

AND...

THE WORKSHOPS OF THOUGHT

Dialogue artists-audience with the artistic team of *Ibsen huis*, July 18 at 16:30,
Site Louis Pasteur Supramuros de l'Université d'Avignon

TOUR DATES AFTER THE FESTIVAL

February 8 to 17, 2018, Stadsschouwburg Amsterdam

IBSEN HUIS

The characters who come on stage all share a silhouette. Are they cousins, sisters, daughters and sons of a unique character imagined by Henrik Ibsen? What does the mother-house imagined by Simon Stone reveal? From a central place, a nourishing centre that presides over the immensity of the stage of the courtyard of the lycée Saint-Joseph, the Australian director has decided to propose a flat-pack architecture modelled on a genealogy: each chapter in the life of this family is a room, he house peels and opens like a fruit, the audience move from one work to the next. By re-exploring the dramaturgic continuity, he returns, with this *Ibsen huis*, to the central questions of a family going through a crisis, to the wounds that haven't healed. Bedroom, kitchen, or attic carry within themselves traumas and struggles, but also happy memories. Starting from his own experience, Simon Stone brings together the lives of modern people and a bestiary of characters dear to Ibsen: those who pull away the sheet that covers the lies of everyday life. Stage writing, handpicked actors, multifaceted dramaturgies that play with the last two centuries in the history of theatre... *Ibsen huis* is a play that blazes a new dramatic trail to continue questioning Man and his survival instinct. How do we fight to keep going in an abnormal world, when abnormal situations were the norm until now?

SIMON STONE

The Australian actor, director, and writer Simon Stone was born in Basel and studied in Cambridge. He returned to Australia in 2007 to create the Hayloft Project. The first play by his company, Frank Wedekind's *Spring Awakening*, was a major success and quickly established his reputation abroad. The performance of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* at the Holland Festival in 2013 was enthusiastically received. Simon Stone likes to work on plays from the repertoire which he leads, with help from his team, towards more intimate territories, on the edge of cinematographic performance. Starting with the characters, he doesn't so much rewrite the plays as build scenari based on improvisation. An avid reader of mythology and classical authors, he believes in the power of those texts to elevate the questioning of the human condition: "One can't make theatre based on fear and compromises. Without argument, there is no art." His first feature film, *The Daughter* (inspired by Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*) was released in 2016. Simon Stone will be appearing for the first time at the Festival d'Avignon.

HENRIK IBSEN

Henrik Ibsen was a Norwegian playwright (1828-1906). Born in a family of merchants whose business was failing due to his father's unfortunate investments, he started out as an apprentice pharmacist and medicine student, before dedicating himself to writing. His first play, *Catilina*, was published in 1849, at his own expense. Named director of the Christian Teater, he resigned to move to Rome. There, he wrote *Brand*, then *Peer Gynt*, which met with acclaim in Norway and inspired the composer Edvard Grieg. He published *A Doll's House* in 1879, and *Ghosts* two years later. He followed them up with five other plays which finished to make him famous: *An Enemy of the People*, *The Wild Duck*, *Rosmersholm*, *The Lady from the Sea*, and *Hedda Gabler*. He then made a triumphant return to Norway, twenty-seven years after his departure. Henrik Ibsen paid particularly close attention to family dramas, to the things left unsaid that could derail destinies.

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INTERVIEW WITH SIMON STONE

What is the play about? What are its main themes?

Simon Stone and Peter van Kraaij: *Ibsen Huis* is the story of a family that unfolds over several generations, in a holiday house which serves as a refuge during times of trouble. The show pulls threads and stories out of Henrik Ibsen's plays that revolve around the family saga. The result is a testament to his obsession, to this project he keeps coming back to: unveiling the everyday lies that rest at the heart of so-called "modern" families. For Ibsen, a home built on disappointment and corruption cannot survive on its own. In spite of time and of the succession of generations, the family remains a prisoner of its own system and dysfunctions. This leads to an endless struggle on the part of the characters against their broken fate, and attempts to heal the wounds of the past in order to start over.

To what extent do you recreate a story based on the original plays? Is this an adaptation, an exercise in rewriting?

This play is a new object, written for actors I personally chose, role by role. The themes and characters were taken from Ibsen's world. The sources were used more to set the atmosphere and moral tone of the play, its possible orientation. The literal meaning isn't as important. It's not the topic that's directly treated. In this perspective, it was impossible to keep complete sections of the original plays. We are in a transposition of the subject. The characters evoke those of the bestiary created by Ibsen, but they are inspired by the actors with whom I rehearse. We're at the crossroads between an Ibsenian mythology and actors who tackle the characters head on. More importantly maybe, it's also an autobiographical reflection. I create characters that remind me of men and women I've met throughout my life, and who carry within themselves the essence of some of Ibsen's figures.

Can you tell us more about rehearsals, about the work you do with the actors, and in particular about those phases of improvisation and of characterisation?

A few weeks before we started to rehearse, we met to read the plays that inspired *Ibsen Huis*: *Ghosts*, *An Enemy of the People*, *A Doll's House*, *The Master Builder*, *The Wild Duck*, *Little Eyolf*... This was followed by a period of discussion, to allow the eleven actors to tune up. During rehearsals, we spend time developing the characters, imagining their biographies, their deep-seated traumas, making that family ours. Then, I started writing scenes and building the play, day by day. The most important thing to me is for the actors to always keep the freshness of discovery. I try to unsettle them, I invite them to rediscover the scene at the same time they evolve through it. When I created *Three Sisters* in Basel, I developed a "sound system," which I still use, and which allowed me to talk to the actors at the same time they were rehearsing. This gives the "acts of life" unfolding onstage even more spontaneity. I spend a lot of time trying to find the best way to make them exist onstage, rather than letting them perform. The actors only become the characters with the premiere, sometimes without even knowing if their scene will be visible by the audience.

The house is present on the stage; the set, the spaces seem to play a primordial role.

The scenography is the holiday house of this family, where they gather every once in a while. We recreate key moments in the close past, without necessarily following their chronological order. We jump around in time. This house is built on a revolving stage, which allows the action to exist without interruption and lets us move from one moment to another in a fluid way. It's a structure that's reminiscent of the way a film's story is put together. Little by little, the complexity of the relationships appears, a triggering event in the life of a character echoes another that happens twenty years later. The house, which was created by Lizzie Clachan, is seen at three different stages of its evolution: the holiday house furnished and inhabited by the characters, the construction site, and the house empty of everything, at the end of the play. I see it as a mental representation, a nightmare in which the characters find their place in a surrealist way. The house is truly a witness to the conflicts, traumas, and abuses that have endured within that family.

Do you think our modernity is in need of acts of rewriting?

The present is this period that's impossible to understand, because it is a moment that doesn't exist as such. Only it's very difficult to take a global view of that notion since we are in a perpetual state of identification with the present. We therefore rewrite the past in order to better understand what's happening to us. Ibsen always set his plays "in the present." And even if he belonged to the late 19th century, it's a principle I apply literally. I reuse his stories, his plots, or his moral dilemmas, and anchor them in the now. The themes we defend in *Ibsen Huis* are easily recognisable by all: subtle games of influence at the heart of relationships, hidden abuses within a family, guilt, loss, and mourning, the struggle to break free from past traumas. We only have to inject them with an additional dose of modernity. For all of us, it's about learning to say "I" again. The question of identity, but also of nature and nurture, are questions that haven't lost their power in the 21st century.

You feel a strong connection to Ibsen?

Ibsen was one of the first modernists. He shifted the focus of theatre: leaving royalty and aristocracy behind, he entered the sitting rooms of the middle class, which led to the emergence of the drama of a majority. I'm obsessed with the way he grasped the form of the epic to reinject it into ordinary contexts. It's something that's really part of the magic of theatre. At the movies, you can see incredible battles, fantastic worlds, whatever the human mind can come up with, while at the theatre, the fantastic can arise from the banality of everyday life. It elevates the ordinary to the rank of the extraordinary. This way, Ibsen takes over where the Ancient Greeks left off. I'm only following up in his footsteps by using a language and situations that belong to the modern world. It's the realisation of a new phase of our dramatic period. In that sense, I prefer to talk of an ideological invention rather than of a poetic process.

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Interview conducted by Marion Guilloux and translated by Gaël Schmidt-Cléach