



Meaghan Sullivan-Willis plays Nora and Andrew Goldwasser plays Dr. Rank in a scene from Ibsen's "A Doll House," produced by the Professional Theatre Training Program at the University of Delaware.  
WILLIAM BROWNING



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## Sullivan-Willis electrifying in 'Doll House'

*By TOM BUTLER Special to The News Journal*

Henrik Ibsen's "A Doll House" (1879) is one of the seminal works of modern theater. The famous slamming of the door that ends the play signaled the arrival of feminism into popular literary life.

The current production by the University of Delaware Professional Theatre Training Program adds a strikingly 21st century sensibility to the material yet still retains the moral rigor and vision of the author. Director Leslie Reidel emphasizes the exact nature of the translated title. This production stresses the childlike mind-set of both Nora and her husband. The notion of adults playing with real people as if they were dolls figures prominently in key scenes.

Meaghan Sullivan-Willis is an electrifying Nora. Tiny and blond, she speaks with a childlike lilt and laugh that establishes both her curious charm and her terror. Nora is bright and clever and absolutely delusional. She needs to please her haughty prig of a husband because his love reinforces her sense of worth.

Mathew Simpson plays Torvald with a rigid bearing and an absolute impression of his own worth and moral correctness. He brooks no slacking of standards. He speaks of his wife as "squirrel," "lark" and "featherhead."

Nora is a captive of her dreams. After years of scrimping, her husband is on the verge of a huge promotion. Financial comfort soon will be available. Quickly, images of secrecy, illness, moral decay and debt creep into the play. Success has been built on a lie. Nora needed money to save Torvald's life by spending a year in Italy away from the harsh northern winter. It worked and her husband recovered. But Nora forged her father's signature on the note, and she has been struggling to pay off an unscrupulous moneylender for many years.

On Christmas Eve, with imagined happiness within her grasp, all of Nora's

dreams collapse. The moneylender Krogstad (Erik Matthew) is now one of Torvald's employees, and he wants favor at the bank in return for his secret. Nora knows she cannot persuade her husband to support this dark, sinister figure with a corrupt past.

Reidel lets the action unfold in a series of intimate conversations. Nora acquires a confidante in Christine (Caroline Crocker), an old school friend. Through Christine, the audience learns Nora's secrets and dreams and watches the joy and pride she reveals in her secret efforts. Christine -- tall, Nordic, very stoic -- eventually becomes the vehicle for Nora's release. Crocker is a subtle actress and her conversations with Nora and Krogstad, who is revealed as an old lover whom she sacrificed in order to support her ill mother, are often poignant and always revealing. She confronts trouble directly and deals with it. She sees no merit in Nora's fears and secrets.

Watching Sullivan-Willis transform Nora from a doll wife into a self-conscious, decisive woman makes for powerful theater. Throughout the play, she peels back her top lip from her teeth in smiles or sneers, giving the character a sort of whimsical frivolity. At the critical moment when she decides to act, her lips remain shut, her face a mask of stern determination. Her final scene with Simpson draws much ironic laughter at his blindness and the stupidity of his self-centered plans.

That offstage sound of Nora slamming the door while Torvald discovers the pain of his loss still shocks the audience. The earlier laughter has not blunted its impact.

"A Doll House" remains an important and instructive play, and the PTTP has provided a fine production.

IF YOU GO

**WHAT:** "A Doll House" by Henrik Ibsen, translated from the Norwegian by Rolf Fjelde

**WHERE:** University of Delaware's Professional Theatre Training Program, Hartshorn Theatre, Academy Street and East Park Place, Newark

**WHEN:** 7:30 p.m. Fri. and Sat., through Sept. 4; 2 p.m. Sat. and Sun. through Sept. 5

**ADMISSION:** Evenings \$18, students \$10; matinees \$15, students \$8

**MORE INFORMATION:** 831-2204 or [www.udel.edu/theatre](http://www.udel.edu/theatre).