

Intercultural Implications of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*: Experiences with a Production of Ibsen's Play in Mozambique

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Abstract The point of departure for this paper is a discussion of the 2006 production of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* at Teatro Avenida in Maputo, Mozambique. The article consists of reflections on the adaptation processes from one historical and cultural setting—Europe in the late nineteenth century to Mozambique in early twenty-first century. The focus is not so much adaptations as such, but an attempt to come up with some reflections on how a play like *A Doll's House*, where gender roles are important, may provide a theoretical model for how modern societies have changed their perceptions of the relationship between men and women. The adaptation of the play in a particular African context serves as a springboard for principal reflections on what interculturalism implies in relation to dramatic and literary works.

Key words adaptation of drama between cultures; modernisation; drama interculturalism

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In 2006 the theatre group that for twenty years has been central to Mozambican theatre—Mutumbela Gogo—produced *A Doll's House* at its permanent venue Teatro Avenida in Maputo, Mozambique. I participated in the production as a dramaturg, and was part of the process of adapting the play to a contemporary Mozambican situation, as well as following closely the way the actors and the director worked with the play. The production was directed by Manuela Soeiro, and the actors were Isabel Jorge as Nora, Adelino Branquinho in the role of Helmer, Graça Silva as Mrs Linde, and Jorge Vaz as Krogstad, and João Chauque as Dr. Rank. (I shall return to the significance of the names in the production).

First some words about Teatro Avenida and Mutumbela Gogo. The theatre itself is an old cinema in the centre of Maputo, and the possibilities the stage offers is to a certain degree limited by the fact that the theatre was not originally constructed with the purpose of being a proper theatrical arena. This has not, however, prevented the company from staging many impressive productions. The company produce original new Mozambican drama as well as international classics. Of plays that they have late-

ly staged may be mentioned *A Street Car Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams, *Die Räuber* by Friedrich Schiller, and *Miss Julie* by August Strindberg. As a principle the company tries to give their productions of the classics a Mozambican twist. And this was also the intention with the production of *A Doll's House*. But while the Mozambican context is important for the work of Mutumbela Gogo, they are also aware of the significance of maintaining a link to the historical and cultural origins of the plays that they produce.

Thus Mutumbela Gogo's *A Doll's House* was faced with a double challenge—how to make the play relevant for a contemporary Mozambican audience, and also to show how the situation in Mozambique today may be interpreted in the light of developments in the European society, which Ibsen depicted, and which was very different from today's Mozambique. It was this double perspective we wanted to maintain in our production of Ibsen's play. In order to be able to do so, we first had a discussion among those involved in the production of how it was possible to understand the central thematic structures of the play in the light of a modern African society full of contradictions. Already here we had to make an important choice. Ibsen's plays deal with the lives of nineteenth century European bourgeoisie. Which social group in today's Mozambique occupies that particular role? It is obvious that this play does not deal with the lives of the majority of the country's population, which lives in poverty in rural areas, nor is this the life that is lived by the urban poor in Maputo's "bairros". As in 19th century Europe we had to be aware that our production both had to reflect the life of an elite, economically and educationally, as well as appeal to an audience that in some way or other could relate to this life.

Here, however, we had an advantage, and that is linked to the popularity and influence of Brazilian telenovelas in Mozambique. Every night and afternoon there are telenovelas screened on Mozambican television. They are high melodrama, much in the same way that *A Doll's House* may be interpreted. A characteristic phrase often used about Ibsen's drama, but not so often used about melodrama is that it deals with "real people in real situations". However, if we look at it in a different perspective and bearing in mind the melodramatic tradition, the characters of the play differ very little from the usual types found in telenovelas. Borrowing from Raymond William's description in *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht*, the innocent, childlike woman, involved in a desperate deception; the heavy, insensitive husband; the faithful friend; the evil villain who is reformed by love.¹ The main situations are also similar to those found in the melodramatic intrigues of the telenovelas: the guilty secret, sealed lips, a fatal letter, which will reveal it all, the appearance of the villain against a background of idyllic happiness. Maybe the secret of the play is that both the plot conventions and the stock figures from melodrama carry over into serious psychological topical drama. And the same may be said about the Brazilian telenovelas.

For us the link to Brazil had another advantage, and that was that a modern Mozambican audience is used to watching and identifying with settings and social situations that are different than their own. Many Brazilian telenovelas depict the lives of a modern Brazilian upper or middle class, which is very different from even the lives of the Mozambican elite, but which nevertheless a Mozambican audience may relate to

and recognize. Consequently we decided to give our *A Doll's House* a Brazilian touch, and link it to the world of the telenovelas.

Now Brazil is important for other reasons as well. Like Mozambique it is a Portuguese speaking country, and while the influence from Brazil is not as strong as it is in other Lusophone parts of Africa, there still are strong links. Lusophone African elites study in Brazil. Rich people may go there for medical treatment. Brazilian music has a certain influence. Mozambicans and Angolans go there to establish business contacts and import fashion. There is a carnival tradition in Mozambique though not as strong as in Brazil. Indeed the name Mutumbela Gogo has its origins in the carnival in the part of Maputo called Mafalala, and it apparently means something like “put on your masks.” So while it is not really relevant for a modern Mozambican elite couple to go to Italy for medical treatment, as Helmer and Nora do in Ibsen's original, they might go to Brazil. And the famous tarantella in Ibsen's play is certainly not a dance that any one has any idea about in Maputo, but the samba is another matter. So we sent Nora and her husband to Brazil, where she learned to dance samba the Brazilian way.

The next challenge was to find names that would ring a bell in Mozambique. Nora was fine. That is a name in the Lusophone world. In Mozambique—not very common—but it exists. Torvald Helmer, however, not a chance. But who is Helmer? He is a banker and in Mozambique people in finance often have a background in India, and many are Muslims, and the fabulous actor Branquinho, who had the part of Helmer, is of light complexion. Consequently Helmer had to have a Muslim name, Omar Mussagy. And Mrs Kristine Linde? The first name Christina—fine. But Linde? In Norwegian it is the name of tree. Consequently we used the word for tree in Portuguese, which is a common name in the Lusophone world—Madeira. Fru Kristine Linde became a senhora Christina Madeira. And then Nils Krogstad. Nils is a name that signifies a traditional Norwegian common rural background. So the first name was not a problem. We choose Joaquim, a very common Portuguese name. Krogstad is also a name with rural significance in Norwegian. Because it starts with a K sound, We choose Cossa, a suitably Mozambican Portuguese name. And Doctor Rank? The name connotes a certain straightness and clarity, a bit like a twig of a tree, so we went for the Portuguese name Ramos, which means a branch of a tree.

We could of course have set the play as in the original at Christmas, but people do not really go to masked balls at Christmas in Mozambique, although they may certainly do so during carnival. And this also provided us with yet another Brazilian link. So we changed the time of the year of the play to carnival time.

The next challenge we faced with was to trim the play. We could not have a production that lasted much more than one and a half hours. At Teatro Avenida there are no intermissions. Where to cut? The first act is obviously more long-winded than the others, and also less dramatic. Therefore we cut more lines in the first act than in the others. The correctness of this decision became apparent when we used the entire text in a Portuguese translation as our basis. For an audience whose usual period of attention is limited to the length of an ordinary film, the first act of *A Doll's House*, which is rather complex in providing background information and explanations was clearly

too much. But the next two acts have more drama and suspense. There is some clowning when Dr. Ramos gets drunk, and the eroticism between him and Nora has a strong appeal. And not least the intense final melodramatic act worked well. Incidentally it is echoed in telenovelas. Adaptation is not only about transforming a play from one cultural setting to another. It is also about drama and media conventions.

A Doll's House is a drama with a woman as the central character is about the conflict between women and men and their different views of existence and society. This conflict represented a profound challenge to nineteenth century European society as a whole. As it does today, but it also is very much a challenge to social roles in the modernizing societies in the early twenty-first century on the African continent. Here I consciously use the word modernizing, because what makes Ibsen's play so adaptable is not only that it deals with the role of women in a society where traditional values are pitted against new. It deals with an important feature of modern existence, which also is an important theme on Ibsen's work, namely the widening gap between an objective culture and the subjective existence of the individual. Nora's development implies the growth of an individual consciousness in which the objective culture of society is thoroughly male, even if this society may pay lip service to the role of women, and have women in important positions. The prime minister of Mozambique in 2006 was a woman. The problem, however, is more profound, and this is what Ibsen delineated in his first notes to *A Doll's House*, namely that there were two sets of rules in society, one for men and another for women. And we printed these notes in the programme for the production.

The Mozambican interpretation of *A casa da boneca* thus implied two perspectives. The first was related to the clear gender aspect of the play, which was emphasized in the production. The second one had to do with the structure of feeling related to living between cultures and between mores—one more traditional, one more modern. And this is a theme that cuts across gender boundaries. The coming of modernity is fundamental to the conflicts of societies that straddle a traditional existence and a modern one, and where people migrate constantly between two sets of values: one in the city, and one in their background often in rural society.

This is a move that often has taken place within the life of one individual, and certainly something that implies differences within families. This development is very pronounced in contemporary Africa. It formed a background to our interpretation of the play, though it was implicit in our staging, and never as clearly pronounced as it has been in other African productions of *A Doll's House*, for example the one that was performed in Zambia in 2006. In that production the setting of the intrigue was moved to a village. The play was adapted by Chela Chilala, given a new title *Forbidden ground*, and was directed by Benne Banda.

We decided to maintain the drama's links to the coming of a steadily more complex and differentiated society with diverse partial systems and functions of economic, social and cultural character. This differentiation is particularly pronounced in relation to the growth of the modern nuclear family. Contrary to what is the case in traditional African communities, the new modern existence implies a change in the demarcation between what is public and what is private and intimate. In the modern Mo-

zambique of the elite there is a tension between the public and private spheres, and the barriers between different types of behaviour and activity that are appropriate in each of these. There are clear demarcations between genders at the same time as new social roles for women do emerge. This is what we wanted to highlight by giving our version of *A Doll's House* a modern, urban, Mozambican atmosphere.

The role of art and literature in contemporary global modernities is to express the experiences of encountering this new way of life in a manner that combines the perspectives of the great history of society with the small biographical history of the individual. It is part of the strength of Ibsen's drama that it recreates how individual encounters with the rapid conditions of modern change result in psychological ambivalence as well as feelings of uncertainties and contradictions. His dramas pose the questions: How is the individual to understand his or her position in a new social and historical situation? What are the backgrounds and the futures of the individual and society? Is there going to be constant change, or will some permanent features of existence remain the same? It is this sense of non-simultaneity in global modernities that explains why Ibsen's dramas feel to be so much part of the structures of feeling of cultures so different from where they had their origin. This feature makes his plays uniquely relevant to the understanding of how to face modernity all over the world.

Half a year after the *A Doll's House* production, the Swedish playwright and novelist Henning Mankell, who for many years has worked with Teatro Avenida, wrote and directed a play with the same company based on *A Doll's House*. The play was called *As filhas da Nora* (*Nora's Daughters*) and has as its focus how the three daughters of the Mozambican Nora meet at her grave ten years after her death and reflect on their destinies and on Nora's influence. Granted Mankell has changed the gender of Nora's children. His drama is an attempt to explore the situation of modern Mozambican women. The three sisters all have inherited a sense of loss from their mother. They all express incomprehension of her actions. They have not met her, only caught glimpses of her, and every time they have tried to find her, she has just disappeared. What binds them together is a sense of loss, which they when they were young, compensated for by among others singing pop songs in the style of the Supremes, something they also do at the end of the one-hour long play.

The three sisters, whose name incidentally are the same as the three actors who portrayed them in the original production—Graça,² Isabel³ and Yolanda⁴—have lived different lives, and disagree between themselves about how life is and ought to be. What keeps them together, however, is the sense that they share a common feminine destiny, in which they do not really control their own lives, and here the parallel to their mother is explicit.

Graca is the oldest daughter, and she is a typical Mozambican rural woman. She has married a small hold farmer. She has two children thirteen and fifteen years old. Like many women in agriculture she does most of the work. She brings up the children. She toils in the fields. But she knows that her role in society is important. She provides the food that others eat. Her husband does not treat her well, and she is poor. Her dreams of a quiet and fulfilled life away from the city have certainly not become true. Yolanda the second daughter is a typical wife from the city. She is preg-

nant with her second child. But now she lives alone, because she has discovered that her husband, who does not provide her with enough money for running the household and school-fees for the children, has a second family. He drinks and he has cheated on her and established a permanent relationship with another woman, who has a daughter with the same name as her daughter. She is bitter, but still she does not really want to divorce him. The third sister Isabel taunts her to do just that. She is apparently the free woman. She is elegant. She comes to their meeting speaking on a cell phone. It soon becomes clear that she is a high-class call girl. She asks her sisters: "What is the real difference between us? We lived different lives, but when all comes to all, we are the same."

The sisters quarrel between themselves, and they refer to Nora, whom they say wanted to live a life of her own, but she is both a heroine and also guilty of being without a full life. Isabel proposes that the three sisters move together in her house with the children. And another sister answers: "But that would imply a war against men." And Isabel answers that that would mean that the men would realize that we as women understand them. In the end Isabel says: "Women do not fight. They discuss, they shout, but they do not fight." So Mankell's text like Ibsen's is about the difficulties of how to realize individual liberation within a society that puts great emphasis on communal and collective togetherness.

A small final note on these two productions: in 2008 and 2009 Mutumbela Gogo had great success with another play about the relationship between women and men and the contradictions of class that date from the same period as Ibsen's play. Henning Mankell adapted and directed *Miss Julie* by August Strindberg under the title *A Menina Julia*. And that production focused on the same conflicts of sex and individuality and power that also play such a central part in *A Doll's House*.

The Maputo adaptation of Ibsen's play, which kept the essential structure and elements of the original, and Mankell's follow-up raise some interesting principal issues of encounters between cultures and intercultural adaptations of theatre and other art forms. Practically every single individual in today's world regardless of continent, status, age, education, how they earn their living, religion and other forms of distinctive characteristics, is in some way or other part of a modernizing experience. All cultures are in some way or other hybrid. They are a result of the meeting with other cultures—technologies, values, art, and entertainment.

To me the issue of multiculturalism lies not in the notion of multiplicity, but in the concept of culture.⁵ Consequently the question of cultural identity is a very problematic one. It is possible to pose the question thus: Is to maintain a cultural identity something that creates a boundary, that closes off from influence from the outside? Is culture something one subjects oneself to as an individual? Is collective identity stronger than what you possess as an individual? Does culture precede the individual and is it above the choices of the individual? Or on the other hand: Is cultural identity something that is created in a meeting between individuals and groups, and something that we open up for through a fundamental respect for the way others chose to create cultural identities. In intercultural work it is necessary to criticize essentialist understandings of cultures. The reason why we are able to understand, appreciate, and

adapt art originates in other cultures and epochs is that literary works and particularly drama in a striking way express experiences and conflicts that we also encounter in our existence. And we have many existences that change with time and contexts.

One of the most fundamental issues in the debate over cultural identities is the one which has to do with gender roles. It is around this question that the conflict between closed cultural identities and open ones comes to the forefront. Gender identities are fundamental. When they are challenged they reveal all the oppressive structures that often exist in cultures that profess to essential identities. Thus the relationship between men and women in societies that undergo modernizing changes is thus maybe the most important theme for understanding such social transformations. What happens in many African societies including Mozambique can serve as a pertinent illustration of this. That is why *A Doll's House* functions as such a clear expression of social and gender identities and of raising the issue of what freedom and independence imply.

Ibsen's dramas from the late nineteenth century confront modern globalized audiences with questions of whether it is society or the individuals that are divided and disharmonious. Why do the characters that move on the stage and that the audiences recreate in their minds suffer problems and challenges so similar to their own? How have these people and their situations come about? They are fiction, and Ibsen created them in the nineteenth century, but the distresses they face are real enough. They are intrinsically linked to social and psychological existences not only of Ibsen's period, which may be characterised as the first modernity, but also of the global modernities that exist all over the world at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

[Notes]

1. Williams Raymond, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1971).
2. Graça Silva.
3. Isabel Jorge. In later productions Lucrecia Paco took over the role of Isabel.
4. Yoland Fumo.
5. For a discussion of this see among others: Todd Gitlin, *The Twilight of Common Dreams. Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars* (New York: Henry, Holt, 1995); Jens-Martin Eriksen & Fredrik Stjernfelt, *Adskillelsens politikk* (København: Lindhardt og Ringhof, 2008); Amartya Sen, *Identity & Violence* (London: Penguin, 2006) and *The Illusion of Destiny* (London: Penguin, 2007).

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