Little Eyolf
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October 2004

Hendrik Ibsen's (1828-1906) *Little Eyolf* was published and first performed in the winter of 1894. It thus falls midway, in the series of his late plays that begins with *The Lady from the Sea* (1888) and ends with *When We Dead Awaken* (1899) . In these plays Ibsen turns away from the searing social criticism of *Ghosts* , *The Dolls House* and *The Enemy of the People* , (works that gave him as international reputation as the most renowned, and most vilified playwright of the 19th century) , to the creation of a theater of magic and dreams more in line with that of his Swedish contemporary August Strindberg, and of his own earlier works *Brand* and *Peer Gynt* . Among these latter works, *Little Eyolf* is the most successful in terms of combining the scientific spirit of Naturalism with new currents in European Expressionism and Symbolism absorbed in his 27-year self-imposed exile from Norway. (*Expressionism, Art and Idea* , pgs. 44, 67; all references are to the Bibliography)

Ibsen's insights into human psychology are unfailingly acute, often merciless though not lacking in compassion - (one must however grant a sadistic streak in the soul of a tragedian) - deeply pessimistic, with rare in glimpses of hope or salvation.

***Little Eyolf* is unique in Ibsen's plays. Any production of it must be beset by innumerable difficulties, because of which some commentators have deemed the play, (notably its 3rd Act) a**

failure. Performances in this country are few and far between, nothing at all compared to those of *Ghosts* , *Hedda Gabler* and his other major works. [1]

This notwithstanding, there is a distinguished following of Ibsen scholars, translators and directors, including William Archer, Michael Meyer and Hiermann Weigand who maintain that it is Ibsen's *best* play . Quoting William Archer, Ibsen translator and play director :

" *I rank the play beside, if not above, the very greatest of Ibsen's works, and am only doubtful whether its soul-searching be not too terrible for human endurance in the theater.* " (Archer translation, preface)

Michael Meyer, Ibsen's biographer and translator:

" *Little Eyolf* (1894) is one of Ibsen's least known plays and is, to my mind, the greatest he wrote, at any rate in prose. After a dynamic first act all external action virtually ceases and the characters spend the rest of the play stripping each other of their protective spiritual padding until at the end they are humbled and bare like criminals shaved for execution. "

(*Plays of Ibsen* , trans. Michael Meyer, Forward to *Little Eyolf*)

George Bernard Shaw was powerfully impressed by the play. He wrote more than one review of it and discusses it at length in the *Quintessence of Ibsenism* . (*Shaw and Ibsen* , pgs. 177-183) Quote:

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[1]**To date I've been unable to obtain a copy of the videotape of the BBC production of 1982 , with Anthony Hopkins as Alfred Allmers, Peggy Ashcroft as Asta and Diana Rigg as Rita.**

" ...how we have put off the torture of Little Eyolf as one puts off a visit to the dentist, But the torture tempts us in spite of ourselves. We feel it must be gone through .... "

" Miss Janet Achurch ... jumped at the appalling part of Rita, whom nobody else on the stage dare tackle, for all her 'gold and green forests'..."

"... Miss [Elizabeth] Robins herself will play Asta, the sympathetic sister without whom, I verily believe, human nature could not bear this most horrible play... " **(***The Drama Observed , Vol II* **: November 7, 1896, in the Saturday Review)**

Counter-balancing such observations I want to suggest that ***Little Eyolf*** **is no more unbearable than Sophocles'** ***Oedipus Rex , Antigone , Electra*** **, or Euripedes'** ***Hippolytus , Bacchae*** **or** ***Medea ,*** **which have been in the active repertoire for 25 centuries . GBS continues:**

" Rita ... is one of the heaviest [parts] ever written; any single act would exhaust an actress of no more than ordinary resources. But Miss Achurch was more than equal to the occasion. Her power seemed to grow with its own expenditure. The terrible outburst at the end of the first act did not leave a scrape on her voice (which appears to have the compass of a military band) and threw her into victorious action in that tearing second act instead of wrecking her.. "

" I have seen Mrs. [Patrick] Campbell play the Rat Wife twice, once quite enchantingly, and once disappointingly. On the first occasion ... she played superbly, beautifully: the first note of her voice came as from the spheres into all that suburban prose: she

played to the child with a witchery that might have drawn him not only into the sea, but into her very busom... **" In the next review he comments:**

"*As to Allmers, how could he recommend himself to spectators who saw in him everything that they are ashamed of in themselves...* **"(Ibid November 28, 1896)**

Between this review and the one written December 12, Janet Achurch had been replaced by Mrs. Patrick Campbell. He roundly dismisses her performance as insipid, (which, he notes is why the theater audience loved it) . [2]

Michael Meyer, Henry James and GBS are in agreement that the portrayal of Alfred Allmers as a self-inflated mediocrity would not be likely to appeal to any actor anxious to make a name for himself. This view may be short-sighted: any role, however petty or insignificant, becomes great when greatly performed; and in fact Allmers is not as hopeless as all that. One can even turn the criticism around: it is one of Ibsen's cardinal achievements in this play to depict the sufferings of a commonplace soul crushed by a catastrophe. Meyer goes on to say:

" *Allmers is usually, in practice , either romanticized or, (as with Rosmer) played as sexless; and a sexless or romanticized Allmers and a happy ending are burdens that no production of Little Eyolf can hope to survive. A Doll's House , Ghosts and Hedda Gabler are robust plays; they can be ill-cast, ill-directed,*

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[2]**I'm sure he was right, although Shaw's enthusiasm for the progressive or avant-garde is often little more than a cloak for the stodgy reactionary he in fact was. Shaw is exhilarating when writing on subjects he knew something about, and rather irritating otherwise.**

ill-acted, and yet make a goodish evening. Little Eyolf , like The Lady from the Sea and When We Dead Awaken ,
is fragile ; if it is not done well, one would rather it had not been done at all; performed as it was written to be performed, it is a haunting and memorable experience. **" (Meyer biography, pg. 728)**

The difficulties involved with constructing a production of *Little Eyolf* are formal, technical and structural. Its global conventions are familiar to us from classical Greek tragedy: all violence occurs offstage or sometime in the past. Unlike Shakespeare or Chekhov, the cast is limited to exactly 6 persons, no more or less. There are no minor characters, no servants, gardeners, postmen, on-lookers, rabble . Finally the backdrop of Nordic mythology, ever-present without being made explicit, echo the caprices of the spoiled and jealous gods of the Indo-European religions of the classical world which figure so prominently in Greek tragedy.

Yet *Little Eyolf* is also thoroughly modern . The cosmic dimension appears only as a suggestion, while the active characters, (even the Rat-Wife, clearly the embodiment of legend) are real down the smallest details. Ibsen yields nothing to Stanislavski in his fidelity to emotional authenticity. There are no supernatural interventions - or let us say Ibsen takes the humdrum occurrences of the sort one reads about in the daily papers -
a child falls off a table and is crippled; 9 years later he loses control of his crutch and is drowned; a woman reads an old letter and discovers that she never knew her true father; a man hiking

in the mountains is lost for 24 hours - and puts us in touch with their latent cosmic dimensions.

In plummeting the tragic depths concealed in the banality of everyday life, Ibsen was in the mainstream of European trends, with writers such as Zola, Hauptmann and of course Chekhov, whose perspective on the world was far removed from the playwrights of the ancient world, or the masters of the 16th and 17th centuries.

***Little Eyolf* 's way of combining genres and styles is a challenge to any director. Parenthetically it isn't all that easy to read either. Even after I'd read the script 4 times beginning in June, I understood little about the play beyond its surface narrative. Returning to the text for the fifth time, it began to come together. After the 6th reading I conceded that it was a "good" play. Only with the 7th reading and beyond (parts of it have been consulted 10 times) was I willing to acknowledge that it is a great play, well deserving of the praise that Archer and Meyer give it.**

To the very last the enigmatic Act III withheld its secrets from me . In this I am not alone. Many critics, Henry James among them, thought that the ending ruins the rest of the play. Michael Meyer comments:

"James' objections to the third act of Little Eyolf have been shared by many readers; yet, if properly understood and intelligently interpreted, this act is by no means meagre, nor the solution, as James supposed, simple. The great mistake is to

imagine that Ibsen envisaged the ending as happy. " (Meyer, Ibsen biography, page 247)

We will be returning to an examination of this controversial issue .

One is stimulated by his cross-breeding of late 19th century trends in literature. There is, as stated above, the awe-inspiring Realism for which he is famous. Yet _Little Eyolf_ is also "Expressionist" in the sense of the paintings of Edvard Munch or the plays of Büchner. For the attainment of intense expressive power verisimilitude is distorted by over-reaching hysteria.

The Rat Wife is the first to set the Expressionist tone; she arrives unbidden, a visitation from the realm of saga, legend and ballad, a kind of annunciation in reverse. The play's namesake, Eyolf, is no more real than she, a fabrication of dreams and illusions, allowed a little time to "strut upon the stage" before vanishing into the beyond.

Finally the play is decidedly "Symbolist" in the tradition of Maeterlink and Yeats, the paintings of the pre-Raphaelites, the operas of Wagner , the poetry of Mallarmé. The extrusion of intense emotions through confrontations with a grim reality, is played out against a cosmic background of myth, fantasy and superstition, with their roots in the old Nordic religion. Sea, sky, land and mountains operate like an autonomous cast of the play's characters, whose embodiments are the gods Thor, Odin, Ran, Freya. One must remember that the conflicting claims of Christianity and "paganism" persisted in Scandinavia up into the 17th century. There have always been two "religions", _de jure_ and

de facto , of Scandinavia, even as Ireland has never shed the Druidic foundations upon which the novelties from Rome were superimposed.

Upon this tapestry of legend and symbol Ibsen has woven a modern parable about essentially mediocre people forced to deal with the sort of catastrophe that theater normally reserves only for the very noble and the very great: Oedipus, Othello, Lear, Faust.

The immediate consequence of this syncretism of genres is that two planes of existence, the immediate and the transcendent, are simultaneously present. Without being assimilated into their alien dual, their denizens interrelate as if they all were part of the same universe.

On the manifest level (Realism) are numbered the four "adult" principals: Rita (age 30), Alfred (37), Asta (25), and Borgheim (30) . On the transcendental plane (Symbolism) , the plane of gods, demons, elves, Nixes, trolls and fairies, one places Eyolf and the Rat Wife. We will have more to say about this in our analysis of Act I.

Yet there is more, much more. After several readings one is startled to uncover another peculiarity - indeed one might almost call it a paradox: _Little Eyolf_ turns out to be two quite different plays, idiosyncratically linked by a _play-on-words_ stemming from the differing personal associations of the name "Eyolf" in the minds of the protagonists.

One of these plays, (the "surface" drama) centers about the spiritual exploitation, even abuse, of the crippled 9-year old Eyolf. Viewed as a kind of malediction upon the house (one is put in

mind of the "changeling" theme in the old ballads (*Ibsen's Forsaken Merman* , pg. 238), he is at the same time the cornerstone of a misalliance fated to disaster from its inception. For a decade Alfred and Rita Allmers have used Eyolf as a sort of battering ram in their unrelenting hostility to each other. The suddenness of Eyolf's death at the end of Act I leaves a lingering suspicion in the minds of the audience that the 9-year old child may have deliberately , if unconsciously, chosen this way of escaping from an impossible life situation with no sign of relief.

This is a not uncommon theme in fiction: children blame themselves for the woes of their parents and may even be driven to commit suicide. The paradigm is, of course, the murder/suicide of the children of Jude and Sue in Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* : *' Done because we are too meny' "*

In the savage warfare that fills much of the action in the remaining two acts, the two principals vigorously push the burdens of guilt, grief and remorse back and forth onto one another's shoulders.

The *other* play has to do with the unacknowledged incestuous attachment between Alfred Allmers and his gentle step-sister Asta. Though it wears the demeanor of a sub-plot, it quickly becomes *the central relationship of Act II* , a "wrenching of focus" or "upstaging" that is introduced so subtly that one doesn't realize it, until it bursts about our heads in a series of painful revelations taking us all the way to the end of the act.

One can imagine a reshaping of the material in *Little Eyolf* based primarily on the tortured relationship of Asta and Alfred ,

with an uncomprehending Borgheim, (and an all-too-comprehending Rita) on the sidelines, a play leading by measured yet inexorable steps to the climactic moment when Asta reveals to Alfred that they are not in fact blood relatives! (Shall we call it "Little Asta"?)

The link, rich in irony, between the two plays is simply this: "Eyolf", the name Alfred gave to his son, is also the pet name he gave Asta as a child in the years when they were thrown together as orphans. They used to play a game in which she would dress herself up as a boy , "Eyolf", and they pretended they were brothers. The very name *Eyolf* now becomes a metaphor signifying the permanent presence of Asta in the Allmers marriage. Indications abound in the play which suggest that Alfred's sexual imagination has been dominated by the tangible image of Asta throughout all of the ten years of his marriage to Rita. Even he is unaware of this; to Rita it is obvious. We continue our discussion of *Little Eyolf* through a synopsis and analysis of each of its acts.

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Act I

Rita's estate, Alfred Allmers's through marriage, is located in on the hill above the waterfront of a town in the vicinity of Oslo (formerly Christiania). Squatters have built hovels and shacks along the beaches ; one can hear the rude voices of unschooled children running about the waterfront. Alfred is 37, Rita 30. They've been married 10 years.

It is a weekend in August; I assume that it's a weekend, because there are no domestic servants or grounds personnel in sight and all the small menial tasks are being done by the owners and their guests. When the play opens Rita is seen unpacking her husband's travelling bag. From the ways she feels and fingers his belongings one senses her sexual frustration and possessive jealousy. One has an immediate intimation from this indication alone, that their marriage is poisoned at the root. With only a telegram sent at the last minute informing her, Alfred Allmers had suddenly returned the night before, cutting short by two weeks a 2-month hiking trip in the mountains that had been prescribed to him by his doctor.

The opening situation of an Ibsen play is often established by the arrival of an unexpected visitor. It is Asta, Alfred's half-sister (for the time being) . She brings with her a portfolio containing her mother's (Alfred's step-mother) letters. She's used the period of his absence to sort and arrange them.

An atmosphere of tension springs up between the two women immediately . Asta states that a telepathic sympathy between her and Alfred, compelled her to rush out of her home in Oslo and catch the ferry to their place. Indeed she was in so much of a hurry that she forgot to bring the key to open the portfolio, which she's brought with her for nothing.

Telepathic sympathies are common features of Ibsen's later plays - they are the dominant force in *The Lady from the Sea* - and

it's clear that he believed in their existence.[3] However Asta is also letting Rita know that the sympathetic bond between herself and Alfred is far stronger than anything Rita will ever experience. This idea is reiterated several times in the play: the love between a brother and sister, Alfred tells her in Act II, is "unaffected by the law of change".

Tactlessly, Rita repeatedly hints that Asta is secretly in love with the engineer and road-builder, Borgheim, although Asta never shows the least interest in having him as a lover or husband.[4] Annoyed by these repeated innuendoes Asta turns the conversation back onto the subject of Alfred: Is his condition better? Was he exhausted from his trip? Where is he now?

In answering her questions Rita suddenly becomes very emotional: Alfred's absence had made her feel as if there'd been a funeral in the house. Given that she has been alone with Eyolf for those 6 weeks, this revelation is a sinister pre-echo of what is to follow. She points out that, up until then, Alfred hadn't been away from the house for a single day in the past 10 years. Even a short absence makes her dread the possibility of losing him. Another typical Ibsen situation : Rita clings desperately to the man with whom she's had a meaningless relationship for 10 years!

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[3] **It has been plausibly argued that Alfred wrote a letter to Asta indicating that he'd be returning within the next few days. This allows one to dismiss the telepathy hypothesis. See the valuable discussion by Jefferson Lindquist at <http://www.jkpd.net/ibsen/chap3.html>**

[4] **Ultimately she will yield to the pressure and allow him at least to court her, yet only because, (as with the current decision of many people to vote for Kerry as a way of getting Bush out of the White House) , there is no alternative.**

Their exchanges lay the ground for the dramatic entrance of Alfred Allmers himself. He strides quickly into the room with the air of a visionary, his eyes gazing off into space, leading Eyolf by the hand as if he were his disciple. The technical detail of the manner of entrance is significant. Alfred and Eyolf enter by the door *on the left* . Since Eyolf's left leg is the one that is crippled, the audience does not immediately see his crutch, by far the most powerful prop in the play, a symbol equivalent in its functioning to the "wild duck" in the play with the same name . From their entrance onwards, the crutch maintains a low profile until the dramatic moment when, prodded by Alfred to say what he wants to be when he grows up, Eyolf lifts the crutch high in the air, and cries:

Eyolf: *I want most of all to be a soldier !*

A director might then portray him as reinforcing his words by strutting about the living-room to the imagined music of a military band!

Alfred clenches his hands together and is reduced to tears. Indeed, Eyolf is even dressed in a blue military uniform decorated with gold braid! When Alfred rebukes Rita for getting him such clothing, she coyly evades the charge by saying that he kept insisting until she gave in. Already they are using their handicapped son as a "prop" to support their broken marriage, even as Eyolf uses the crutch as a replacement for his damaged leg.

One has the impression that the only adult in this circle who really cares for Eyolf without some self-serving purpose is aunt Asta. Rita will state as much as evidence of her charge that Asta

is usurping her prerogatives as Alfred's wife. Yet she also freely admits that she doesn't love Eyolf. She dotes only on Alfred; if she endured the pain of childbirth it was only for his sake. This may not in fact be true, but only one more device for taunting him.

I can be charged with reading too much into the script, but I've the feeling that Rita will show a marked aversion to looking at the crutch from the moment Eyolf enters the room. She will also avoid his eyes: it will emerge over the course of the play that Rita has been tormented for years by the "menacing accusation" in Eyolf's eyes for her responsibility in the accident that ruined his life. Before Act I has run its course she will accuse him of having the "evil eye". Unto the final exchanges of the play she will moan that Eyolf's eyes are peering at her from under the ocean waves. When the steamer boat pulls up at the pier she will cry that its red and green signal lights are Eyolf's eyes, staring at her in condemnation. The cast or pallor of the eyes, with all of their implicit intentionality, of each character, constitute the primary "Expressionist" element in *Little Eyolf* :

(1) Eyolf's eyes are childish, luminous, intelligent; yet also sickly and inflamed, both because of his handicap and because his father has turned him into a bookworm, making him spend long hours indoors on his studies . The children on the beach will report that Eyolf's body lay face up with its eyes open, before being carried away on the ocean currents.

(2) Rita's eyes are wild, lustful, inflamed with insatiable passion.

(3) Alfred's eyes are mystical. Throughout the script they are portrayed as staring upward or outward, gazing into space, or over the fjord, or up at the mountains from which he's just descended. One has the impression that he expends considerable effort when he forces his gaze to contemplate the people around him. (And when he does it fixes first on Asta.)

(4) The eyes of the Rat-Wife are "glittering", as befits a demon of mythology. They glow with the fire of some Satanic underworld, bright jewels mined from the kingdom of the Scandinavian Poseidon, Ran .

(4) No special significance adheres to the eyes of Asta and her suitor, the engineer Borgheim, but one can imagine hers to be filled with adulation of her half-brother, his with the shallow enthusiasm of the True Believer in the positivist doctrine of progress through technology and science, full of good energy but of little depth.

Given that this is to be the only scene in which Eyolf himself is present , the actor who plays him has to exhibit the crutch in unforgettable prominence, impressing its' power as a symbol upon the audience and preparing them for the haunting references to it that will follow .

Rita's visceral physical aversion to Eyolf, his eyes and crutch, from the moment of his entrance heightens the level of tension that already exists between her and her sister-in-law.

The stage has been set for the entrance of a being from another universe, the Rat-Wife: an elderly woman dressed in peasant costume with red cape and hood, parasol and, (as every

real witch must have) , her familiar the dog Mopsemand, hidden in a sack. One observes that the "symbolic" beings, Eyolf and the Rat-Wife, are dressed in striking, even garish, primary color uniforms, navy-blue and blood-red; the "earth-bound" beings all wear light, drab, pastel garments:

Rita is *dressed in a light-colored morning gown* **.**

Asta wears *a light brown summer dress* **.**

Alfred is *dressed in light summer clothes* **.**

We are not told how Borgheim is dressed. An engineer and road-builder who's just come off the construction site to bid the family farewell, is not likely to wear bright or colorful costuming. We are told however that

his expression is bright and cheerful and he holds himself erect. **No slouch he ; unlike this household filled with decadents to which he's become attached !**

The spatial-temporal intersection of dual planes of reality is thereby given further emphasis through the style of dress.

Her arrival is unexpected yet not unanticipated. Shortly before her entrance the Rat-Wife had been the subject of a lively discussion. Asta remarks that she was seen just outside Oslo ; one is put in mind of the association of rats with the onset of the plague, traditionally personified as a woman . [5]

Alfred thinks he may have seen her in the mountains; we later learn that he believes that Death had joined him there as a road companion. Eyolf asks if its true that she's actually a

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[5] **".... the spread of the disease through the arrival of a ship or through a personification of the plague in the shape of a woman" (Scandinavian Folk Belief and Legend, pg. 344)**

werewolf. In Nordic mythology witches sometimes take the form of wolves, flying about on bats with clutches of snakes as harness and bridles.

(*Mythologies of All Races* , pg. 300)

The Rat-Wife also conjures up other associations, not all of them baleful. She herself claims to come with a "healing mission". Not only does she "cure" households riddled with rats, but the rats themselves experience the bliss of a long slumber in their new home beneath the waves:

The Rat-Wife: ... ***And there it is all as still, and soft, and dark as their hearts can desire, the lovely little things. Down there they sleep a long, sweet sleep, with no-one to hate them or persecute them any more....***

Her origins in the legend of the Pied Piper are unmistakable. Scandinavian folklore is rich in stories of mermaids, Nisses, seal maidens and other beings who cause shipwrecks, lure men to their death, drown little children in wells and the like. (Ibid. , pg. 190 -209)

"*The Nixe's exquisite song beguiles unwary youths, who, like Hylas, are drawn into the waters. The drowned are also her victims, and children falling into wells come into her power.* " (Ibid., pg. 212)

One is tempted to extricate Eyolf and the Rat-Wife from the living-room that grounds Act I, and set them up on a platform as archetypes of myth and legend, Eyolf signifying frail mortality, the Rat-Wife signifying the inexhaustible malevolence and cunning of the hostile environment of the North. The first act of

Little Eyolf takes on the character of a Play within a Play, though whether the sufferings of the Allmers clan is to be seen as a spectacle for the gods' amusement, gratifying their insatiable appetite for trifling with mankind, or whether the consequences of the visit of the Rat-Wife constitute an incursion of subterrestrial Hel visited upon ordinary mortals, is matter for individual interpretation.

The Rat-Wife : *Are your worships troubled with any gnawing things in the house?*

Nothing of the sort here Rita replies, though we already know enough to understand that this household is crawling with all sorts of gnawing things in the belfries of its psyche .The Rat-Wife weaves a web of enchantment, both fascinating and repellent, while Eyolf regards her with an interest that can only be called obsessional; evidently the accident that wrecked his body did some damage to his mind as well. She explains how the music from her pan-pipes charms the rats out of their nooks and niches, describes her arcana of magical rituals and spells, praises her assistant Mopsemand, (who obligingly lifts his head above the rim of the sack in which she's concealed him) . Eyolf staggers away in terror; Rita shrieks and orders the Rat-Wife out the door. But Eyolf overcomes his terror and timidly returns to stroke the sable down on the head of the otter-like creature. His gesture comes across to the audience as a bond, a pledge, a promise that he will soon be joining them in their oceanic realm.

The Rat-Wife leaves. Rita goes out onto the porch to calm her nerves. Unseen by the grown-ups, Eyolf sneaks out the side

door. When Rita returns to the living-room she makes a comment similar to her confession to Asta that Alfred's absence from the house reminded her of a funeral:

Rita : ***Ugh! I feel as if that horrible old woman had brought a sort of graveyard smell with her.***

Allmers : ***Yes, she was rather horrible.***

Now the personal interactions makes a sudden turn. Suddenly we are no longer in the world of rats, *draugs* and Nisses , but in the intimate circle of Alfred Allmers, Biblical prophet to the two doting women who hang on his every word!

Seated on a couch with Rita to his right and Asta in a chair by his left Allmers begins to expound upon the "great revelation" he received during his hike through this mountains. Ibsen indicates that his attention is principally focused on Asta, though he extends hands to both of them, Rita rejecting the one intended for her: she will not share him.

The revelation is this: Allmers is determined to stop working on the treatise with which he's been struggling for a decade, and devote his life to restoring to little Eyolf all the possibilities denied him by his tragic accident.

There is deep pathos in the decision, as well as sarcasm in the very title of his ponderous tract: *The Responsibility of Man* . Still, given that he is an author with a respectable dossier of publications in books and magazines, the title does not have the same sort of deprecatory ring that one finds, for example, in the ludicrous evocation of the never-to-be-finished, never-to-be-performed "tragedy" of Vilhelm Foldal in *John Gabriel Borkmann* .

Yet Alfred Allmers is neither a clown nor a fool. He has something to say to the world, although the accumulation of inner and outer obstacles cause us to doubt that his message will ever reach the outer world. One cannot, all the same, restrain a grimace, even a guffaw, when Asta asks him, in all seriousness:

Asta : ***(Looking sadly at him) But you will never write any more of your book on "Human Responsibility"?***

Until the tropical sun beamed upon him by his admiring circle of wife and sister , Alfred's ego swells like a ripe watermelon, like "the hazel shell with a sweet kernel" :

Allmers: ***(With shining eyes) : Yes! I went up into the infinite solitudes. I saw the sunrise gleaming on the mountain peaks. I felt myself nearer the stars - I seemed almost to be in sympathy and communion with them. And then I found the strength for it.***

Notice the reference to the eyes, gleaming with fanaticism and self-infatuation. As Rita will point out to him much later in the play, it is not out of concern for Eyolf that he taken up this task: he has merely found himself a new "holy cause" . As it turns out, he will not have time to discover if his resolutions are genuine; judging from the indications given of his character, it is unlikely that he would have persisted in them for very long: Alfred Allmers has the exasperating habit of threatening to carry out extreme acts only when in the presence of audiences whom he fully expects to dissuade him from going through with them.

When Allmers states :*What you put on paper is worth very little.* **, Eyolf and Rita will follow with:**

Eyolf ***[Looks confidingly up at him] : Oh yes, Papa! what you write is worth a great deal!***

Rita: ***What an absurd thing to say, Alfred.***

Shortly afterwards Asta will reach over and say

Asta: [*Laying her hand upon his arm] But Alfred - that book is to be your life-work .***

In the course of the play, Alfred will threaten to throw himself into the fjord , (either alone or with Rita) , to leave Rita, to go live with Asta, to thrash the children down by the pier and burn down their hovels, to return to the mountains. Everyone of these resolutions is made in the presence of someone whom he expects to dissuade him from such madness.

One knows that Allmers, depressed as he is, has no real intention of doing these things by contrasting him with other Ibsen characters who do in fact carry through on their threats. Rosmer does jump off the bridge with Rebekka; Ellida comes within a hair of going off with the Stranger ; we know that Nora is leaving her husband; Hedda Gabler throws Lövberg's manuscript into the fire; Solness climbs the tower; Irene and Rubek climb to the summit of the mountain. In Alfred Allmers we are a far cry indeed from Brand, whose motto, terrifying in its sincerity, is ***All Or Nothing*** **.**

Allmers is, in some sense, an anti-hero, a lost soul whose tragedy is all the more gripping because he is the way he is. He in fact ***is*** **the sort of person that commentators often** ***mistake*** **Hamlet to be. The difference is this: Hamlet is "irresolute" because there are a great many problems he must solve before he can act;**

he is *always* forthright in action when action is called for. Alfred Allmers appears to be dedicated to evasion. Avoidance is , for him (as it is, in various degrees, for his wife and step-sister) a way of life.

Alfred's rapturous melismatae are interrupted by the arrival of the road builder, Borgheim. He comes with a present for Eyolf - could it be a swimsuit! (The present is not explicitly described in the script, yet shortly before his arrival Eyolf had announced that Borgheim is going to teach him how to swim.)

Despite Asta's indifference to him,(turning at times to loathing because of his insistence) , Rita persuades them to take a walk so she can be alone with Alfred. No sooner are they departed then she breaks into an utterly mad tirade of jealousy, possessiveness, rage and pent-up sexual fury. With only slight exaggeration Ibsen might have instructed Rita to rip Alfred's clothes from his body and force the conjugal sex act upon him! But this is Norway, not Brazil.

She has reason to complain. For most of their marriage Alfred has avoided going to bed with her whenever possible, using the aimless 'treatise on human responsibility' as an excuse for reading and writing long into the night. Alerted to his sudden return the previous evening , Rita had dressed seductively, let down her hair, put rose-tinted shades on both the lamps, and candles on a dinner table prepared with exquisite care. But as she sadly remarks, quoting some popular lyric:

"*There stood the champagne, but you tasted it not.* "

Re-enacting the scene she stretches out full-length on the couch, as if to say that it's still not too late! All this stuff is irritating to Alfred, who crossly remarks that his mind was on "serious matters" with little time for such nonsense.

One is tempted to sympathize with Rita at this point. Yet seen from Alfred's perspective it does not surprise us that his sexual ardor was chilled years before by the ferocity with which Rita assaults him. Ultimately their son's tragic destiny, and even his passion for Asta, have less to do with his aversion to her than her single-minded intention to devour him body and soul, as a serpent will consume its victim whole.

Rebuffed and enraged, Rita expresses hatred towards Eyolf, Asta, and his cursed book on human responsibility, anything with which she must "divide" her possession of her husband. Darkly she wishes that Eyolf had never been born, going so far as to intimate that there exist ways of remedying this error.

Rita: ... ***The moment you mention Eyolf's name, you grow tender and your voice quivers [Threateningly, clenching her hands] Oh, you almost tempt me to wish -***

Her malevolence mounts inexorably, reaching its apogee at the re-entry of Asta and Borgheim from their futile promenade. In the presence of all she alludes to the ***evil eye*** **of Eyolf, its insane intensity of concentrated on the destruction of her marriage. What children have to put up with from grown-ups!**

The "evil eye" belongs to a larger collection of Scandinavian folk-beliefs about the power of an ill-intentioned soul to wreak

destruction on an enemy: they are known generically as *hug* , or soul-force:

" The deliberate manipulation of the *hug* is the basis of all magic. The *hug* can manifest itself invisibly or it can take on a shape (*ham*)"

(*Scandinavian Folk Belief and Legend* , pg. 41)

" *It was generally believed that the power of the hug could be transferred to another being or object through sight, touch, or the spoken word, often with the intent to do harm. Hence , the expressions, evil eye, evil hand, evil foot, and evil tongue* . " (Op. cit., pg. 49)

That the hostile thoughts of Eyolf could be projected through his eyes and contaminate their marriage is of course a projection of Rita's guilt back onto its object. Ibsen pushes these grotesque mental fantasies of Rita to the limits of sanity, giving her the hysterical intensity of a figure from a painting by the young Edvard Munch, still in his 20's and just beginning to make a name for himself at the time that *Little Eyolf* was conceived.

No sooner does she deliver this astounding accusation when cries are heard coming up from the waterfront: a little boy has been drowned. No-one imagines at first that it might be Eyolf. Alfred assures everyone that Eyolf's been playing out in the garden; the anxiety mounts . Rita, as the most emotional and high-strung is the first to divine the truth. Asta and Borgheim rush down to the beach. One cannot fail to note that, had the victim been one of the beach children no-one would have

considered it worth their time to go down and see if they could be of help.

The remainder of the act is "theater" (as in the colloquial adjective) , albeit superb theater: the well-timed shrieks from Rita, the accumulation of evidences leading to the realization that the drowned child is Eyolf himself, the cries of desperation. Rita collapses from a statement coming from someone at the pier: *The crutch is floating !* Only then does Alfred, always the last to desert make-believe for reality, rush through the garden and down the hill :

Rita : ***[Sinking down beside the armchair on the left] They said: "The crutch is floating!"***

Allmers: ***{Almost paralysed] No! No! No!***

Rita ***[Hoarsely]: Eyolf! Eyolf! Oh, but they must save him!***

Allmers ***[Half distracted]: They must, they must! So precious a life! [He rushes through the garden]***

Once again one notes that Rita does not run down to the beach to help with the rescue efforts. She is genuinely overcome with horror; but that kid was a pest.

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With the powerful conclusion of Act I a further structural level emerges, yet one more way in which *Little Eyolf* functions as two plays connected by common persons and themes. Already we've seen that it combines two universes, the natural and the supernatural, intersecting in a single setting like the phase space of Quantum Theory; that furthermore there is this play about Alfred, Rita and Eyolf, and another play about Alfred and Asta,

two melodramas proceeding concurrently which will not be tied together until well into the second act.

It now appears that Act I forms a play all by itself, and that Acts II and III taken together form another play, a kind of commentary on the themes and events developed in Act I. Two tragedies frame Act I like a pair of boundary conditions , one from ten years in the past, the other determining the future.

As a rough approximation, Act II brings to light all the hidden issues involved in the first tragedy, while Act III is concerned mostly with the consequences of the second tragedy. However each misfortune serves as mirror for the other, their reflections dissipating and re-emerging in throbbing waves much like the recurrent waves of agony from a wound that will not close or be healed.

Up to a point, *Hamlet* has the same structure. The death of the old king Hamlet has occurred before the curtain rises on Act I. The circumstances and consequences of his murder propel the protagonists and the action to the bedchamber scene of Act III, when there is a second murder. The reverberations of these two murders, quite different in both circumstances and consequences, will lead to the gory finale, the destruction of the house of Denmark, a stage littered with corpses, the triumphal ascendancy of Fortinbras.

There are resemblances also to *The Cherry Orchard* , although the order of events has been inverted. Grisha, the son of Mme Ranevskaya, has drowned *before* the dramatic action begins. Her overpowering grief paralyzes her, making her

indifferent, indeed incapable of doing anything to forestall the tragedy that follows , the loss of her estate and of the cherry orchard. What is astonishing about this play is that, superficially at least, Chekhov was able to turn an essentially tragic situation into a comedy. We know, of course, that it is not a comedy, although there is never any let-up to it's grotesque humor .

There is a large class of dramatic tragedies which depend on the metaphysical axiom that past tragedies inevitably spawn future ones. To use the word so dear to Alfred Allmers, present misfortunes must be a form of "retribution". Indeed one has the impression that Alfred Allmers cannot be satisfied until he comes to understand how his sufferings over the death of Eyolf are due to some very bad things he'd done in the past. This is one reason why Hiermann Weigand in his essay on *Little Eyolf* (*The Modern Ibsen*) calls Allmers a "moral crank". Weigand is much too harsh: Ibsen doesn't hate Allmers, he pities him. Allmers is a man with heart, soul and mind, as far away from caricature as he is from the heroic victims of classical tragedy.

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Act II

Assuming that the events of the first day take place between 8 and 10 AM, those portrayed on the second day begin at noon. In obedience to the change of mood (from the joy at Alfred's unexpected return, to the horror caused by the death of little Eyolf) the weather now is chilly, gloomy. There is haze and a light drizzle in the air. This overt "pathetic fallacy" , typical of a

lesser author, works in this case owing to the juxtaposition of traditional realism with an illusionistic theater of dreams.

As the curtain rises we see Allmers seated before a table in a wooded area, a glen, in some other low-lying part of Rita's estate level with the fjord. Shortly afterwards he is joined by Asta, who has been looking for him. No doubt the marriage laws of 19th century Norway were much the same as in the rest of Europe: Alfred Allmers became the legal proprietor of the estate through marriage. Confirming this, the stage direction states:

A little narrow glen by the side of the fjord, on Allmers's property.

Yet spiritually, psychologically and even for most practical purposes this magical setting continues to remain Rita's. Alfred Allmers may own the property legally , but Rita owns it through her possession of Alfred. It is she who holds the key to the playpen in which her Alfred can to stroll about, engaging in his long, largely fruitless meditations on man's fate and 'human responsibility'.

This is not his world. No doubt he avoids the adjoining town, most likely a resort of some sort, and certainly he spends as little time as possible among the shacks and hovels spread out along the beach. Yet this, or something very similar to it, was his world up to the age of 27, before he encountered the 20-year old Rita, perhaps at the university in Oslo - for where else would two singularly unsociable people from such different class backgrounds, he and his half-sister orphans, she with her "green and golden forests", have been likely to meet at that age?

Allmers *[Gazing straight before him] : When I look back over my life - and my fortunes - for the last ten or eleven years, it seems to me almost like a fairy-tale or a dream. Don't you think so, too, Asta?*

Asta: *Yes, in many ways I think so.*

Allmers *[Continuing] When I remember what we two used to be, Asta - we two poor orphan children.*

Rita *[Impatiently] Oh, that is such an old, old story.*

Allmers *[Not listening to her] And now here I am in comfort and luxury* **(Act I)**

The setting has the character of a private preserve, possibly a former hunting domain. Large trees with thick canopies, paths, benches, a boathouse, the fjord visible off to the right. Note once again the absence of any grounds personnel: gardeners, workmen, servants, domestics. Such an omission would be unthinkable in a Chekhov play. The elimination of all members of the crew normally required to maintain the Allmers lifestyle is one more thing that sets the play off from the real world, heightening the illusion of a dream.

The point is in fact that the "estate" is *neither* **"Rita's" nor "Alfred's"**

: *it is not an estate at all* **. It is not intended to represent a "real" place, but something more akin to a "mental state" . The** *Allmers's estate* **can, and does contain whatever sort of landscape is needed to convey the mood of the unfolding action. The purposes of Act III require a lofty vantage , from which the protagonists can look out over the fjord and at the same time down to the waterfront**

and the piers, from which a flag at half-mast can be seen fluttering over the region. Hence the " estate" includes a cliff, guard-rail, flag-post and summerhouse.

The second act needs a low-lying area allowing Alfred to gaze out across the fjord and contemplate suicide. Somehow the "estate" is big enough to incorporate that too! And Act I has to be in the most conventional of Ibsen's settings, the cozy, even mediocre "Biedermeier" living-room of a wealthy family ready to receive the nasty intrusion of the Rat-Wife and the cries of horror coming up from the beach.

So the question of whether the estate "belongs" to Rita or Alfred is somewhat beside the point. ***It works the other way around*** **: anything needed to establish the Expressionist "mental climate"** ***belongs*** **to the estate!**

Indeed Alfred now cries that he must be living in a dream:

Allmers: (Gazing at Asta): ***Is it really true, then, Asta? Or have I gone mad? Or am I only dreaming? Just think, if I were to waken now -!***

Ibsen does not see fit to let us know what the 4 principals did to survive the ordeal of the last 24 hours. Evidently Alfred had arisen early the next morning and begun wandering aimlessly about the estate. He may also have gone down to the village, because he will relate to Asta what the village boys have told him about the accident. Though proclaiming himself an atheist Alfred is obsessed - like some modern-day Kierkegaard stunned by God's command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac - with finding 'meaning' in this catastrophe. God, or the gods, or 'something out

there' , must be punishing him for his sins. There has to be some "retribution" , or he is lost:

Allmers: *"... So there is no retribution; the whole thing is utterly groundless and meaningless, Asta - and yet the order of the world requires it "*

This period of soul-searching gives way to recollections leading insensibly to a domestic scene that bears the character of a *déjà-vu* **: without being aware of doing so brother and sister (for so they regard one another) fall into the roles they played as orphaned children. While Asta sews ribbons of black crepe onto his sleeve and hat, she recalls how she did the same thing for him following the death of his father, (when Asta was (perhaps) 6 and Alfred 18), and the death of her mother 2 years later. To hear them talk one gets the impression that the period of 8 years in which they were parentless and forced to depend on one another, was the golden age for both of them! In the subtlest of ways the theme of incest has made its entry into the plot.**

Allmers: *And then you hunted up some of my old boy's clothes.*

Asta : *Your fine Sunday clothes - yes. Do you remember the blue blouse and knickerbockers ?*

Allmers: *(His eyes dwelling upon her). I remember so well how you looked when you used to wear them.*

Asta: *Only when we were at home, alone, though.*

Allmers: *And how serious we were, dear, and how mightily pleased with ourselves. I always called you Eyolf .*

Asta :*(Suddenly terrified): Oh , Alfred, I hope you have never told Rita this.*

Allmers: *Yes, I believe I did once tell her.*

Here Ibsen demonstrates his profound insight into human psychology: *Allmers does not remember the exact moment when he made this revelation to Rita.* **Later on , in a moment of vengeful triumph when Rita reminds him of the circumstances of this confession the effect will be devastating.**

The whole subject of selective psychological amnesia, now sicklied o'er by the hue of Freudian nonsense, is one that Ibsen understood well. One conveniently forgets things that interfere with the self- image one wishes to maintain until reminded of them. The result can be a severe jolt to one's complacency.

After some more conversation between them, wherein Asta further reveals awe in which she holds her brother, while his responses provide further evidence of his state of purposelessness, Rita and Borgheim enter. They contrast with the more spiritual Alfred and Asta by virtue of the superficial simplicity of their philosophy of life.

Rita is very disturbed. They've just come from the waterfront, where they've been questioning witnesses about the drowning, and she is haunted by what she's learned. Almost immediately Rita and Alfred begin fighting ; Asta discretely suggests a stroll to Borgheim. Predictably he interprets this as a sign that she is softening towards him.

Once alone a vicious quarrel erupts over the living presence of "Eyolf's eyes" in their midst. We know from the previous act

that Rita is obsessed with the superstition of the *hug* , or evil eye . It is another indication that Rita is never very far away from madness. It is otherwise hard to imagine that a person of her social class, education and intelligence should cling to such notions as 'evil eyes' , 'werewolves' and the like. When, in Act I, Eyolf asks if the Rat-Wife might perhaps be a werewolf, it is Alfred, not she, who expresses surprise that he should entertain such a notion.

Rita starts by revealing what's been troubling her: the children down at the pier informed her that they saw Eyolf's body lying on the ocean floor, face upwards with its eyes open, before the undertow carried it out to sea.

Rita: .. ***They said he was lying on his back. And with great, open eyes.***

Since then she's been unable to get the image of those opened eyes out of her mind. Indeed, this tormenting image will only increase in its intensity up to the end of the play. Pressing his advantage, Alfred taunts her in a harsh, merciless tone of voice: are those perhaps the "evil eyes", the *hug* , which she accused little Eyolf of using to destroy their marriage ? She wilts under the cruelty of his assault. Relentlessly Alfred picks at her until she cries out that she is afraid of him. Calming down he reflects (using much the same words expresses by Rita herself in the first act) :

Allmers : ***(Looking harshly and coldly at her) Sorrow makes us wicked and hateful.***

Now each accuses the other of having used Eyolf for their own purposes without ever having really loved him. In making these accusations, needless to say, they are continuing to exploit him in the same way . Returning to the charge, Rita expresses a sentiment that, in its time, will lead to the crushing revelation that pulls together all the isolated narrative strands of this mystifying play. She justifies her coldness to Eyolf on the grounds that Asta stood in the way of her loving him!

To put it mildly, Alfred doesn't know what the hell she's talking about, but he surmises that Rita is referring Asta's competition in being a mother to Eyolf. Clearly the innuendo goes deeper. Rita drops the subject for the moment.

In what follows the audience is given its first insight into the sub-text underlying much of the preceding action: they'd been in bed together, making love at the time that Eyolf fell from the table and was
crippled for life. ***You seduced me!*** **Alfred cries:** ***the accident that led to his death was your fault*** **!**

Allmers ***(with sudden passion): You are the guilty one in this!***

(.....) ***(in a low voice, clenching his fist)*** **:** ***In that hour you condemned little Eyolf to death!***

To which Rita replies that, obviously if she was guilty then both of them were guilty. Of course this gives Alfred an opportunity to babble on about "retribution for sins", "judgment", "remorse" and to invoke: ***that thing he had to drag about him*** **.**

Rita: ***(Whispers) The crutch.***

Properly recited, a heavy silence should fall over the auditorium as the audience freezes in horror. Oppressed by the need to upstage his wife, Alfred dares Rita to jump into the fjord and drown herself. He will join her, he promises. Then he offers to go first if she will follow him later. Although this is the kind of empty stuff we've gotten used to hearing from him, it does also reflect a genuine frenzy of a sort arising from his state of grieving.

As her own contribution to the general empty-headedness, Rita urges Alfred to forget all about Eyolf so that they can lose themselves into a wild merry-go-round of party-giving! Alfred considers this carefully , then replies: No, he'd rather return to his book on *The Responsibility of Man* !

Once again Ibsen's psychological insight is profound. In such moments of deep grief there is a common tendency in people to indulge a wide range of far-fetched impulses, from committing suicide, to spending all one's money, running off to exotic places, throwing oneself away on sexual adventures, drinking oneself into oblivion, and so on.

The flame of emotionalism soon extinguished, the couple returns to the really important business of life, their savage warfare. With unmistakable sadistic intent, Alfred speculates aloud that Eyolf's 'great, open eyes' are staring at them from the ocean depths day and night: speculation is one of those gifts that come naturally to him . Then, after explaining that his love for her is dead, Alfred launches into another monologue on guilt, atonement, resurrection ... Rita is thoroughly disgusted and lets him know as much.

Somehow they fall to into wondering , what was it that brought them together in the first place? Love? Sympathy? Sex? Her money? They conclude that Alfred married her for Asta's sake.

Onwards to the dagger in the heart!

Why - "Asta" was "Eyolf" ,wasn't she? **Rita inquires, her voice suddenly soft and tender in mock innocence.** *Eyolf ____?*

What're you talking about?

Yes, Rita persists, didn't you used to call her Eyolf?

How did you know that?

You yourself told me so, in a moment of confidence, an intimate and beautiful moment...

Allmers : *(Recoiling as if in horror) I remember nothing! I will not remember!*

Rita : *(Following him) It was in that hour - when your other little Eyolf was crippled for life!*

Allmers: *(In a hollow voice, supporting himself against the table) Retribution !*

Rita: *(Menacingly) Yes, retribution !*

Enter Asta and Borgheim!

Hendrik Ibsen didn't invent the convention of rooting the central event of a tragic drama in an obscenity, in what might almost be called a 'dirty joke' . Think of Sophocles, Euripedes, Shakespeare, Strindberg, Tennessee WIlliams, Arthur Miller : the revelation of the secret history of Oedipus; the sacrifice of Iphigenia to rescue the honor of the whore, Helen; the dirty secrets in the bedroom of Elsinore; the foul imaginations in

Othello's sick mind; the secret past of Blanche duBois; the secret roadlife of Willy Loman .....

What is unique in *Little Eyolf* is that the obscenity, the "secret sin" should be a *mental act* rather than some kind of physical misconduct: Allmers was *thinking of his sister* when in bed with his wife, at the time of the accident that killed little Eyolf !

It must be conceded that, unless the audience has been led to recognize by this time that the unavowed, essentially denied *physical* attachment of the siblings (whether by birth or adoption) Alfred and Asta is the *central relationship in Little Eyolf* , that the destructive force of this revelation will not be fully appreciated. This may explain why productions of the play often fail, for in fact it was only in the previous scene where their attachment was fully displayed.

Per his request, Rita and Borgheim leave Alfred and Asta alone, setting the scene for the next "shocking" revelation: that Asta has learned from reading her mother's letters that she and Alfred are not blood relatives. Given the force of what has preceded it, this is an anti-climax at best. As Alfred says:

Allmers: *(Half-defiantly, looking at her) Well, but what difference does that make in our relation? Practically none at all .*

The difference is, of course, that Asta's half-acknowledged wish of marrying Alfred can now become a reality . Naturally she shrinks from the challenge, not only because it opens too many possibilities, but because years of living with Rita, however painful, have changed Alfred irrevocably. Ibsen is an authority on

the ways in which marriage ruins its participants. As Asta reminds him, using his own favorite catch-phrase: *That is the law of change*

.

Act II concludes with a passage of great tenderness. As a symbolic substitute for the consummation of their attachment , formerly denied, now out of reach, Asta offers Alfred a bouquet of water-lilies. Gathered from the tarn at the edge of the fjord, they are strongly associated via folklore and legend, to the corpse of Eyolf lying in the ocean's depths:

Asta : *They are a last greeting to you from - from little Eyolf.*

Allmers: *(looking at her) From Eyolf out yonder? Or from you?*

Asta: *(softly) From both of us.*

Act III

Evening of the same day (perhaps) . **Asta seated on a bench in another part of the Allmers's estate. This is high up against a cliff face along which there is a guard rail and a flag pole. From the guardrail can be seen the waterfront and the pier. To the right a summer house.**

In a few minutes Borgheim enters, carrying a flag which Rita has instructed him to raise at half-mast on the flag-pole. As he does so he earnestly proposes marriage to Asta.

In fact there is no requirement that Acts II and III be on the same day. A number of minor inconsistencies are cleared up if one makes the reasonable assumption that Asta and Borgheim have remained with the Allmers family for several days to cushion the initial shock of their misfortune.

Although both are dressed for their departure the traveling bags they are carrying were not mentioned in their first appearances on the stage. Where then did they come from? Perhaps they both made special trips to Oslo at different times to pick up a few things to bring back with them. This might also explain why Asta does not carry the portfolio that she's brought with her on her arrival. Recall that she'd forgotten to bring the key. Did she retrieve the key on her visit to Oslo? Or did she carry the portfolio back with her, since Alfred had stated that he didn't want to read his step-mother's letters?

My personal opinion is that everything works more effectively if one allows a few days, (perhaps as much as a week,

not more) between Acts II and III. The strange mixture of Realism with Symbolism that one finds in this script makes such questions always relevant yet also irrelevant. However a far more fundamental dilemma adheres to Act III:

Each of the principals makes major decisions in Act III. Directors and dramaturges of any production must decide to what extent these decisions are supposed to be taken seriously, and to what extent they can be treated as further examples of the irresoluteness and lifelong patterns of denial they've exhibited all through the play (excepting only Borgheim, who by way of contrast, has been pictured as being *too* decisive.)

Yet even with him ... When Borgheim is led to believe that Asta will not be making the return voyage to Oslo in his company, Alfred reflects:

Allmers: *You may find it a good thing, after all, that you have to take your journey alone.... you see, you can never tell whom you might happen to meet afterwards - on the way ...*

In these final words to Borgheim, Alfred is referring to *at least five strands* in the fabric of *Little Eyolf* : he may meet someone like the Rat-Wife ; or someone like the "companion" who walked with him in the mountains where he was lost and thought he was about to die; or someone like Asta's real father, a mystery that is never cleared up; or Borgheim may share the experience of losing a little Eyolf, whom no-one ever really knew or understood; or he may discover, as Alfred did, that it was really his adoptive sister, or the equivalent , with whom he was in love.

The "greatness and misery" of *Little Eyolf* resides in the fact that, although there is a grim finality in Eyolf's death , there is none at all in any of the relationships. This is important. Those critics, Henry James among them, who see the 3rd Act as an anti-climax, for whom it ruins the play as a whole, have generally accepted the stated or implied "decisions" of the Rita, Alfred, Asta and Borgheim as genuine.

That means that Asta will be marrying Borgheim; since Borgheim will be building more roads in the far north, Asta may never see her beloved brother again; Alfred will not leave Rita; with Alfred's help, she will turn the estate into a settlement house for the village waifs.
(Commentators who wonder how she can do this forget that the "estate" is essentially a "state of mind", in which anything is possible.)

Interpreted in the fashion, forcing a series of "happy endings" on such tortured personalities is more than a little contrived. It has even been suggested that the play would 'work better' if it were terminated at the end of Act II.

Henry James had this to say :

" ***I fear, in truth, no harm can be done equal to the harm done to the play by its own most disappointing third act - I don;t see the meaning or effect of Borgheim - I don't see the value or final function of Asta .... "***

Those who, like Michael Meyer and myself think that, on the contrary, Act III is very successful and a fit conclusion to all

that precedes it, do so because it appears to us that *almost none* of these dramatic "decisions" ought to be taken seriously!

It is reasonable to conclude that, in some hypothetical 4th Act, Asta would *not* marry Borgheim. She's never shown any interest in him - even her "admiration" is tepid - in addition to which she has been witness over the last decade to the fatal consequences of an ill-considered marriage. If it appears that, by finally accepting to go back to Oslo with Borgheim she is consenting to marriage, one should not forget that her primary motivation in this scene is really to get away from the involvement with her brother, which has turned into a nightmare for both of them. Once Alfred is out of the picture she may see no further use for Borgheim.

It should also not be forgotten that the short time in which we've seen him Borgheim has exhibited a staggering degree of insensitivity, the most callous being his frank suggestion that Eyolf's death was actually a good thing because now Asta is freed up to come live with him! If there is one positive trait that Alfred does possess it is depth. Borgheim has none.

Nor has Alfred Allmers discovered resolve. He makes a number of "pronouncements" in Act III, most of them a rehash of what he's promised to do before:

He will leave Rita to follow Asta; no, that's probably not a good idea; what he really wants to do is return to the solitudes of the high mountains; well, that's not advisable, because when he did so the last time he brought back Death as an unwelcome companion; actually, years of living with Rita has bound him to

her; though he doesn't love her; so he might as well return to writing his book after all.

Finally Rita herself makes the suggestion that the estate be thrown open to serve the needy children of the village. What a notion! Suddenly Alfred is presented with a new "cause", a novel one at that, one that he would probably not have dreamed up on his own. In fact he'd suggested to her that she should burn down all the hovels along the waterfront after he leaves.

But this project gives him something to do. He doesn't have to leave Rita. He can work with her jointly without having either to love her or make love to her. He can write articles for the papers and magazines promoting the center. He can, at least in part, assuage his very genuine grief at the loss of Eyolf to whom (as Rita was not) he was deeply attached.

The difficulty with this creative "solution" is that it is not all certain that *Rita* is sincere ! She's never done that sort of work, she isn't comfortable around children, she despises the village and all that it represents. Under the pressure of strong emotion, guilt, remorse, grief and the fear of losing her husband for good, she suddenly uncovers capacities of heart, of tolerance and compassion, that she's never seen in herself before. Ibsen himself warned against a too literal interpretation of the final "change of heart" of Rita Allmers, a mistake made by almost all its commentators:

"*When my mother, still full of the play, said : 'Poor Rita, now she has to go to work with all those mischievous boys' , Ibsen*

replied, ' Do you really believe so? Don't you rather think it was more of a Sunday mood with her.' " **(Michael Meyer, quoting Bolette Sontum 'Personal Recollections of Henrik Ibsen' , pgs. 251-52)**

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Finale

For the final scene Ibsen brings back all of the Symbolist motifs, artifacts, devices and techniques introduced in the first act, which were then deliberately muted until now so that they may return fortissimo for the grand ending.

Rita and Alfred are standing by the guard-rail beside the high cliff, watching the steamer enter the harbor. Under the glow of a deepening blood-red Northern twilight (such as one can see for example in the "twilight" paintings of Harald Sohlberg (*Landscapes of the Mind* **, plates 80, 81, pgs. 195,196), with the green and red spotlights of the steamer casting streaks across the stage, and the sounds of the ship's bells floating in upon the salty evening breezes , they reflect upon their future as Asta and Borgheim come on board the ship .**

Rita has always been on the razor's edge of sanity. Now it appears that we are destined to be unwilling witnesses to her actual descent into madness. She interprets the hostile glare of the red and green spotlights as Eyolf's "evil eyes" upon her. She reveals to Alfred that in fact she's been hearing voices all day long. She howls that the bells are chanting the refrain : "*The crutch is floating! The crutch is floating!* " **The horror that we feel in hearing these lines is only partly based on the circumstances of**

Eyolf's death; most of it comes from their being recited by a woman going insane before our very eyes.

It is the "dreamy-eyed mystic" Alfred, who must take charge and sharply reprimand the "earth-bound" Rita, that she should not *stand there listening to a sound that does not exist.*

With Rita's mental condition in doubt (assuming that Ibsen is doing more than employing hysteria as a Symbolist/Expressionist device) , it is all the more unlikely that she will be in fit condition to open and maintain a community center for the local children. If this is the way one chooses to do the "hypothetical 4th Act" , Rita will have indeed achieved her objective , stated in Act I. With Rita as a mental cripple, Alfred will be obliged to devote every waking minute to caring for her, shorn of the interfering presences of Asta, Eyolf, and the detestable ' treatise human responsibility' . But there is a stronger, more satisfactory interpretation possible, which works better dramatically.

For almost immediately mourning overwhelms hysteria, the tears flow freely and there is an outpouring of grief. This grieving has been restrained, indeed kept on something of an abstract plane, so long as Asta was around. With the final rupture with, and departure of Asta, the Allmers's are set free from the psychological impediment that prevented them from giving full expression to their sorrow. Tears flow freely in the final scene, and one can imagine a production in which virtually every line is delivered between crying and sobs.

This causes one to make a back-reflection upon the structure of the play seen in its entirety. Looked at this way, the "Eyolf play" and the "Asta play" come together in a resolution that is both inevitable and dramatically effective. It is because of Alfred's unacknowledged involvement with Asta that the expression of his grief, (and of Rita's, for did she not love Eyolf in her own strange way?) were bottled up, suppressed or transmuted into hurtful recrimination and spite. Now the brutally painful separation from Asta has opened the way to the frank expression of intense grief, in which Rita discovers in herself an unsuspected capacity to love children, and Alfred can find something meaningful in continuing to live with her.

If this is so (and it is, admittedly, only one of the various ways of treating this powerful ending), the "decisions" lose something of their import. Asta may or may not marry Borgheim; she probably will "return" from time to time to "visit" the "Allmers's estate", even to work there (she has considerable experience as a teacher in a Folk's School in Oslo). Yet the festering blister is lanced and the old childhood attachments have evaporated.

Rita can open her settlement house: why not? She can never hope to "own" Alfred as she once believed she could, and she has to have something to fill her life.

And Alfred will no doubt go off to commune with his "mountain solitudes" once in awhile, but he will always return "two weeks early".

separation

#47...

In the final stage directions of *Little Eyolf* , Alfred walks over to the flagpole and raises the flag from half-mast to the top. A director should also ponder the following possibility: that in the closing moments he and Rita remove the pieces of black crepe that Asta had sewn onto his sleeve and hat.

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