

Next to Nora

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Henrik Ibsen's classic play *A Doll's House* and Brian Yorkey and Tom Kitt's rock musical *Next to Normal* were written over a century apart, yet each boldly portrays a woman's desire to leave her family without berating her decision. The relationship of Natalie, Diana's daughter, and her classmate Henry parallels the relationship between Mrs. Linde and Krogstad. The mothers in both plays have a somewhat romantic relationship with the doctors of the plays to whom they both tell their secrets, reflected in Dr. Rank's unrequited love for Nora and Diana's "intense and very intimate" dance with her psychiatrist. Both plays exhibit Brian Johnston's idea of three "seismic convulsions" that eventually shatter the home. *Next to Normal* is *A Doll's House* of our generation that continues Nora's story by choosing to focus on the consequences of the wife's final action. While the setting, illusion, and final action of both plays are wildly similar, the role of the children in each is radically different, changing the entire perception by the audience. While family dysfunction is accepted as normal, these plays show the danger of living in such a house. *A Doll's House* does this by portraying the harm of this life on the wife, *Next to Normal* by illustrating the harm on the family. Each shows the pain of living a lie and conveys the controversial idea that a woman's duty, above all else, is to herself.

Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* shocked its viewers over a century ago by portraying a woman's motives for leaving her family without berating her decision. Today, Brian Yorkey and Tom Kitt's *Next to Normal* does the same in a rock musical of a modern dysfunctional family. Its Nora is Diana, a woman who lost her son before her daughter was born and failed to come to terms with his death. Consequently, she became manic-depressive and schizophrenic, still believing her son is alive. Unable to offer her existing child and husband the love they deserve, she eventually leaves them. *Next to Normal* is *A Doll's House* of our generation that continues Nora's story by choosing to focus on the consequences of the wife's final action.

Both plays represent the underlying tragedy of a typical family. To the outside world, these characters appear essentially normal, and that is their very purpose. From their home to their personal appearances, all is in order with society. *A Doll's House* opens with the scene description of "a warm, well-furnished room, reflecting more taste than expense" (Ibsen 7). This "modest tastefulness of the domestic setting reflects the 'aesthetic' view of the world within which the Helmers contrive, totally, to live" (Johnston 144). *Next to Normal* begins with the line "We're the perfect loving family, so adoring" (Ripley, "Just Another Day"). The audience buys this, until the daughter asks, "If other families live the way we do. If they love each other or if they just fake it?" (Damiano). As much as the outside may accept this skewed view of their imperfect world, these characters fail to fool themselves.

The characters in each play are also obsessed with beauty. They take great care of their physical appearances to add to their normal façade. Furthermore, Torvald cre-

ates Nora's image in his idea of perfection, refusing her the macaroons she craves and dressing up his pretty little doll of a wife. "The very essence of the family, the sexual relationship, is a form of erotically charged fiction. The living reality of Nora has been transformed into a fictional being with no truth, no freedom, other than that which her 'author' provides" (Johnston 144). In the first act, this author is Torvald, and Nora's identity is what her husband wills it to be. The same holds true for the opening act of *Next to Normal*, except it is this Nora that does the manipulating. Diana's son is perfection in her eyes. She makes him so real and ideal that the audience fully believes he is alive. It is not until we see the deterioration of the family's cover that we learn he is long deceased. We then spite ourselves for so easily falling for their façade.

The relationship of Natalie, Diana's daughter, and her classmate Henry parallels the relationship between Mrs. Linde and Krogstad. Each experiences a "journey from estrangement to reconciliation and joy" (Johnston 144), after Krogstad is separated from Mrs. Linde in time and space, and Henry is distanced by Natalie's built-up guard. The inability of each female to deal with her family is what initially keeps them from love. When Natalie is at complete odds with her mother, her relationship with Henry is only another mechanism to add stress. As much as she cares for him, she is not ready for love. She abuses drugs to help handle her life, inadvertently driving Henry away. Only when Natalie can stop the self harm by forgiving her mother and admitting that "For all those years I'd pray that you'd go away for good, half the time afraid that you really would" (Damiano, "Maybe"), she can open her heart to Henry. While Henry "might be lazy, a loner,

a bit of a stoner” (Chanler-Berat, “Perfect For You”), and Natalie reveals her deep fear that she will end up as crazy as her mother, Henry promises that, “I will be perfect for you... Sometimes life isn’t sane, but crazy I know I can do” (Chanler-Berat, “Hey #3/Perfect for You [Reprise]), and Natalie replies that she, too, is “perfect for you” (Damiano). Similarly, Mrs. Linde left Krogstad for someone who could support her family, yet once she is free of her familial ties she can be with Krogstad, the one who is perfect for her.

Both plays feature a “Song of Forgetting,” represented by Torvald’s wish to forget the ugliness, and never again talk about his wife’s mistake, and by Dan’s wish to fill Diana’s mind with only happiness after electric shocks meant to help with her psychological disorders completely destroy her memory of the last nineteen years. Furthermore, whenever Nora talks about how “wonderful” life is, the repetition of the word “wonderful” is stopped abruptly as “the doorbell rings to bring in one of the agents through whom none of these wonderful things will come about” (Johnston 146-147), either Mrs. Linde or Krogstad. This juxtaposition of appearance versus reality is paralleled in *Next to Normal*, when, after an incredibly merry tune, “It’s Gonna Be Good,” the cheerfulness is immediately cut off by the revelation that Diana’s son is dead in the painful song “He’s Not Here.”

Both women leave their families because of lack of understanding on the part of their husbands. “By attempting to exclude conflict, guilt, and sorrow from their lives, Torvald and Nora are evading human wholeness for a doll existence. Both need to be shocked into maturity” in this play “about the destruction of an illusory idea of life shared by both husband and wife” (Johnston 143). The same holds true for the relationship between Diana and Dan, masked by lies, pills, psychosis, and secrets.

Both plays exhibit Brian Johnston’s idea of three “seismic convulsions” that eventually shatter the home (Johnston 141). The first one is the objective shock, in Act I of each play, “when Nora is forced to recognize, for the first time, the claims of the public/social world she had frivolously disdained” (Johnston 141) and when Diana is physically shocked by treatment for her delusions. The second is the subjective, inward shock, in Act II of each, when Nora “begins to fathom something of her own nature” (Johnston 141) and when Diana, after completely losing her memory of her children, feels a large, unnamed piece of her soul missing. Finally, the final act of each woman leaving her family is performed through the third, metaphysical shock

when both Nora’s and Diana’s “whole idea of the world she thought she inhabited and of her own, and others’, identities is shown to be grotesquely false” (Johnston 141). The build-up of these progressive shocks allows the final woman to be a transformation from the original. This stepwise progression makes the final decision believable, in which the newly aware woman finally begins to understand herself, and learn that her sense of self does not involve her present husband or her inadequate parenting.

They exit alone because each is presently unequipped to be a mother and a wife to strangers and “must stand on my own if I’m to make sense of myself and everything around me” (Ibsen 63). Nora leaves, telling Torvald that, “You do not understand me. I have never understood you either” (Ibsen 61), and Diana leaves her husband believing that, “You say you hurt like me... You say that you know... Oh, you don’t know” (Ripley, “I Am the One”). Unfortunately, while Nora is correct, Diana is painfully mistaken in her belief. Her husband knew how she felt all along, but kept his own psychosis and hallucinations of his son Gabriel a secret to protect his true love. When Diana leaves her husband, we see Dan alone with Gabriel crying, “Why didn’t you go with her?” (Spencer, “I Am the One” [Reprise]). While his wife, through all her suicide attempts, always ranted that her husband could never know how she felt, Dan’s life was “just a slower suicide” (Spencer, “I’ve Been”).

While the setting, illusion, and final action of both plays are wildly similar, the role of the children in each is radically different, changing the entire perception by the audience. *A Doll’s House* was produced before women publically possessed basic human rights. Simply the notion that Nora deceived her husband was preposterous; let alone her leaving her family. The shock value of the play rested in the woman’s uncanny independence, not in the harm to her family. Therefore, the children of Nora are practically nameless with absolutely no character development. Any empathy for these characters derives simply from the fact that they are young. *Next to Normal*, however, was written in a time when women have drastically more accepted power. However, the impact of Diana’s final action is arguably just as difficult for society to accept. This is possible because of the focus on the individuals who suffer in the aftershocks of the mother’s decision.

The children Natalie and Gabriel each possess a voice that matters immensely.

Gabriel is a mother’s dream, literally. His perfection in appearance and voice serves to mask the evil that

lay beneath. He tells his mother that “I am what you want me to be and I’m your worst fear you’ll find it in me” (Tveit). The physically deceased son and the mentally decayed mother have an almost incestuous relationship that destroys Diana’s mind. He is the son she would have had but never could. He died soon after he was born, and Diana had Natalie to compensate.

This compensation is the genuine product of a twisted yet average middle-class American family. The parents of *A Doll’s House* intended “to create an attractive home, to raise a family that will go to the ‘right school and university’” (Ibsen 140), yet we never see the implications of this environment. In *Next to Normal*, this atmosphere creates Natalie’s drive to “get into Yale, so I won’t feel so sick and I won’t look so pale” (Damiano, “Everything Else”). Natalie fails to realize that this sickly determination is founded out of spite and her inability to cope with the present, only furthering her misery.

Diana’s fixation on her son leaves Natalie with no attention from her mother, leading Natalie to cry, “Superboy and the Invisible Girl, everything a kid oughtta be. He’s immortal, forever alive. Then there’s me,” and begging her mother to “please look closely and find her before she fades away” (Damiano, “Superboy and the Invisible Girl”). This lack of caring from her mother causes Natalie’s insecurity and the resulting wall built around her heart for sixteen years.

USA Today raves *A Doll’s House* is “gut-twisting and gripping” (Ibsen, back cover), and The New York Times claims that “No show on Broadway right now makes as direct a grab for the heart – or wrings it as thoroughly – as *Next to Normal* does” (Brantley). Both plays are powerful, very human stories that cause the audience to feel. Whether or not we agree with the decision of the women of the plays, we can at least understand the reasons why they chose the future they did. While family dysfunction is accepted as normal, these plays show the danger of living in such a house. *A Doll’s House* does this by portraying the harm of this life on the wife, *Next to Normal* by illustrating the harm on the family. Each shows the pain of living a lie and conveys the controversial idea that a woman’s duty, above all else, is to herself.

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