Staging of Ibsen play overcomes slow pacing and poor performances

ROSSMERSHOLM
By Henrik Ibsen.
At the New Ehrlich Theatre.

By JULIAN WEST

Not Ibsen's greatest work, or his best known, "Rosmersholm" is nevertheless an important early play. And it is certainly Ibsen, heavy and thick, with impenetrable shadows and a dimly revealed plot.

What plot there is seems to be a little about politics, more about liberation and innocence. It was ambitious of the New Ehrlich Theatre to tackle it in the centenary of its first production.

The production succeeds, though not without a few problems. First, they have not managed to overcome Ibsen's pacing. The first two acts contain some pretty clumsy expositions, and, to be frank, drag to no uncertain degree. But they lay the necessary groundwork for the psychological drama of the second half, and it is after the interval that the play becomes gripping.

In a little studio theater it is easy to hear the audience, and there were more than a few fidgeters at the close of the play. I do not understand why; perhaps they had not been adequately warned of what to expect. "Rosmersholm" is not action-packed; it is a relentless psychological pursuit of its characters. Those carefully scrutinized include John Rosmer, a hereditary estate owner and a fallen priest; and his intellectual companion Rebecca West. Even the skeleton in his closet, a wife who went mad and killed herself long before the start of the play, comes under the microscope.

The second problem concerned the portrayal of the characters. It was not that the acting was bad, it was simply a little misguided. Dr. Kroll (Charles Weinstein), who contributes to Rosmer's downfall through a mudslinging campaign, was well portrayed, but was too friendly and outgoing by half. He is something like J.R. Ewing, smiling amiably at his friends, even while Terry Stoeker as Rebecca West and double crossing them.

Rosmer himself (Vincent P. Mahler) was suffused with his sought-after inner peace to such an extent that he always had a sort of grin on his face. In the face of possible death and disgrace he remained cheery rather than resigned.

Much better performances were turned in by the women. Terry Stoecker was a fine Rebecca, the woman with secrets from everyone. After confessing to Rosmer about the past, she has a splendid moment alone to consider the future. Equally good Vince Mahler as John Rosmer in "Rosmersholm" was Chris Fudala, as Mrs. Helse, the longtime housekeeper, who gave her opinions on a number of occasions, she made the best of a few awkward scenes, including a hideously predictable final speech.

What made the production worthwhile, however, was not the acting but the staging. A simple but effective set was enlarged into a several performing areas by the use of spotlights which never quite provided adequate lighting. The resulting gloom deepened the darkness of Rosmer's labyrinth.

When faces emerged from the shadows, they were frequently half-lit, neatly paralleling their speeches, which frequently revealed only one side of a character. In this play everyone has something to hide, and they were provided with plenty of shadows to hide in. Only Rebecca's blue dress relieved the starkness of the men's black-and-white costumes.

"O how happy I would be if I could kindle a little bit of life in this barbarous darkness," Rosmer says. The New Ehrlich production does, indeed, kindle a little.

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