBN 0 7486 0436 7

Theatre and Performance
in Austria
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Edited by Ritchie Robertson and Edward Timms
AUSTRIAN STUDIES IV

EDINBURGH UNIVERSITY PRESS