

A Doll's House

By Henrik Ibsen. In a version by Frank McGuinness. With Hannah Yelland, Owen McDonnell, Bosco Hogan. Donna Dent, Phelim Drew, Judith Roddy & Maureen Toal. Directed by László Marton The Abbey Theatre until 28 May.

Any version of a classic play will always be judged by its ability to offer a fresh, bold and innovative approach to the subject matter at hand. Frank McGuinness's attempt at breathing new life into Ibsen's 'A Doll's House' serves up mixed results and leaves you wondering what other ways the text could have been enlivened rather than appreciating the version presented before you.

Written in 1879, 'A Doll's House' overturned traditional family values as the supposed obedient and caring mother Nora Helmer (Hannah Yelland) walks out on her husband Torvald (Owen McDonnell) and three young children to begin life as an independent woman. An act of benevolence on her part to assist her husband in a time of need was not well received. The fact that the gift was obtained by less than honest means further horrified the proud protector of the homestead and successful businessman.

Ibsen's idea of the free-spirited female rising up from the clutches of subservience has had its followers, with O'Casey's renowned trilogy acutely reinforcing the strength of the female in difficult conditions surrounded by weak-willed men, a perfect example.

However, does this idea work as a serious and engaging form of theatre for today's audience? The equality of the sexes and the emergence of terms like 'homemaker' on the one hand, coupled with the availability of divorce on the other, underpins the convergence of roles and the freedom of one to seek a new existence within the familial structure.

In attempting to heighten the drama, McGuinness presents Nora as somebody of varying personalities and perhaps this could have been developed more. She is carefree and kind on the one hand, yet devious and somewhat deranged on the other. We see her as a graceful dancer in one scene to a picture of stony-faced defiance at the end. The journey could have been injected with more colour.

Owen McDonnell's playing of Torvald is excellent as he moves from the smug, self-satisfied husband to the pathetic portrayal of disbelief. His view on the world could have been more developed. Also engaging was Phelim Drew as the flawed, but ultimately consciousness Krogstad, who resists any harmful intervention. Bosco Hogan as the dying Dr Rank, who has sexual feelings for Nora presents us with the notion of the compassionate soul idling along surrounded by those who espouse self-serving ideals. Somewhere in the middle is Kristine Linde (Donna Dent), who while wanting to better herself is aware of Nora's secrets and advises her accordingly.

If these supporting roles had been developed more, the potential for something absorbing was there. You just wish the writer and director Laszlo Marton took more risks. That said, the actors handled the somewhat clunky script with aplomb, while Thomas C Hase's lighting design more than served to create a particular mood and a sense of foreboding.

Jim McMahan