

Rosmersholm

by Henrik Ibsen

In a new version by Mike Poulton



PROJECTS PACK

compiled by
Samantha Lane and Charlie Payne

ALMEIDA
PROJECTS



Paul Hilton
Photo: Johan Persson

Welcome to the Almeida Theatre's production of *Rosmersholm* by Henrik Ibsen.

It's been almost three years since the Almeida has staged anything by Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, and then it was one of his better known plays, *Hedda Gabler*. *Rosmersholm*, written in 1886, is one of Ibsen's earlier plays.

Realism is in the driver's seat for *Rosmersholm*, and, consequently, there has been a great deal of round-the-table discussion about character motives, status and sub-text in the rehearsal room. This isn't a play that is overtly theatrical or playful, but rather it strives to reach a level of realism that will make the audience feel like they are sharing the sitting room with the characters on stage.

The Almeida Projects Team are really excited about exploring some of the key ideas and questions posed in *Rosmersholm*. Thanks to all of the creative team and the cast who have been so generous in their enthusiasm and support of the Projects work. We very much hope that you and your students are able to draw energy both from its ideas and the skill with which they are presented.

We look forward to welcoming you to the Almeida Theatre soon.

Samantha Lane and Charlie Payne
Almeida Projects



Helen McCrory in rehearsal
Photo: Johan Persson

ALMEIDA PROJECTS

Under the artistic directorship of Michael Attenborough, the Almeida Theatre presents an eclectic programme, ranging from redefined major classics to the cutting edge of brand new work. Our Projects reflect the main programme's ambition by finding ways to challenge and excite our participants about the work you come to see at the Almeida. We hope to inspire you to approach your own theatre work in the same spirit of generosity and risk-taking that we encourage in our rehearsal room.

PROJECTS PACK

This pack aims to provide insight into the play and our process in taking the production from research stage to performance. We hope you will use it to help you in your own investigations into the play both before and after your visit to the Almeida.

WORKSHOPS

Before you see the production, a member of our Projects Team may be visiting you for a workshop, bringing some of the techniques explored in the rehearsal room, the challenges the play presents and some questions. The sessions are designed to be practical and participatory so please come energised, ready to work and wearing appropriate clothes and shoes.

GROUP HOSTS

When you come to the theatre, you will be met by one of the Projects Team who will be on hand to answer your questions and listen to your feedback about the production. Please do take advantage of this opportunity to find out more about how the production has evolved.

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Malcolm Sinclair & Paul Hilton
Photo: Johan Persson

Rosmersholm

By Henrik Ibsen

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Cast:

Johannes Rosmer
Rebecca West
Doctor Kroll
Ulrik Brendel
Peder Mortensgaard
Mrs Helseth

Paul Hilton
Helen McCrory
Malcolm Sinclair
Paul Moriarty
Peter Sullivan
Veronica Quilligan

Creative Team:

Director
Set Design
Costume Design
Lighting
Sound
Casting
Assistant Directors

Anthony Page
Hildegard Bechtler
Amy Roberts
Peter Mumford
Gareth Fry
Toby Whale
Paul Higgins
Wally Sutcliffe

Production Manager
Company Manager
Stage Manager
Deputy Stage Manager
Assistant Stage Manager
Costume Supervisor

Igor
Rupert Carlile
Harry Niland
Lucy Taylor
Ali Hunter
Carrie Bayliss

For Almeida Projects:

Director, Almeida Projects
Projects Administrator
Workshop Team

Samantha Lane
Charlie Payne
Kate Budgen
Ned Glasier
Nicholas Khan
Imogen Knight
Debbie Korley
Wally Sutcliffe
Maria Thomas
Anna Tolputt

Plot Summary



Veronica Quilligan & Helen McCrory
Photo: Johan Persson

SUMMARY

Johannes Rosmer, the owner of Rosmersholm, is the last of a long and influential line of clergy, officers and senior civil servants. Formerly a vicar, he has resigned from office. Before the opening of the play, his wife Beate had drowned herself in the mill-race. She was thought to have become mentally ill through sorrow at being childless. A young woman, Rebecca West, has gained admittance to Rosmersholm through Beate's brother, Dr. Kroll. She sees Rosmer's potential, and believes she can help him to realise his dream of creating a world of happy, noble people, where freedom of expression is the norm. His conversations with her strongly influence his view of life, and for a while he believes himself ready to go out into the world and actively take part in left-wing politics. An open conflict breaks out between him and the conservative Dr. Kroll. In the course of the play Rosmer discovers that Rebecca has manipulated Beate and he is filled with doubt and self-accusation. Yet when Rosmer asks Rebecca to marry him she refuses. Rebecca confesses that she was indirectly the cause of Beate's suicide, because she wanted to become mistress of Rosmersholm herself. Lost in despair, the two of them agree to throw themselves into the mill-race, willingly meeting the same end as Rosmer's late wife.

ACT ONE

It is a summer evening in 1886. The scene is the living room of Rosmer's house, an estate near the sea, a little way out of a large town. Rebecca West sits crocheting a large shawl. Rosmer is expected home, and Rebecca West and the housekeeper, Mrs Helseth discuss his behaviour after the suicide of his wife Beate, who jumped to her death from the bridge approaching the house. Mrs Helseth is superstitious about death: 'it's the dead that won't let go...of the ones they leave behind.' Rebecca mocks Mrs Helseth's superstition about the White Horse of Rosmersholm – the ghostly apparition that supposedly haunts the Rosmer estate. Dr. Kroll is seen approaching; a surprise, as he has not visited since Beate's death.

Dr. Kroll notes the changes Rebecca has made to the house – there are more flowers and bright colours; Beate did not like the scent of flowers nor their bright colours. Dr. Kroll has taken an interest in politics of late, and has recently suffered a humiliating defeat in the local election. Rebecca too expresses interest in politics, but hints that her beliefs differ greatly from Kroll's conservatism. Dr. Kroll asks if Rebecca plans to stay on at Rosmersholm. She replies that this must be Rosmer's decision: as long as she can be of some use to him, she will stay. We learn that Rebecca's foster father, Dr. West, is recently deceased. Rebecca has also had to bear the strain of supporting Beate during her final days of depression, 'her last, long illness'. Dr. Kroll suggests that Rebecca might take Beate's place as the new Mrs Rosmer. Rebecca refutes this strongly: marriage is not something to be taken lightly. Rebecca invites Dr. Kroll to stay for dinner.

Rosmer arrives home, glad to see that Dr. Kroll has finally visited. Rosmer and Kroll reaffirm their old friendship. Dr. Kroll apologises for his absence – he did not want to be a reminder of Beate. Rosmer is surprised to hear of Kroll's involvement in politics and he too has been debating political ideas. Kroll is against Socialism and the 'Radical' press – *The Light Bringer*, Mortensgaard's newspaper, as the worst example. Even Kroll's wife and children have been taking an interest



Paul Moriarty & Paul Hilton
Photo: Johan Persson

in liberal ideas. Kroll believes the country is on the brink of complete political collapse and tries to enlist Rosmer's help in standing up against the new popular Socialism. Rebecca assures him that Rosmer hates party politics and will be of no help, hinting that Rosmer would not share Kroll's conservative beliefs anyway. Kroll wants Rosmer to become editor of *The Light Bringer's* rival paper and political opposite, *The Standard*. Rebecca laughs at the very idea and Rosmer declines. Kroll asks if they can simply use Rosmer's name on the editorial board of the paper, as he is a 'Rosmer', a name which would guarantee respect and propriety. Rebecca is about to tell Dr. Kroll why Rosmer would never let this be the case, when Ulrik Brendel arrives at the house.

Our country is on the brink of complete political collapse. The foundations of our society, our faith – morality – are shaking. And what are you doing?

Dr. Kroll, Act One

Ulrik Brendel was Rosmer's tutor at University, a political writer, and, according to Kroll, a revolutionary. He is dressed very shabbily. At first Brendel mistakes Dr. Kroll for Rosmer - it has been a long time since they last met. We learn that Kroll and Brendel too have a history – Kroll had Brendel removed from the student council at University for his Radicalism. Brendel is back in town to aid the downfall of the right wing. He wants to arrange a public meeting and will be starting a series of public lectures. Rebecca suggests he contact Mortensgaard, to use *The Light Bringer* to spread his message, but Brendel does not trust Mortensgaard: he is a 'rabble rouser'. Before Brendel leaves, Rosmer lends him a new set of clothing and some money.

Rosmer asks Kroll if their friendship can really survive a difference of political and religious opinion. He sees that their minds have moved apart. Rosmer has had an awakening: he sees that everything that has been handed down to him over the generations was 'worthless deception'. He wants to give people the right to free thought, to bring them together without political division. Kroll is shocked and warns Rosmer: 'you are the foundation on which this community is built'. Kroll doubts people will do this without a leader, or even with a leader, like Rosmer, who has denied his God. Rosmer pleads for Kroll's understanding and asks for his help to bring about political freedom. Kroll flatly refuses, claiming Rosmer has hereby ended their friendship. Kroll alludes to Rosmer and Rebecca's 'partnership' leading to Beate's



Malcolm Sinclair
Photo: Johan Persson

downfall, and abruptly leaves. Rebecca wants to discuss this allegation with Rosmer, but Rosmer refuses, and goes straight to bed. Rebecca predicts trouble ahead, before she too retires to bed.

ACT TWO

The scene is Rosmer's study, the following morning. Rosmer is sat reading a political pamphlet. Rebecca enters to tell him she has written a letter on Rosmer's behalf to Mortensgaard, asking that if the newspaper editor could help Brendel in any way, Rosmer would consider it a great favour. Rosmer is not happy with this. Whilst Rebecca believes Rosmer should 'make his peace' and be open about his beliefs, Rosmer doubts that his friendships and position of respect in the community could endure this.

Dr. Kroll visits again. He wants to speak to Rosmer without Rebecca present. He comments on her inappropriate attire and Rebecca leaves, offended. Now alone, Kroll tells Rosmer that Brendel spent all the money Rosmer lent him in an alehouse last night, and made an insulting drunken speech, for which he was beaten. He even pawned the clothing that Rosmer lent him; however Mortensgaard redeemed it for him. Kroll warns Rosmer about Rebecca's manipulation of him and asks Rosmer why he really thinks Beate took her own life. Rosmer believes she was deeply unhappy, 'demonically possessed' by her depression, and guilty that she could not bear a child. Beate had visited Dr. Kroll a few days before her death, begging him to visit Rosmer to tell him of Rosmer's loss of faith and changing ideals, insisting that Rosmer and Rebecca must marry. Kroll accuses Rosmer of having an affair with Rebecca. Rosmer asks why Kroll only now levels this accusation, when Beate's death was over a year ago. Kroll accuses Rebecca and Rosmer of being 'atheists and free thinkers' and asks Rosmer how much he actually knows about this mysterious Rebecca West. Before Rosmer can answer, Mrs Helseth enters looking for Rebecca. Rosmer shoos her away. He strongly denies Kroll's accusations of infidelity. Even so, Kroll tells Rosmer that if he wishes to carry on with his current life, beliefs and relationship with Rebecca, he must not endanger the community and Rosmersholm society, and must keep his new lifestyle - and opinions - confined within the walls of his own home. Rosmer wishes to lift the oppression he feels his family have heaped on the community for years; Kroll believes Rosmer is out to destroy a legacy and corrupt history. Rosmer states he is no longer interested in history – he now looks to the future.

Men are not sheep! And I'm no longer their Pastor! I answer for myself alone!

Rosmer, Act Two

Mortensgaard arrives to speak to Rosmer. Rosmer does not want to see him – or be in any way associated with him. As Mortensgaard enters, Kroll leaves, slamming the door behind him. Mortensgaard has really come to see Rebecca about the letter he received from her. Mortensgaard wants to report Rosmer's political 'change of heart' on the front page of *The Light Bringer*. He believes that the backing of the church behind the new Socialism will make a profound difference with the public. Rosmer, however, tells Mortensgaard that he has abandoned his faith and is no longer a pastor. Mortensgaard is shocked: he asks Rosmer to reconsider and return to the fold, as he now cannot possibly run the story: 'nobody will give you the time of day if they think you'd turned against the Church'. Mortensgaard warns Rosmer that he is going to be pilloried in *The Standard* anyway, and they will resort to lies to damage his reputation. Mortensgaard tells Rosmer of a letter sent to him by Beate before her death, worrying about the threats to Rosmer from people out to destroy him, and gossip about 'goings on' at Rosmersholm. Mortensgaard warns Rosmer about his actions – he is a liability to the Radical movement because of his loss of faith. Rosmer asks Mortensgaard to run the story about him anyway. Mortensgaard leaves.



Paul Hilton & Helen McCrory
Photo: Johan Persson

Rebecca has been hiding next door in Rosmer's bedroom and has heard the conversations with Kroll and then Mortensgaard. Rosmer prepares himself to be very much alone, ostracised by the community. He is haunted by memories of Beate, questioning the letter Mortensgaard has just told him about. Rebecca dismisses his anxiety, reminding Rosmer of their happy times together. But Rosmer has lingering doubts: he believes he is losing his own sense of innocence, the one thing that gave his life purpose. Rebecca tells him to look to the future, and forget the past: 'you'll find no answers there.'

Rosmer asks Rebecca to marry him. She refuses. Rosmer persists, and Rebecca threatens to leave Rosmersholm if he asks her again.

ACT THREE

The sitting room at Rosmersholm, on the afternoon of the following day. Rebecca is watering plants and arranging flowers. Mrs Helseth is cleaning the room. Rosmer has not yet appeared. Mrs Helseth and Rebecca discuss Mortensgaard. Mrs Helseth tells Rebecca he is trouble, and that he had an affair with an older woman and gave her a bastard child. They discuss Beate's downfall. Rebecca thinks Beate's inability to bear Rosmer's children was a good thing - for Rosmer.

Rosmer enters, about to go out for a walk. *The Standard* has arrived with a damning story about Rosmer's abdication of his faith. Although he is not named, the insinuation is clear; he is described as a 'Judas' and 'politically inept' while Rebecca is described as a 'malevolent influence'. Rosmer is hurt and shocked. Rebecca urges Rosmer not to be ashamed, and to stand up for his beliefs. Rosmer blames himself for the inadequacies in his real marriage to Beate, as he could not return her love; his and Rebecca's was the 'true' marriage of mind and spirit. Once again, Rebecca tells him to look to the future, and not hold onto fairy stories like the White Horse of Rosmersholm. Rosmer leaves.

Kroll enters. He is shocked too at *The Standard's* betrayal of Rosmer, but blames Rebecca for 'goading him on', just as she allegedly once did with Kroll himself. Rebecca denies this – it was Beate who needed her, and who begged her to come to Rosmersholm. Rebecca blames Kroll for crushing Rosmer by blaming him outright for Beate's suicide. Kroll retorts with allusions to Rebecca's illegitimate birth: her lack of honour in shameful contrast with the historical line of the Rosmers. Frightened and shaken, Rebecca denies any illegitimacy in her relationship with Dr. West, her adoptive father. Kroll insists Rosmer must return to 'decent'

While right and left are snarling at each other like this, all the good in them – and there is good – much good in both sides – it's just falling away and we're left with all the destructive hatred of the past.

Rosmer, Act Three



Paul Hilton
Photo: Johan Persson

There are ghosts and ghosts, Mrs Helseth – most of them have the decency to wait for the darkness. I'm afraid your White Horse of Rosmersholm is accustoming himself to the sunlight.

Rebecca, Act Three

As we no longer believe there is a judge above us, we must pass sentence on ourselves.

Rosmer, Act Four

old values. Rosmer arrives home – Kroll is eager to leave and not see him, but Rebecca insists he stay – she has something to tell them both.

Rebecca confesses that she had come to Rosmersholm deliberately to change Rosmer's ideas: she 'set to work' on Rosmer, putting her ideas to the test and using his influence in the community. Rebecca told Beate that she and Rosmer had relations and did nothing to dissuade Beate of her belief that she was a poor wife because she could not bear children. She admits that she was to blame for Beate's suicide, "as surely as if I'd pushed her from the bridge". Rebecca feels no remorse, just concern for what she now must face. Kroll and Rosmer are disgusted, and leave for town immediately. Rebecca has already caught a glimpse of the ghostly White Horse of Rosmersholm. She orders Mrs Helseth to fetch her trunk, and prepares to leave the house forever.

ACT FOUR

The sitting room at Rosmersholm, later that evening. Rebecca is packing her belongings. Mrs Helseth is upset at Rebecca's imminent departure – she thinks Rebecca should stay and confront Rosmer; she cannot believe that Rosmer would abandon his responsibilities to Rebecca.

Rosmer arrives home and Rebecca tells him she is leaving that night. He does not beg her to stay, but instead tells her that he and Kroll have reached a mutual understanding: that it is best that Rosmer gives up his changed standpoint. Rebecca too agrees that this is best and Rosmer accuses her of lying. Rosmer confronts Rebecca about her selfish manipulation: she has only believed in herself, never him. But Rebecca tells him she was drawn to him by what she believed to be love. She believed Beate had to be dead for her and Rosmer to accomplish great things together, only now she has lost everything.

Rosmer asks her why she refused his proposal of marriage. She tells him she was frightened and refused because she feels she has changed and become another person since her arrival at Rosmersholm. She now truly believes in Rosmer, has learnt from him, but cannot look back: her happiness has been killed. Now it is Rosmer's turn to urge Rebecca to look towards the future. But whilst Rebecca has caused Rosmer to doubt his faith, Rosmer likewise has changed Rebecca's heart: all that is left of them is their shell. Rosmer begs Rebecca to give him back his faith and his belief in the power of love.

Suddenly, Brendel enters unannounced. His lectures have been cancelled, and he is leaving the town to carry on his work elsewhere. Once again he is broke. But he does not ask for money, only to borrow 'merely an ideal or two', something worth fighting for. He believes that Mortensgaard is the new 'god': the free press is the new religion. Rosmer dismisses Brendel: his trust in Rosmer's belief has been misplaced. Brendel leaves silently. Rebecca too prepares to leave. Rosmer tells her not to worry about the future, as he has made financial arrangements for her. Rebecca is not thinking about her future. Rosmer is lost after his failure to stand up for idealistic change. He asks Rebecca if she will end her life, as Beate did, to prove her love for him. Rebecca agrees. They leave, not one leading the other, but together, "as man and wife".

Mrs Helseth enters. She watches as Rebecca and Rosmer jump together from the bridge. She sees the White Horse dancing once again through the mill race.

The Characters



Johannes Rosmer (Paul Hilton)
Last in the line of the Rosmer family of Rosmersholm.
Formerly the town's Pastor.



Rebecca West (Helen McCrory)
Rosmer's companion.
Came to Rosmersholm from Finmark to care for Beata before her death.
Adopted daughter of Dr West.



Mrs Helseth (Veronica Quilligan)
Housekeeper at Rosmersholm



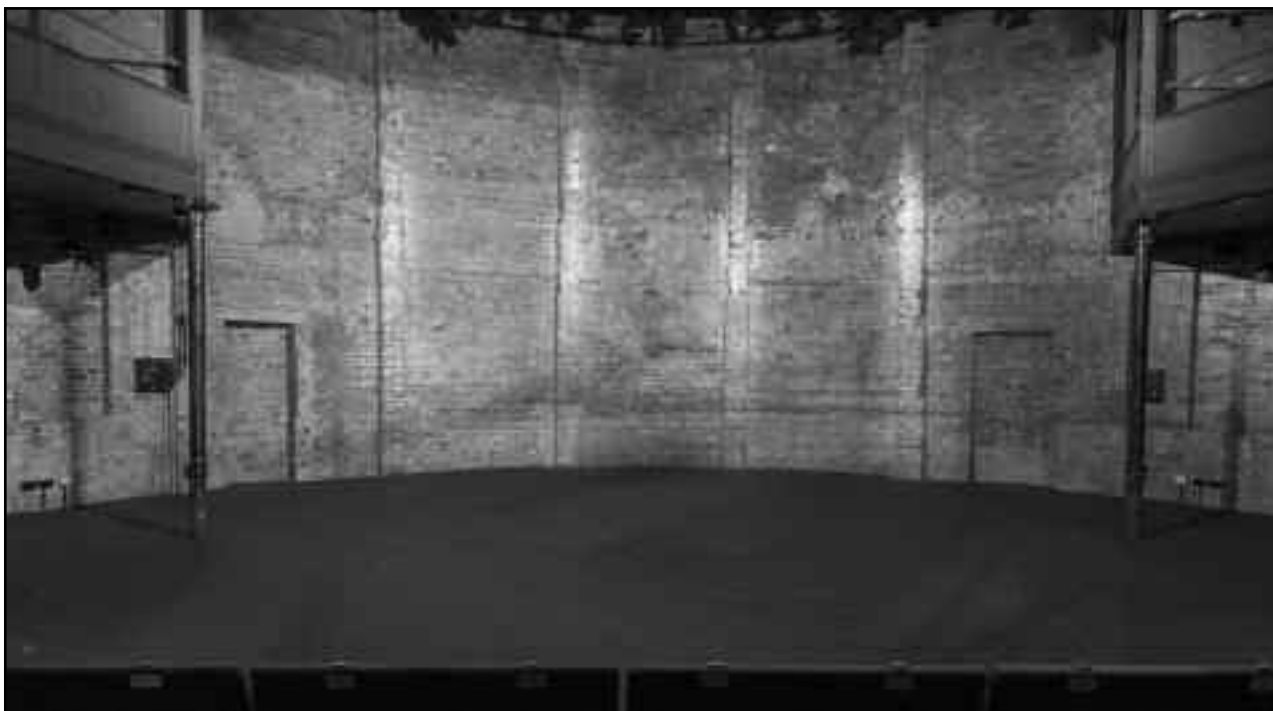
Dr. Kroll (Malcolm Sinclair)
Beate's brother; Rosmer's brother-in-law.
Strongly against the socialist movement.
Local Conservative politician.



Peter Mortensgaard (Peter Sullivan)
Editor of *The Light Bringer*



Ulrik Brendel (Paul Moriarty)
Rosmer's lecturer from University.
A political thinker and writer.
For the radical movement and socialist reform.



The Almeida Theatre - empty space
Photo: Lara Platman

The Almeida is a “found space”, and was not originally built as a theatre. Designing for our theatre requires great ingenuity because there is no conventional backstage space (wings), nor is there a fly tower to allow us to lower and raise big pieces of scenery. This means each designer has to choose whether to reveal the building as it was, or to transform it into a conventional theatre space.

Hildegard Bechtler’s stage set for the Almeida production of *Rosmersholm* is heavily influenced by the evocative paintings of Danish artist Vilhelm Hammershøi, a painter roughly contemporary with Ibsen. Most famed for his interiors, the overall impression of his style is one of coolness, restraint, and quietude. Hammershøi’s paintings are often painted in muted greys with decisive geometric stringency, and tend to feature a lone figure, often the artist’s wife. Sparsely-furnished rooms exude an almost hypnotic quietude and sense of melancholic introspection, conveying a sense of the emotional abyss behind the façade.



The *Rosmersholm* model box from above: The Living Room
Designer: Hildegard Bechtler



The *Rosmersholm* model box front on: The Study
Designer: Hildegard Bechtler

For centuries Rosmersholm has been the very heart of this community. The Rosmers have created here a stronghold, where good order and right-thinking can grow and flourish. Think of the respect – I may say the awe – in which your name is held.

Kroll, Act Two

THE MODEL BOX

The model box is a scaled down 1:25 version of what the set will look like in the theatre. This is created mainly for use by the production team, the setbuilders and painters, and the lighting designer as a reference. It is also useful for the actors and director when thinking about how to stage the production.

Rosmersholm's set is quite simple. Act One takes place in a large sitting room in Rosmersholm – a manor house on an estate near the sea a little way out of a large town. The grandeur of the room – this is the home of a wealthy man – is amplified by the high ceiling. There are a number of portraits on the wall (but deliberately not one of Rosmer's deceased wife, Beata). Director Anthony Page talked about a Norwegian production where the actors constantly referred to, and endlessly touched, a bust of Beata and he felt that this was distracting and unnecessary.

Mike Poulton's translation describes a set of folding doors that open into the hall. He also describes some French windows that are open, through which can be seen an impressive avenue of trees. However, the back wall of the Almeida makes this quite tricky to achieve, and director and designer consciously chose to place the window stage right. It means that the audience never see the avenue of trees, or the bridge over the river where Beata committed suicide. Yet we hear about this outside world throughout the play.

The sitting room echoes the coolness and quietude of Hammershøi's paintings. Yet the seemingly flat colour is actually hidden with many colours that can be picked up with appropriate lighting. Consequently, the mood can be cold and grey one moment, and warm the next. The furniture is sparse as Anthony Page felt that too much would endanger the theatricality of the play and make it too much like television. He also wanted to strike a balance between naturalism and expressionism. The flowers, an attempt by Rebecca to brighten up the room, stand out in their vividness amidst the drab hues. Indeed, light (and the absence of light) is an important aspect of *Rosmersholm's* design. Candles and oil lamps are used, and the moonlight – macabre and chilling – filters into the sitting room in the final act as Rosmer and Rebecca leap to their deaths. The cold light reflects the bleakness of the end of the play.

Act Two requires a hefty scene change from the sitting room to Rosmer's study, full of signs of his clerical past. The back wall is brought forward to shrink the space. The addition of bookshelves, desks, and general clutter of papers and books, gives even greater intimacy. It is no longer spacious and lofty, but crammed and busy.



Paul Hilton in rehearsal
Photo: Johan Persson

Rosmersholm is unusual in that there were two Assistant Directors on the show. Paul Higgins – weeks one to three; and Walter Sutcliffe – week four onwards. Here is their Rehearsal Diary.

Week One

The first day of the first week begins with what is referred to as a “meet and greet” – where the administrative, production and creative staff of the Almeida Theatre meet the actors, writer, director and designers. Everyone gathers in a circle – it’s quite a big circle – to introduce themselves. It’s quite a special moment, as it’s probably the only time all these people are together in one room.

Next is the model showing led by the designer, Hildegard Bechtler and director Anthony Page. Everyone gathers round a miniature scale model of the set, together with miniature furniture, props and cut out figures to represent the characters. The designer and director will go through the set design of each scene or act of the play, moving the furniture and talking about the look and feel of the production and what inspirations have been used.

For the next couple of days, the director, cast and adaptor sit round a big table to re-read the play – discussing and analysing the story, the play’s themes, the use of language, and any historical, social or political background of the 1880’s in Norway which may be of use. This ‘round-the-table’ exercise proves very useful because the actors don’t have to worry about props or where and when to move, they can just concentrate on their characters’ wants, needs and intentions and the characters’ relationships to each other.

On Thursday of the first week, after the first production meeting, it’s time for the actors to get on their feet and start to move. The stage management team have marked out the floor using tape to indicate where the set doors, windows and walls will be; and rehearsal furniture and props (substitutes that are close in size and period to what will actually be used in the theatre) are placed in the same positions as in the model of the set.

Week Two

We continue working through the play, act by act, plotting moves with the actors. Character relationships are now explored physically in the playing space.

This week the costume designer visits the rehearsal room and has some time with each member of the cast individually, to talk about what they will be wearing: the cut, the colours, the fabrics and material used etc.

At the end of each rehearsal day, the deputy stage manager has made notes on anything that has cropped up in rehearsals, for instance during the rehearsing of one scene we discovered the character of Mrs Helseth will need polish and a cloth to polish furniture in the room. Also, one of the tables will need a drawer for one of the actors to use. These items may not be part of the set, but it’s only through rehearsing the scenes and the beats of the scenes that the finer details are realised. The rehearsal notes of the day are then issued to the various departments so that additional props can be found or furniture changed.

A second production meeting takes place at the end of the week covering all aspects of the production, from the choosing of

*Time will teach you the answers –
you must keep searching –*

Rebecca, Act Four



Helen McCrory in rehearsal
Photo: Johan Persson

furniture to discussions about wigs; from which way the doors need to be hung – does the door open inwards or outwards into the room? – to whether the oil lamps need to be real or could be operated by battery. Portraits are seen on the walls of the set. Anthony and Hildegard decide on the look of the portraits from examples. Two of the characters crochet in the play, so we need to teach one of the actors how to do this. And decide what type of garment would they be crocheting. Every aspect of the production is thought through very carefully, often using a great deal of research.

Week Three

Actors are now mostly 'off-book' – working from memory rather than scripts in hand – which can be a frustrating time for actors as the scenes will often be slower. Although by working in smaller sections, often going over a scene or a beat of a scene many, many times, the text is soon solidly in the actor's memory.

Escape the past by running to meet the future – never look back. You'll find no answers there – there are none to be found.

Rebecca, Act Two

Having gone through the play once we go back to the beginning and work in much closer detail, really pulling things apart, beat by beat, discovering new things and exploring in greater depth what was found in the previous weeks. Some choices that were made in the previous week develop into different choices and the plotting of a scene can take on a new life if a different 'key' into the scene that is discovered. It's an exciting part of the rehearsal process as Anthony begins to shape the play almost as though it were a piece of music – the contrasting movements of the play, the physical and textual rhythms, the building of scenes to their climax, and the silences that separate them. And of course the interplay between the actors is sharpened. Once a scene has been broken down and worked on, Anthony will then run the scene and give notes to the actors.

Anthony also has meetings with other creatives on the production, such as the sound designer. This takes place in the rehearsal room and Anthony and the sound designer can talk through in detail, whilst walking around the rehearsal set, the sound requirements of the play.

Other aspects of the production continue to run alongside the rehearsals. Costume, hair and wig fittings for the actors occur during this week, which then allows the design team the time needed for any alterations or changes to be made so the costumes and wigs are ready for the actors when they get into the



Veronica Quilligan and Paul Hilton in rehearsal
Photo: Johan Persson

I no longer know who I am or what I am. I used to have willpower, courage, energy – no challenge was too much for me. Now I'm a shell – there's nothing inside.

Rebecca, Act Four

theatre. Also, new props and furniture are continually brought into the rehearsal room by the stage management team, to be used by the actors, which again allows time for any alterations or changes that may need to be made.

Week Four

Week four begins with a run-through of the play. This is important for the full company, as after a couple of weeks of detailed work it is important for everyone to gain a sense of the bigger picture. This is a chance for the actors to feel their characters' journeys; for the director to assess how the overall story is coming across and to chart how the more detailed work is functioning; for the adaptor to experience the script in context; and for the set and costume teams to check their designs against what the actors are now doing in practice. This is an exciting and sometimes nervous event. To relieve some of the pressure, Anthony decides to run the first three acts of the play that have been staged and re-worked over the previous week, but to read the final act without the staging, as it has not had so much attention and there is still plenty of time to run the whole play at the end of this week.

The run-through shows that the first three acts are in good shape. There are some conversations with the adaptor Mike Poulton about cuts and changes that may help the storytelling or that may make the actors more comfortable with their words.

The next two days are spent working in detail on Act Four. As it has been a few days since we last worked on it, the cast and director spend some time talking about the characters' motivations and choices in the context of the previous acts. This takes the form of a short discussion, with the actors then walking through the scene with scripts in hand – the process is faster if they don't have to try to remember their lines while they are going back over their objectives and emotional responses. The process shows up new and better options and Act Four becomes tighter.

Once Act Four has been re-worked we work backwards planning to look Act Three, then Act Two, then Act One, in preparation for the run-through on Saturday morning. We spend more time than anticipated on Act Three, developing the intensity of Rebecca West's confession scene. This is very productive but it means that on Friday afternoon we can only re-cap Act Two and we have not seen Act One since Monday. We decided that we should run the whole play on Saturday all the same, particularly because the coming Monday is a Bank Holiday and we cannot rehearse! The re-workings prove successful and the run on Saturday morning shows a lot of good things. Our lighting and sound designers are present and can get a very clear sense of the atmospheres they will be creating.

Week Five

The final week in the rehearsal room before we get onto the actual set in the theatre is divided up into run-throughs of the play and sessions to re-work specific aspects that need attention. We have notes to give the cast from last Saturday's run-through. We saw that Act One could certainly benefit from some closer attention. In addition we would like to give the actors a chance to look at aspects of Act Three, where the scene between Rebecca West and Dr Kroll is becoming very exciting; but the information that it conveys is so significant, for both cast and audience, that it could do with a couple of hours of calm and considered assessment. We would also like to give the final scene between Rosmer and Rebecca a couple of hours.



Paul Hilton in rehearsal
Photo: Johan Persson

Atheists and freethinkers! A man who has denied his morality, denied his Saviour – and a woman who has never had a family, nor a faith to abandon –

Dr. Kroll, Act Two

Tuesday is spent working Act One. The basic moves are fine and the performances are developing well, but there are positions that can be fine tuned, and choices that need refining. We work through the act chronologically, stopping where necessary and adjusting. This is often a case of something as simple as a character finding a stronger position in the set, or staying seated when previously they had been standing up. Sometimes the alteration is more significant and requires the actor to re-assess the effect a certain piece of information has or what their attitude should be at a particular moment. The characters' major objectives remain as they were, but this fine tuning gives the scenes greater dynamism and brings them closer to readiness for performance. On Wednesday morning we tweak Acts Three and Four before running the piece in the afternoon. A production meeting over lunch has brought no major problems to light, and the creative team are able to stay to watch the run-through. The play is now running at just over three hours, not including the intervals. We feel sure that this will drop by about twenty minutes as the cast get quicker at picking up cues and we adjust the tempo of certain scenes.

Our plan is to run the play on Friday afternoon and again on Saturday morning, giving us Thursday and Friday morning to do more fine tuning. Thursday is spent looking at Act Two, clarifying a few choices and stage positions and injecting more pace into certain scenes. Friday morning we work small sections of Act Three and Four. We have invited a few guests and Almeida staff to watch the afternoon run. Anthony likes to give the cast as much opportunity as possible to perform in front of an audience. It is also very useful to get fresh perspectives on the production. Is the information being conveyed clearly to people who are seeing it for the first time? Where does an audience lose interest?

The run through shows that the narrative is coming across clearly and the performances are becoming very exciting. We note the occasions when the tension drops or the tempo seems not to work, and any aspects that did not ring true. Most of these can be fixed by giving notes to the cast and do not require a scene to be re-worked. On Saturday morning we spend an hour on notes, and then decide to run the first half of the play. The cast have taken on board the issues that we discussed and the first half has a real buzz to it. We plan a line run for Monday morning and a final run in the rehearsal room on Monday afternoon before moving into the theatre on Tuesday.



Peter Sullivan & Paul Hilton
Photo: Johan Persson

Henrik Ibsen

Henrik Ibsen (March 20, 1828–May 23, 1906) was a major Norwegian playwright of realistic drama. He is often referred to as the father of modern drama. Ibsen is held as one of the greatest of European authors and certainly one of the most important playwrights of all time. He is celebrated as a national symbol by Norwegians.

His plays were considered scandalous to many of his era, when Victorian values of family life and propriety largely held sway in Europe and any challenge to them was considered immoral and outrageous. Ibsen's work examined the realities that lay behind many facades, possessing a revelatory nature that was disquieting to many contemporaries.

Ibsen introduced to the Victorian stage a critical eye and free inquiry into the conditions of life and issues of morality. In this sense he can be said to have founded the modern stage. Plays of his day were expected to be moral dramas with noble protagonists pitted against darker forces, reaching every a morally appropriate conclusion: goodness bringing happiness, and immorality pain. Ibsen challenged this notion and the beliefs of his times and shattered the illusions of his audiences. Many of his plays provoked outrage and public protest, with others receiving a decidedly cool reception.

By the end of his career, Ibsen had completely rewritten the rules of drama, with a realism which was later to be adopted by Chekhov. From Ibsen forward, challenging assumptions and directly speaking about issues has been considered one of the factors that makes a play art rather than entertainment. By the time of his death, the Victorian Age was on its last legs, to be replaced by the rise of Modernism not only in the theatre, but across public life. Ibsen played a major role in the changes that had happened in the arts and across society.

“Rosmersholm marks Ibsen’s final withdrawal as a playwright from the political field...the last of his plays which introduces national or local politics as a decisive factor in shaping people’s characters and destinies...In the six plays which follow Rosmersholm, the battle is out of earshot. It is the trolls within, not the trolls without, that determine the destinies of Ellida and Hilde Wangel, Hedda Gabler, Halvard Solness, the Allmers, the Borkmans and Arnold Rubek. They are conscious of strange, sick passions which direct their lives; and Rosmersholm provides a link between Ibsen’s old method and his new. Rosmer is the last of his characters to be caught up and undermined by local politics; and Rebecca is the first of those passionate but inhibited lovers who dominate the dark plays of his final period.”

Michael Meyer, Ibsen, 2004

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Henrik Ibsen 1828 - 1906

1828	Henrik Johan Ibsen born 20 March at Skien, Southern Norway
1844-50	Apprenticed to an apothecary in Grimstad
1846	Birth of illegitimate son
1850	Moves to Christiania (modern-day Oslo) to study medicine, but fails to get into university. Becomes involved in Socialist movement. Publishes first plays, <i>Catiline</i> and <i>The Burial Mound</i>
1851-57	Appointed as 'dramatic author' at Det Norske Theatre in Bergen – stages more than 150 plays
1852	Trip to Denmark and Germany to study stagecraft
1853-1855	Failure of two of his plays, <i>St John's Night</i> and <i>Lady Inger of Ostrat</i> .
1856	The Feast at Solhaug well received
1857-63	Artistic Director of the new Norwegian Theatre, Christiania
1858	Marries Suzannah Thorensen. Writes <i>The Vikings of Helgeland</i>
1859	Birth of son Sigurd
1859-62	Writes poetry
1862	Christiania Theatre goes bankrupt. Writes <i>Love's Comedy</i>
1863	<i>The Pretenders</i> well received
1864-68	Receives government travel grant and moves to Rome
1866	Brand re-establishes his reputation throughout Scandinavia; awarded a lifetime government grant to enable him to write
1867	<i>Peer Gynt</i>
1868-75	Moves to Dresden
1869	Writes <i>The League of Youth</i>
1871	Collection of Ibsen's poems published
1873	<i>The Emperor and the Galilean</i> published to great acclaim
1874	Returns briefly to Norway
1875-78	Moves to Munich
1877	<i>The Pillars of Society</i> a great success
1878	Returns to live in Rome
1879	<i>A Doll's House</i> a great success in Scandinavia and Germany
1880	First performance of an Ibsen production in London (<i>The Pillars of Society</i>)
1881	<i>Ghosts</i> provokes great scandal and controversy
1882	<i>An Enemy of the People</i> gets a mixed reception
1884	<i>The Wild Duck</i>
1885-91	Living mainly in Munich
1886	Writes <i>Rosmersholm</i>
1888	<i>The Lady from the Sea</i>
1890	<i>Hedda Gabler</i>
1891	Returns to Norway
1892	<i>The Masterbuilder</i>
1893	Grandson Tancred born
1894	<i>Little Eyolf</i>
1896	<i>John Gabriel Borkman</i>
1899	<i>When We Dead Awaken</i>
1900	Suffers a stroke; partially paralysed
1903	A second stroke leaves him bedridden
1906	Dies in Christiania 23 May, aged 78. Lavish state funeral held.



Helen McCrory
Photo: Johan Persson

'No dramatist has ever meant so much to the woman of the stage as Henrik Ibsen'.

Elizabeth Robbins, *Ibsen and the Actress*, 1928

Ibsen's plays contain some of the strongest female characters in dramatic history: women who reject the status quo, who yearn to live outside imposed limits and who want more than society deems appropriate for them.

Ibsen was concerned about the social, economic and political situation of women in the society in which he lived. He felt that men and women didn't 'belong to the same century'. But he did not see himself as a campaigner for women's rights or a feminist, despite participating in some direct political action such as signing a petition to give married women a right to ownership of property and family earnings. He said the following in a speech at a banquet of the Norwegian League for Women's Rights in 1898:

'I am not a member of the Women's Rights League. Whatever I have written has been without any conscious thought of making propaganda. I have been more the poet and less the social philosopher than people generally seem inclined to believe. I ... must disclaim the honour of having consciously worked for the women's cause. I am not even quite clear as to just what this women's cause really is. To me it seems a problem for mankind in general. And if you read my books carefully you will understand this. True enough, it is desirable to solve the woman problem, among others; but that has not been my whole intention. My task has been the description of humanity. ... The task always before my mind has been to advance our country and give the people a higher standard. To obtain this, two factors are of importance; it is for the mothers by strenuous and sustained labor to awaken a conscious feeling of culture and discipline. This must be created in men before it will be possible to lift the people to a higher plane. It is the women who are to solve the social problem, but they must do so as mothers. And only as such can they do it. Here lies a great task for women.'

While it can be argued that there still isn't full equality between women and men in the UK today (women get paid significantly less for the same job, for example), we are accustomed to a degree of equality that would have been un-thought of a hundred years ago when Ibsen was writing *Rosmersholm*. If we consider the options open to many women living in Britain today, we can begin to explore whether the nineteenth century Rebecca West has any choices at all.

Women in Nineteenth Century Europe

The laws in nineteenth century Europe were based on the idea that women would get married and that their husbands would take care of them. Ninety per cent of women in Victorian society married at least once. Upper and middle class women were thereby forced to depend on a man, first as a daughter and later as a wife.

The legal, social and economic structures made women's choices for a meaningful role in society very narrow. And so to survive they were compelled to marry. The Victorians believed that roles of men and women were ordained by nature and theology. God makes man and woman one in marriage, so the law also made them one person. As a Victorian feminist put it, when women married they were, 'despoiled of their money, goods, chattels, and condemned to prison for life'.

You are deliberate and determined in everything. That's why you're so dangerous. There's a splinter of ice in your heart.

Dr Kroll to Rebecca, Act Two



Veronica Quilligan
Photo: Johan Persson

Women couldn't sign contracts unless their husband also signed them. Women couldn't make a valid will unless their husband agreed to it. Until the Married Woman's Property Act in 1882, a married woman's wealth in Britain became the property of her husband. Until 1882, if a woman worked, her earnings belonged to her husband. Divorce was very difficult to obtain. The Matrimonial Causes Act 1857 meant men could divorce their wives for adultery, but not vice versa. If a woman did get a divorce, her children became the property of her husband who could prevent her from seeing them.

Separate Spheres

In the late industrial era there was a widely accepted ideology of separate spheres which assigned the private sphere of the home and family to the woman and the public sphere of business, commerce and politics to the man. In both popular literature and in the advertisement columns of magazines and newspapers, domesticity was strongly presented as a female domain. The increasing physical separation of the home and the workplace for many of the professional classes meant that many women lost touch with public life. It was through their duties within the home that women were offered a moral purpose: towards their families, especially their husbands, and thus towards society as a whole. The notion of separate spheres was a way of living and working based on deeply held beliefs about the importance of the family, the constancy of marriage and woman's innate moral goodness.

The Vote

Women across the world were not allowed to vote during the nineteenth century. This meant that they could have no influence on and be no part of the world of politics. They were disenfranchised and unable to have a say in the government of their country. It was generally believed that women lacked the education, intelligence and ability to make a sensible, trustworthy decision at the ballot box. It was argued that if they were given the vote, they would only vote for the same party as their husbands did anyway.

New Zealand was the first nation to give women the vote in 1893. In 1884 the Norwegian Women's Movement association was founded to promote women's rights. In 1907 some women were given the right to vote (although these rights were based on taxation and two thirds of women were still excluded). In 1903 the Women's Social and Political Union was founded in England to get women the vote. In 1913 Norway introduced Universal Suffrage and all women were allowed to vote. In 1918, the Representation of the People Act in the UK allowed women over the age of 30 to vote and women over the age of 21 who owned a house (all men over the age of 21 were allowed to vote). In 1928, all women over the age of 21 were given the right to vote. It was not until 1970 that the voting age for both genders was reduced to 18.

Education

Women had little academic education in the nineteenth century. Working Class women worked from a very young age, middle class women would have learned skills like sewing and playing the piano. Women couldn't go to university in Britain until 1869 and even then weren't able to claim full degrees.

In *Rosmersholm*, Rebecca West is unusual. Her foster-father, Doctor West, introduced her to left-wing politics and encouraged her to read and learn. She represents everything that Doctor Kroll



Helen McCrory
Photo: Johan Persson

is against – a "new woman" who has abandoned both Christianity and its whole ethical system.

Women in the Victorian Theatre

In the nineteenth century, women who followed careers on the stage were viewed very poorly by society. By the beginning of the Victorian period, despite there being many examples of great actresses and actor managers, the women who performed on stage were seen as little better than prostitutes.

However, acting was one of the few professions at the time where women were equal to men. Theatre management remained male-dominated but men and women never competed for parts. Backstage in the theatre men never felt threatened by women, and they were able to command the same wages and esteem. Yet outside the theatre, the actress's reputation was always on thin ice and this financial and social independence had to be kept hidden. Articles and biographies about actresses always stressed how they combined their careers with the usual roles of mothers and wives.

By the end of the nineteenth century, things had begun to change a little. This was partly due to the popularity of 'polite' drama, introduced to get the middle classes back into the theatres, which was often performed by genteel actresses and soon a group of actresses like Lily Langtry, drawn from society circles, were popular.

Ibsen and the New Drama

Ibsen offered actresses more than respect in terms of the way they were viewed. His plays also offered a new style of acting which gave the profession a new intellectual edge. Those who supported Ibsen (among them the socialist Eleanor Marx, daughter of Karl Marx, and her husband William Aveling, who translated and performed his plays in their drawing room) were excited by what they felt was a 'new drama'. Ibsen's plays were realist and they also had serious political concerns.

Ibsen was one of the playwrights who really changed the world for actresses. Not only did his plays feature strong (and often lead roles) for women, but the way that he wrote really enabled actresses to get into the mind of the characters they were playing. Ibsen's plays were topical and current, and in them actresses saw their own lives reflected. The world was being shown not just from the perspective of a male order, but from their perspective. Ibsen's support of women's rights and his portrayal of women's struggle in his work soon made him popular with actresses and women's rights groups, in his own country and abroad:

'Actresses were acquiring an intellectual as well as a social respectability. Admittedly, by 1890 this development was in its infancy and concerned a very select (and critically unpopular) minority of the profession, but the association of actresses such as Janet Achurch [who first played Nora in the Doll's House in London] and Elizabeth Robbins with Ibsen... foreshadowed the 'new drama' in the 1890s and early 1900s'

Michael Baker, *The Rise of the Victorian Actor*

For more information see www.peopleplay.co.uk

“Life ought to be a struggle of desire toward adventures whose nobility will fertilize the soul.”

Rebecca West

The Other Rebecca West

Born Cicely Isabel Fairfield in London in 1892, Rebecca West was a British-Irish suffragist and writer famous for her novels, literary criticism, travel literature and for her relationship with H. G. Wells. Rebecca West has been called ‘the world’s number one woman writer,’ and even ‘the greatest woman since Elizabeth I’ yet few people may realise that she actually took her pen name from Ibsen’s *Rosmersholm* heroine.

Her father was a journalist, who abandoned the family whilst she was a child. The rest of the family then moved to Edinburgh, where Cicely went to school. She later trained as an actress, changing her name to Rebecca West for the stage. Before the First World War, she became involved in the women’s suffrage movement, and started her writing career working as a journalist for suffragist publications *Freewoman* and *The Clarion*. In 1913 she met writer H. G. Wells, and they began a turbulent love affair that lasted ten years. Together they had a son, Anthony West, though Wells was still in his second marriage at that time. West is also said to have had affairs with Charlie Chaplin and newspaper magnate Max Beaverbrook.

In 1930 she married Henry Maxwell Andrews, a banker, and they remained together until his death in 1968. Before - and during - the Second World War, West travelled widely, researching for subsequent books on travel and politics. She was also present at the Nuremberg trials. Her later work, both as writer and broadcaster, drew widely on her wartime and overseas experience.

Selected works by Rebecca West:

HENRY JAMES, 1916
THE RETURN OF THE SOLDIER, 1918
THE JUDGE, 1922
THE STRANGE NECESSITY, 1928
HARRIET HUME, 1929
D.H. LAWRENCE, 1930
ST. AUGUSTINE, 1933
THE HARSH VOICE, 1935
THE THINKING REED, 1936
BLACK LAMB AND GREY FALCON, 1942
THE PHOENIX: MEANING OF TREASON 1949/1965
A TRAIN OF POWDER, 1955
THE FOUNTAIN OVERFLOWS, 1956
THE COURT AND THE CASTLE, 1958
THE VASSALL AFFAIR, 1963
THE BIRDS FALL DOWN, 1966
MCLUHAN AND THE FUTURE OF LITERATURE, 1969

For further information on Rebecca West see:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rebecca_West

<http://www.rebeccawestsociety.org>



Paul Hilton & Helen McCrory in rehearsal
Photo: Johan Persson

The Almeida's production of *Rosmersholm* is in a new version by Mike Poulton. What does that mean?

Ibsen's plays are written in Norwegian and so they have to be translated into English for an English audience. There have been many translations of the play and it has appeared in many different versions.

The difference between a translation and a version.

A translation is a completely new translation of the play. A translator might be a playwright or a professional translator. Often when doing plays like *Rosmersholm* a theatre will commission a new translation from a playwright who they feel will bring something new to the text. Translation isn't simply about converting words: it's about conveying meaning. As language changes, new translations can give a play a more contemporary feel. Sometimes a translator will be employed to take the play and its language into a different context (Frank McGuinness, for example, gives Ibsen's plays an Irish feel; or another writer might set the play elsewhere).

Sometimes a translator will translate directly from the original text, other times (when the playwright doesn't read the original language) a literal translation will be done first. A literal translation is a word for word account of the original text, and the writer will then use this to put it into their own language.

A new version is not necessarily a completely new translation, but with a new version the text has been changed by the version writer especially for the production. This may mean some re-translation, it may also mean some changes to the text itself: for example, lines being removed or scenes being reshaped.

'As a rule, I make three drafts of my plays, which differ greatly from each other – in characterisation, not in plot. When I approach the first working-out of my material, it is as though I knew my characters from a railway journey; one has made a preliminary acquaintance, one has chatted about this and that. At the next draft I already see everything much more clearly, and I know the people roughly as one would after a month spent with them at a spa; I have discovered the fundamentals of their characters and their little peculiarities; but I may still be wrong about certain essentials. Finally, in the last draft, I have reached the limit of my knowledge; I know my characters from close and long acquaintance – they are my intimate friends, who will no longer disappoint me; as I see them now, I shall always see them'

Ibsen, quoted in Michael Meyer, Ibsen, 2004. Reprinted with kind permission of The History Press.

TRANSLATION EXERCISE

COMPARE TWO DIFFERENT VERSIONS

Look at the two versions of the opening moments of *Rosmersholm* on the following page. What are the differences between them? Are the characters discussing the same things? Are they using similar language? Do they seem like similar characters or are there noticeable differences? How do these differences add to or change the meaning of the text? What other contexts could you see *Rosmersholm* being translated into?

ROSMERSHOLM

(English version by Norman Ginsbury)

ACT 1

Scene – The living room at Rosmersholm. Dusk on a summer evening. The room is spacious, old fashioned and comfortable. There is a door L leading to the dining room. An open fireplace with a cowl chimney piece cuts across the corner of the room up L. Backstage C is a large square arch with heavy curtains hanging behind it which leads to the hall. The front door up L opens on to the hall. There is a table in the hall with a large vase of flowers on it. There is a French window R, hung with lace and heavy curtains. A pedestal with plants trailing from it stands at the upstage end of the window and an armchair facing into the room at the downstage end. There is a round table up R with an oil lamp on it and an armchair beside it, RC. A backless divan runs diagonally downstage from LC. At the upstage end of the divan is an occasional table with a bowl of flowers on it; also a hall-stand. There is an upholstered stool downstage C, in front of the divan. A low wooden stall stands on the L of the arch and a cabinet on the R of it. There is a table down R with a bowl of flowers on it and another down L with flowers and an oil lamp. A tasselled bell rope hangs on the wall upstage of the door down L. The walls are covered with portraits, old and fairly recent, or clergymen, army officers and judges in professional dress. A carpet covers the floor. An avenue of old trees leading to the millrace can be seen through the window.

When the CURTAIN rises, the sound of the millrace is heard. The French window and the front door are open. The curtains at the window and behind the arch are open. REBECCA WEST is sitting in the armchair RC. She is crocheting a large, white woollen shawl. It is nearly finished. Now and again she looks out through the window. MRS HELSETH enters L.

MRS HELSETH
Shall I lay the table now, Madam?

REBECCA
Yes, please, I expect the Pastor will be back soon.

MRS HELSETH
(*moving to L of REBECCA*) Aren't you in the draught there?

REBECCA
I suppose I am, now that you mention it. Would you mind closing the door? (MRS HELSETH goes to the front door, closes it and returns to C) And the window too?

(MRS HELSETH goes to the window)

MRS HELSETH
The pastor's out there now.

REBECCA
(*rising and going to the window; quickly*) Where? So he is! Keep back. (REBECCA and MRS HELSETH hide behind the window curtains) Don't let him see us.

MRS HELSETH
He's going along the path by the mill again.

REBECCA
That's the way he went the day before yesterday. (Peeping out) Let's see if ...

MRS HELSETH
I wonder if he'll dare go over the bridge?

REBECCA
That's what I'm waiting to see. (She pauses) No he's turning; he's gone past it. (Leaving the window) He's going the long way round. (She sits in the armchair RC)

MRS HELSETH
It's too much to expect him to cross the bridge. When something like that has happened...

(The sound of the millrace fades)

REBECCA
They go on clinging to their dead here at Rosmersholm.

ROSMERSHOLM

(Adaptation by Mike Poulton)

ACT ONE

Music. Summer evening 1886. On an estate near the sea a little way out of a large town. Spacious comfortable sitting room in the house of a very rich man. Flowers. A stove with vases of birch twigs and wild flowers. Folding doors open onto the hall - these are open. Other doors. French windows - open, through which can be seen an impressive avenue of trees. A table with flowers and plants near the window. Many portraits of military commanders, clergy, court officials the earliest dating back to the 1630's. Recent portraits of Rosmer's father - a general - and Rosmers recently deceased wife. REBECCA WEST is sitting crocheting a large white woollen shawl which is almost finished. Occasionally she looks out of the window as if expecting an arrival. MRS HELSETH, the housekeeper enters.

HELSETH
Shall I tell them to start laying the table?

REBECCA
Yes - He'll be back any moment.

HELSETH
Aren't you sitting in a draught over there?

REBECCA
Perhaps you'd better shut the window.

HELSETH
(MRS HELSETH crosses to the French window and starts to close it) This is the Pastor now -

REBECCA
(eagerly) Where? (getting up)

HELSETH
Over there by -

REBECCA
Come away from the window. (MRS HELSETH moves behind the curtain) He'll think we're -

HELSETH
He's coming down the path by the mill race. That's a good sign isn't it?

REBECCA
He's started using the mill path again. I noticed that a couple of days ago. (peeps out behind the curtains) The question is -

HELSETH
Will he cross by the footbridge? -

REBECCA
Or go the long way round? Well we'll soon see. (watching him) Come on! (pause) No. He's turning back... (leaving the window) Shame. I was hoping... (comes away from the window)

Translation Exercise



Paul Hilton
Photo: Johan Persson

Ibsen is considered to be the father of modern realistic drama.

Donna Campbell describes realism as ‘the faithful representation of reality [where] character is more important than action and plot; complex ethical choices are often the subject’.

Rosmersholm does not have any truly dramatic plot elements. The play consists mostly of conversations between two or three of the characters at any one time. This is very much like reality, in the sense that, in reality, it is more likely that friends have political conversations than experience explosive, life-changing situations. In *Rosmersholm*, the characters are clearly the dominant element in the play – the narrative revolves entirely around what they are thinking and feeling, and the subtext and back story create the forward motion that gives the play purpose.

Consequently, any practical exercises relating to the play would need to encourage the actor to think about how to portray his/her character truthfully on stage.

Know Your Character

The Big Ws

Look at the extract from the play on the following page and answer the following questions:

Who are you?

Where are you in the scene / within the context of the play / within the context of your character’s life?

What are you doing in the scene?

Why are you doing it?

What do you **want** in this scene?

Further questions:

What do you say?

What is the subtext in the line?

Do you mean what you say?

If not, what do you mean? How do you know this?

What do you learn about the back story of your character?

What do other characters say about you? (This often gives you as much, if not more, information about your character).

Now draw an outline of your character, so that it is hollow on the inside and there is space on the outside. Write all of your character’s inner feelings and subtext inside the outline and all of the open, shared information outside the outline.

Character Wants

Now revisit the scene and identify your character’s ‘wants’ for every line. Have someone prompt the ‘wants’ and play the scene without a script – finding an action that portrays the want for every line. Now play the scene again, this time adding a sound to the action. Repeat with a few words/paraphrased sentences.

This exercise will help students to think about context and what the character wants; consider their relationship with other characters on stage; and really understand what is happening without needing to refer to the script.

ACT THREE

Sitting room much as act one but afternoon. The sun is shining brightly. Rebecca is watering plants and arranging fresh flowers. Her crotchet work lies on the armchair. Mrs Helseth comes in to clean the room.

- REBECCA I wonder why he doesn't come down? (slight pause) It's so -
- HELSETH It's nothing unusual. He's often late down.
- REBECCA Perhaps he's unwell –
- HELSETH No! He was already dressed when I took his coffee up.
- REBECCA He was feeling a little downhearted yesterday. So...
- HELSETH Wasn't there some row with the brother-in-law?
- REBECCA A row? Was there?
- HELSETH I knew there'd be trouble once that Mortensgaard came through the door -
- REBECCA What sort of a man is he - Mortensgaard?
- HELSETH How should I know? He's trouble that's all.
- REBECCA Because of the Paper he edits?
- HELSETH He had an affair with an older woman - gave her a bastard.
- REBECCA It was a long time ago though - before I moved down here.
- HELSETH He was young then but she wasn't - she should have known better. He was going to marry her but it came out she couldn't... Married already. The Pastor was very fiery with them. It doesn't seemed to have done him much harm though. Mortensgaard's the coming man now.
- REBECCA *(smiles, but with a degree of irony)* The people's champion - yes, the downtrodden run to him with their problems.
- HELSETH Not just the downtrodden...
- REBECCA *(glances at her furtively)* Really?
- HELSETH I know what I know. What would you think if I told you letters went from Rosmersholm to that man.
- REBECCA To Mortensgaard? I wouldn't believe you.
- HELSETH Well you'd be wrong. There were letters - well one at least. I know because I took it myself. And it wasn't for publication neither. Red sealing wax – lilac paper –
- REBECCA Mrs Rosmer was in correspondence with Mortensgaard?
- HELSETH I'm saying nothing. It's you that's saying things.
- REBECCA So what was in this letter? No, you couldn't know that...
- HELSETH Couldn't I?



Rosmersholm Projects Pack

Compiled by Samantha Lane and Charlie Payne

Rosmersholm by Henrik Ibsen, in a new version by Mike Poulton was produced at the Almeida Theatre from 15 May - 5 July 2008.

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Script extracts from *Rosmersholm* by Henrik Ibsen in a new version by Mike Poulton.

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