

Acting Edition

Ibsen's Ghost

An Irresponsible Biographical Fantasy

by Charles Busch

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|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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ISBN 978-0-573-71153-4

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IBSEN’S GHOST was first produced by George Street Playhouse (David Saint, Artistic Director; Edgar Herrera, Managing Director) in New Brunswick, NJ, on January 16, 2024.

IBSEN’S GHOST had its Off Broadway premiere at Primary Stages (Erin Daley, Artistic Director; Shane D. Hudson, Executive Director; Casey Childs, Founder) in association with George Street Playhouse and by special arrangement with Daryl Roth, Ted Snowdon and Jamie deRoy on March 2, 2024.

The cast and creative team for both productions were as follows:

WOLF	Thomas Gibson
SUZANNAH THORESEN IBSEN	Charles Busch
GERDA	Jennifer Cody
GEORGE ELSTAD	Christopher Borg
MAGDALENE KRAGH THORESEN	Judy Kaye
HANNA SOLBERG	Jennifer Van Dyck
THE RAT WIFE	Christopher Borg
STANDBY FOR SUZANNAH THORESEN IBSEN	Kate Hampton

Director	Carl Andress
Scenic Design	Shoko Kambara
Costume Design	Gregory Gale
Lighting Design	Ken Billington
Sound Design	Jill BC Du Boff & Ien DeNio
Hair, Wigs, Makeup Design	Bobbie Zlotnik
Dialect Coach	Rebecca Simon
Key Art Photographer	Michael Wakefield
Production Stage Manager	Avery Trunko

CHARACTERS

WOLF

SUZANNAH THORESEN IBSEN

GERDA

GEORGE ELSTAD

MAGDALENE KRAGH THORESEN

HANNA SOLBERG

THE RAT WIFE

SETTING

The sitting room in the home of the Norwegian playwright,
Henrik Ibsen.

TIME

1906.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

My introduction to the plays of Henrik Ibsen came when I was a theater major at Northwestern University in the early 1970s. The versions we read were the late nineteenth-century William Archer translations from the Norwegian. I don't mean to disparage Mr. Archer, who played a major role in bringing Ibsen's oeuvre to English speaking audiences, but his conservative Edwardian sensibility was at odds with the radical nature of Ibsen's work. After reading his translations, I dismissed Ibsen with the cold eye of youth, muttering to myself, "I dunno. I don't get it."

A few years later, at a yard sale in Saugatuck, Michigan, I stumbled across a paperback anthology of Ibsen's plays, translated in the 1960s by the legendary actress/director Eva Le Gallienne. These translations were in a vital, contemporary actor's language. At last, I could appreciate the mystery and insight into humanity I'd been told these works possessed.

For the next forty years, I dreamed of playing the title role of *Hedda Gabler* and Mrs. Alving in *Ghosts*. The odds were slim that I'd ever star in a production of either play. In 2021, Carl Andress, the director of nearly all of my plays for the past twenty-five years, and I were discussing what project we might work on next. He suggested, "What about writing something where you could finally play all of your favorite moments from Ibsen?" I wasn't quite sure how I would go about doing that. It wasn't as simple as putting together a medley of ABBA tunes.

The first thing was immersing myself in Ibsen biographies and commentaries of his works. Not light bedtime reading. However, minor but intriguing figures emerged among the footnotes. There was an illegitimate son from a brief romance with a boarding house servant girl when he was a youth. Ibsen never met this child, but what if decades later, an adult son appeared on the doorstep? I read about a woman named Laura Kieler who had been friends with Ibsen and his wife, Suzannah. Ibsen used the disastrous breakup of Laura Kieler's marriage as the basis of his first international success, *A Doll's House*. What if she returned full of rage over that perceived exploitation? Although Ibsen's wife Suzannah was very much the woman behind the great man, there was little in any of the literature about her emotional life. I learned that after Suzannah's mother died in childbirth, her father, a Deacon of the church, quickly married Magdalene Kragh, the seventeen-year-old nanny to Suzannah's older sisters. Even more interesting is that Magdalene Kragh Thoresen became a successful novelist and playwright. What was the nature of her relationship with her stepdaughter? Was it nurturing or acrimonious? With all of this in mind, I fashioned an original story about Suzannah Ibsen set during the first weeks of her widowhood. I could make her a quintessential Ibsen heroine, haunted by the ghosts of her past and determined to ward off any scandal that might tar Ibsen's legacy. Having played somewhat fast and loose with the historical facts,

I chose to scuttle any scholarly raised eyebrows by giving the play the subtitle, "An Irresponsible Biographical Fantasy."

As I've done for most of my playwriting career, I wrote the role of Suzannah for myself. I've never viewed any of these female characters as "drag" roles. It's always been difficult for me to define exactly what I do. Since childhood, I've been fascinated by the pantheon of stage actresses of the past; Laurette Taylor, Katharine Cornell, Lynn Fontanne, Alla Nazimova, Eleanora Duse, Eva Le Gallienne, and above all, Sarah Bernhardt. When I've created female characters for me to embody onstage, it was not to lampoon or spoof. It was a way of getting closer to these extraordinary women and the theater of their time. I've made my reputation as a comic performer. Therefore, I've laced this play with plenty of opportunities for comedy, verbal and physical, while giving me the chance to play the dramatic moments from Ibsen's plays that have long been my unfulfilled ambition. You might come across some dialogue reminiscent of plays outside the Ibsen canon. Henrik Ibsen has been called "the father of modern drama." I thought it would be fun and theatrically valid to evoke a few of the playwrights he influenced, including August Strindberg, Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams.

Here then, I give you *Ibsen's Ghost; An Irresponsible Biographical Fantasy*. One could say it's the play Ibsen never wrote, his themes and dark Nordic sensibility present, but with the veil of madcap laughter and a most un-Ibsenian happy ending.

ACT I

Scene One

*(1906. The sitting room in the home of the Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen. There are no walls to the set, only a free-standing door, a Victorian settee, an end table, an accent chair, a desk and chair, a liquor cabinet and a porcelain stove providing heat. An imposing portrait of a glowering Ibsen is the most striking element.** **WOLF**, a virile, forceful man wearing a sailor's pea coat and cap, enters from inside the house. For all of his seaman's swagger, he also has the sensitivity and virtuosic eloquence of a poet. All his life he has imagined what this room must be like. He picks up a cigarette box on the table and studies it. He hears someone entering from the front door and hides within the recesses of the house. **SUZANNAH IBSEN** enters. Dressed in black mourning clothes, she's wearing a short capelet and gloves and carrying a small reticule and a leather folder, which she places on the end table. She enters full of ebullience, with the slightly mad confidence that the letters contained in the folder will solidify her position as the force behind her husband's

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creative life. GERDA, a pretty housemaid, having heard her mistress arrive, rushes out. She walks with a limp that borders on the outlandish.)

GERDA. Madame, you left without your hat.

SUZANNAH. I could have sworn I had it on. Silly of me.

GERDA. When you leave the house without your wrap, then we'll have cause for worry.

(GERDA helps her remove her capelet and takes her gloves.)

SUZANNAH. Complete and utter forgetfulness might be a blessing. All that matters, Gerda, is today! My dear, you seem flushed.

GERDA. *(Self-consciously.)* I don't know why I should.

SUZANNAH. Didn't Dr. Esbjornsen diagnose that the curvature of your spine might lead to unwanted sensations in the pubis?

GERDA. That humiliating diagnosis is etched in my memory.

SUZANNAH. Was my son here? His presence has on you a *stimulating* effect.

GERDA. I shall not regard Herr Ibsen the younger as anything more than a happily married man.

SUZANNAH. And so he is. And so he is.

GERDA. A gentleman of propriety, same as his father...his beloved father plucked from the living like an unripe lingonberry.

SUZANNAH. Gerda, my husband endured a series of debilitating strokes. His death was not unexpected.

GERDA. Even at the last, Herr Ibsen dominated his surroundings with an intense virility.

SUZANNAH. With his demise, I lost, along with everything else, a conjugal partner of inexhaustible pyrotechnics.

(GERDA uncontrollably gasps with erotic stimulation.)

GERDA. Oh.

SUZANNAH. Gerda. Pubis.

GERDA. Yes, Ma'am.

(Offstage, Ibsen's distinguished publisher, GEORGE ELSTAD, rings the doorbell.)

SUZANNAH. That must be my husband's publisher, George Elstad. You may serve the tea here in the sitting room.

ELSTAD. *(Offstage.)* Good afternoon.

GERDA. Yes, Mum.

(SUZANNAH stares transfixed at the portrait of the late Ibsen. GEORGE ELSTAD, a figure of congenial dignity, enters the room. GERDA curtsies painfully and exits, taking with her Suzannah's capelet, gloves and reticule.)

ELSTAD. A rendering worthy of a giant.

SUZANNAH. One can almost catch him stealing a breath.

ELSTAD. I have just been informed that a memorial portrait has been commissioned to hang in the National Gallery in Christiania and one for the state theater in Copenhagen and an alabaster bust for Stockholm's Valgorande Fruntimmerssällskapet union of scenic artists and carpenters.

SUZANNAH. Is it de rigueur for the bereft widow to be trotted out at each unveiling?

ELSTAD. My dear Suzannah, have I come at an inopportune time? I can return tomorrow.

SUZANNAH. No, I mustn't be alone! Do pardon my morbidity, George. It's thoughtless and self-indulgent.

ELSTAD. As your husband's publisher and you his literary executrix, we will be spending many hours together in this room.

SUZANNAH. For your sake, I wish it wasn't so squalid. Ibsen didn't seem to mind. He blossomed in rooms that wreaked of death and decay.

ELSTAD. The parlor has the effect of seeming off-balance. Is this old building listing slightly to one side?

SUZANNAH. With the walls and its inhabitants turned towards the blinding sun of genius, all is apt to become lopsided. The floorboards, the windowpanes, the servant girl. Long after this edifice is rubble, his glory shall live on.

ELSTAD. We will see him in every future play that lifts the iron lid off polite society.

SUZANNAH. To contribute to that legacy, I have decided to relinquish these letters that have been moldering in a safe deposit box over at the Royal Oslo Bank. I see them as the foundation for a compelling and important book.

(SUZANNAH enthusiastically hands him the leather folder.)

ELSTAD. The letters your son recently donated to the Ibsen archive are some of the most eloquent I've read from a father to a son.

SUZANNAH. We're fortunate that Sigurd was diligent in preserving them.

ELSTAD. The letters of Henrik Ibsen are of immense literary importance and I might add, as his publisher, of remunerative value. What have we here?

(He opens the leather folder and lifts out the top letter.)

SUZANNAH. The fifty year correspondence between a husband and wife.

ELSTAD. It's been recognized the role you played in his literary career.

SUZANNAH. His life was my life. My life his life. His victories, my victories. His enemies, my bitter foes. When he found it impossible to write, I gripped the pen in his hand and together we would shepherd his thoughts to that terrifying blank page.

ELSTAD. It's widely known that you were the model for one of his most controversial heroines.

SUZANNAH. I am Nora Helmer. So pleased to meet you. My early frustrations in our marriage, and my cowardice... Did I say cowardice? And my wise decision not to leave him to pursue my own writing, sparked my husband to create a play about a woman who did flee the roost.

ELSTAD. Has there been a playwright with such insight into the mysteries of the feminine brain?

(He scans the top letter.)

In this letter written by you dated November 5, 1877, I see much about a holiday you and your son took in Gossensass, but nothing of Ibsen's play *The Pillars of Society*, which was written during that same period.

(Scanning a second letter.) And here's his reply. Again nothing about the play. Here's another dated, June 1886.

SUZANNAH. A prized jewel of the collection.

ELSTAD. There's quite a bit of agonizing over the purchase of a hot water bottle. And no mention of the difficulties Ibsen found in the premiere production of

Rosmersholm. Tell me, Suzannah, are all the letters in this domestic mode?

SUZANNAH. A rare glimpse into a monumental artist's day to day existence.

ELSTAD. Well, they certainly should be included in the Ibsen archive. To publish, I think not.

SUZANNAH. Not only a wife and muse, I am mother to his only child, Sigurd Ibsen, the current Prime Minister of Norway.

ELSTAD. The harsh reality is that my company is in the business of selling books.

SUZANNAH. How dare you, George Elstad, how dare you slap me across the face with my insignificance! You, a pretentious, ineffectual bourgeois!

ELSTAD. Suzannah!

SUZANNAH. I don't know what came over me. Loyal, steadfast George. It's rather amusing my sudden burst of hysteria. Almost comic. Isn't it?

(The doorbell rings.)

We may continue the debate over the value of these letters when you're in a more objective frame of mind.

(GERDA enters the sitting room.)

GERDA. Madame, your stepmother, Mrs. Thoresen.

*(Suzannah's formidable stepmother,
MAGDALENE KRAGH THORESEN, enters.)*

MAGDALENE. Suzannah, my lamb.

SUZANNAH. Stepmama, always unexpected.

ELSTAD. Magdalene.

MAGDALENE. Dear George.

(They kiss each other twice on each cheek.)

Suzannah, I feel dreadful that I haven't seen you since the funeral. And my blundering rudeness in criticizing your appearance as the coffin was being lowered into the ground. But, Suzannah, my darling, that wrinkled veil with the polka dots.

SUZANNAH. I wasn't wearing a veil.

GERDA. Mrs. Thoresen, will you be having tea?

MAGDALENE. I suppose. I'd ask you to toss in a shot of whiskey, but Ibsen's liquor cabinet is strictly Sven's Waterfront Saloon. No. I'll forgo the tea as well. Thank you.

GERDA. Yes, Ma'am.

(GERDA curtsies and exits with an outrageous limp, flailing arms and hip twitch.)

MAGDALENE. *(Sotto voce.)* Oh my, her infirmity has evolved into a vaudeville routine. Is there nothing therepeutic that can be done?

SUZANNAH. The doctors have flung up their hands. I was telling George, it may have to do with the house.

MAGDALENE. This domicile could transform Lillie Langtry into Quasimodo.

ELSTAD. Magdalene, what you are working on these days?

MAGDALENE. The usual. A play, a novel, an opera libretto, a cycle of poems, a ballet scenario and three short stories.

SUZANNAH. Stepmama. You're fiendishly productive in this fifth act of your life.

MAGDALENE. If I am in the last act, I shall take at least ten curtain calls. Rather like when we saw Madame Geneviève Prévost sing Zerlina in *Fra Diavolo* in Stockholm. The curtain calls were longer than the opera.

ELSTAD. (*To SUZANNAH.*) The Prévost Zerlina is the stuff of legend. You must've been quite young.

SUZANNAH. Very young.

MAGDALENE. Suzannah was seven years old. Her sister Elisabeth was nine. I was in my early twenties and hardly more worldly than they. It took some doing to spirit them away for two whole days. Their father was, after all, the Dean of the Holy Cross Church. If their mother had been alive, she never would have permitted such a deplorable excursion.

SUZANNAH. Tell me Stepmama, is there a purpose behind this afternoon's surprise invasion?

MAGDALENE. There is. And it's most fortuitous, George, that you're here. Last night, Mona Lund had a few of us over for dinner. The guest of honor was the extravagantly hailed new novelist, Axel Viggo Rasmussen. Have you read his latest? Such seethingly muscular prose.

SUZANNAH. His book is extraordinary. Every paragraph vibrates with life daring to be lived.

ELSTAD. For my taste, a bit too much masculine posturing and a barbaric lack of punctuation. Zealously guards his privacy. To my knowledge, no one has ever seen Rasmussen. Most likely a crashing bore.

SUZANNAH. If Mona had invited me, I am sure I would have found Herr Rasmussen endlessly fascinating.

MAGDALENE. The guest of honor was characteristically *in absentia*. Mona was livid. Even so, what a hostess she is. The centerpiece of the smorgasbord was an entire vodka-brined smoked salmon. I spent nearly an hour devouring each heavenly morsel.

SUZANNAH. Your favorite pastime. Picking the flesh off bones.

MAGDALENE. But by far the most delectable offering was the gossip served up after dinner about the curious return to Oslo of one Hanna Solberg. Is the name familiar?

SUZANNAH. She was the first of my husband's princesses.

ELSTAD. Ah. The young women he took on as protégées. This involvement with Miss Solberg was before my association with your husband. Did it end badly?

SUZANNAH. I can't remember. While these ladies clung to each word of wisdom Ibsen uttered, they made little impact on our lives. I believe this one was married when she attached herself to my husband. Like the others, she moved on.

MAGDALENE. Well, she's moved back, peddling a diary. A tome rumored to be most indiscreet.

SUZANNAH. What are her claims? Has she invented some obscene nonsense that it was a physically intimate relationship?

MAGDALENE. One would assume so.

SUZANNAH. Well, then she's a liar.

MAGDALENE. Can you be so sure?

SUZANNAH. Ibsen gave unstintingly to these novices his critical judgements, career advice, championing their efforts. The effrontery that this Solberg woman should malign Ibsen and myself! As if I was some weak-willed, acquiescent drudge.

MAGDALENE. George, do you think a reputable publisher will pick it up?

SUZANNAH. His acquaintanceship with these women was purely intellectual.

ELSTAD. The diary will be lucrative to whoever takes it on.

MAGDALENE. What's to be done? Do you make an offer to buy the diary, then bury it?

ELSTAD. I must tell you, she has made an inquiry to our firm.

MAGDALENE. The brazen Jezebel. Ibsen's own publisher?

ELSTAD. We've chosen to have no further contact with the lady.

SUZANNAH. Bring her here.

MAGDALENE. What?

ELSTAD. Suzannah...

SUZANNAH. I insist, I insist, I insist that you bring her round tomorrow. She shall be confronted with her lies.

ELSTAD. We shall see what we can do.

SUZANNAH. Miss Solberg will find in me a most combative opponent.

MAGDALENE. 'Tis best if I'm here when you face the creature.

ELSTAD. That won't be necessary.

MAGDALENE. I'm an old warrior. I know my way round the battlefield.

ELSTAD. If you say so. I must get back to the office. Magdalene, will you be staying?

MAGDALENE. No, I should be returning home as well. I have rewrites due on my new play. Hopefully, this nasty business will reach its swift conclusion. Goodbye, my pet.

(She gives SUZANNAH a kiss on the forehead.)

And try not to brood. These scoundrels, like mice, emerge out of the woodwork, but a clever trap generally keeps them at bay.

ELSTAD. Magdalene, can I drop you at home?

MAGDALENE. Yes that would be lovely.

(**MAGDALENE** and **ELSTAD** exit. **SUZANNAH** again stares at the portrait of her husband. **WOLF** comes out of his hiding place. **SUZANNAH** screams at the sight of him.)

SUZANNAH. Have you come to plunder, or murder, or both?

WOLF. (*With a light Irish cadence.*) Neither, my fine lady. However, the bedroom window shouldn't be left open. Carelessness of that order would never be countenanced aboard ship.

SUZANNAH. You climbed in through a second story window. That displayed ingenuity.

WOLF. I'm puzzled by the décor of these rooms. Ibsen was a man of the theater. (*With a surprising theatrical intensity.*) Where's the drama? The flair? The panache?

SUZANNAH. What exactly are you looking for?

WOLF. I came in search of a memento.

SUZANNAH. Ah, an overly-enthusiastic aficionado of my husband's oeuvre.

WOLF. I am his son.

SUZANNAH. His son? Your mother was Mary Agnes O'Neill.

WOLF. You know of her?

SUZANNAH. My husband and I held nothing from each other. Early in our marriage he confessed that as a friendless boy, taking a room in a boarding house, he engaged in a three-day tryst with an affectionate and jovial Irish servant girl.

WOLF. That would be my old Ma.

SUZANNAH. Those were years of struggle, but Ibsen managed to contribute to your support until you were of age to work.

WAIT, THERE'S MORE!

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