



Home is where the heart is - and the drama too

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Nicholas Grene, *Home on the Stage: Domestic Spaces in Modern Drama*. Cambridge University Press, 2014. ISBN 9781107078093. 242 pp. £60.00

When Britain's Lord Chamberlain read the script of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, he determined immediately that it would have to be censored before a London performance could be permitted. Any references to what his report called the "four-letter word" would have to be cut; so would any other sexual allusions (the word "rutting" particularly bothered him).

He also objected to the play's explicit treatment of homosexuality. In Williams's original, the heroine Blanche recounts the devastation she endured upon discovering her husband in bed with another man (a discovery that prompted her husband's suicide). The censor declared that the husband should instead be found sleeping "with a negress" – a sufficiently "disgraceful" transgression, he thought.

That was not the strangest of the censor's admonitions. One of Williams's funniest scenes occurs when Blanche is taking a bath – and, as she does so, her brother-in-law Stanley Kowalski becomes increasingly angry at having to wait to get into the bathroom himself. "Possess your soul in patience!" Blanche urges him – half-flirtatiously, and half-provocatively. "It's not my soul. It's my kidneys I'm worried about!" is Stanley's reply.

The censor was having none of this. "Pity to cut this," he wrote. "But I suppose we should".

The suggestion that kidneys might be obscene probably tells us more about British censorship than it does about Williams, but perhaps the Lord Chamberlain was also reacting to the intensity of *Streetcar* in its entirety.

In that play, Blanche has invaded the tiny home of her sister and brother-in-law: they share only one room and, as Blanche observes with horror, only one bathroom. This cramped space allows for tensions between Blanche and Stanley to escalate explosively, culminating with his rape of her. We may have laughed as Stanley "hops from foot to foot waiting to urinate", but that minor humiliation shows how the Kowalskis' home has become a kind of battleground, the setting for a conflict that Blanche will lose comprehensively.

Williams's scene is one of many explored in Nicholas Grene's *Home on the Stage*, a book that shows how dramatists since Ibsen have used the home as a guiding metaphor. "The representation of home" writes Grene, "is everywhere apparent" in the history of theatre since the late nineteenth century. Sometimes the home is presented realistically; sometimes it is parodied – and sometimes it is thrashed. Yet as Grene notes, modern playwrights "have had to return to [the image of home] repeatedly", if only to thrash it one more time.

These ideas are of course very relevant to Irish theatre, the area with which Grene is most associated. Many of our greatest plays work on the creation of tension in tiny domestic spaces – from Synge's *Shadow of the Glen* in 1903, to

Murphy's *Whistle in the Dark* in 1961, to Enda Walsh's *Walworth Farce* today. Yet his book takes up a more international outlook, ranging from Ibsen's Norway and Chekhov's Russia to the decaying America of Suzan-Lori Parks's *Topdog/Underdog*.

Its nine chapters thus present a kind of "greatest hits" of modern theatre, analysing "major plays by major playwrights", including the Irish writers Shaw and Beckett. Those plays have been chosen not just because they are canonical, however, but also because they continue to be re-imagined in the present. Indeed, all of them have recently appeared in Ireland (and around the world), with seven of the nine produced at the Gate Theatre alone.

The on-going impact of these dramas is most apparent in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, the play that famously concludes with its heroine Nora leaving her home in order to discover her true self. The sound of the door slamming behind her may have "reverberated throughout Europe" during the 1880s but, as Grene implies, the challenges that her departure poses to dramatists have yet to be fully resolved.

This is because the home in Ibsen's play operates as a metaphor both for society and for the theatre itself. Nora, for example, is placed close to the hearth onstage, while her husband Helmer spends much of his time in a study – a neat expression by Ibsen of the stereotype that women are associated with feeling and men with reason.

When Nora walks off-stage, Ibsen is showing his society that it literally has no place for such a woman – yet he is also showing that the conventions of the realistic theatre have failed to adequately represent the real Nora. One of the reasons she must leave the stage is that the theatre had yet to devise a language that could tell the story of what happens to her after her departure from her home.

That failure to accommodate the "real" Nora might explain why each generation has sought to remake *A Doll's House* for itself, even while claiming (rather too optimistically) that Ibsen's play is no longer relevant. In our own times, Lee Breuer of Mabou Mines presented a production in which the three male roles were played by actors "of no more than four feet tall, while the women ... were near enough six feet". Breuer was trying to "mock the reverence with which [the play] has been treated," writes Grene. But that mockery shows how the home remains a space that theatre-makers feel compelled to explore.

Grene's focus on the home inevitably places women characters at the heart of his study. He reminds us that when Strindberg's Miss Julie goes to her basement kitchen to begin an affair with a servant, her descent is both literal and metaphorical: a transition across social as well as emotional boundaries. And his book also suggests that Ruth – the sole woman in Harold Pinter's snarling masterpiece *The Homecoming* – must be seen in relation to Ibsen's Nora. Ruth abandons her husband and children too but, unlike Nora, she remains onstage at the end, seemingly in a position of power.

Male dysfunction is also a theme of several chapters, notably one on Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. "The more property you own, the safer you think you are," says Tyrone, a character based on O'Neill's Irish father – a man whose lust for property was a direct reaction to the trauma of the Irish famine. The characterisation of Tyrone illustrates one of the book's key points: that people too often suffer as a result of seeing the home as a symbol of their own worth, a guarantor of their own security. That idea will resonate with readers in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland.

Ultimately, then, this suggestive and insightful study shows that the home is where our dramatists have most clearly revealed to us who we really are: as family-members, as citizens, and – most importantly – as individuals.

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