

THE WILD DUCK: PRESS RESPONSES

Almeida (2018)

Ibsen in a new adaptation created by Robert Icke

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TIME OUT

Andrzej Lukowski

★★★★★

Almeida wunderkind Robert Icke strikes gold again with this moving and clever take on Ibsen

Totemic Almeida associate Robert Icke is such a ludicrously and consistently good director that I sometimes find myself wearily bracing for the brilliance of his shows. Trotting slowly through the white male canon, in productions rarely shy of three hours, it can all sound a bit like taking your theatrical medicine. But in practice, it's almost always extraordinary.

'The Wild Duck' is a sort of upper mid-tier Ibsen play which Icke's new version manages to simultaneously deconstruct, make more intimate, and vastly expand upon. As Kevin Harvey's Gregory Woods wanders on to the Almeida's bare, brightly lit stage, he casually – almost smirkingly – informs us that 'The Wild Duck' is a play written by Henrik Ibsen in 1885, and that there is no point in a British audience expecting a 'true' version of something originally written in Norwegian – but that there is a truth buried under all this.

For the 90-minute first half he slowly builds up a picture of James Ekdal (Edward Hogg): essentially a failure in life, but blessed by the loving and tolerant family of his wife Gina (Lyndsey Marshal, a picture of guilt-wracked compassion) and 12-year-old daughter Hedwig (on press night Clara Reed excellent as a smart child who fatally can't quite understand the adult world). Plus there's his oddball father Francis (Nicholas Farrell, enjoyably fruity), who spends his time living and hunting in the eccentric 'forest' he has built in the attic. Their fates are entwined with those of the Woods: patriarch Charles (Nicholas Day) is a hugely wealthy businessman who has served as patron to James, apparently over guilt about something that happened when he was a business partner to Francis. And his son Gregory, an estranged childhood friend of James, has rebelled against his father's perceived rapaciousness and taken to aggressively trying to inform anyone who'll listen of 'the truth' about him.

A huge part of Icke's talent is as a writer and being able to adapt stiff-but-important classical texts into empathetic, tender work in modern English. The first half is a frequently beautiful account of flawed human beings trying to keep their shit together under desperate circumstances (while also vocally dissecting the allegorical significance of the wild duck Francis has in his attic). It's extremely well anchored by Edward Hogg's weak, caring, bad-postured James: a vanity-free performance shockingly different to his matinee idol-ish turn in the Open Air Theatre's 'As You Like It' this summer.

It all kicks off in the gutwrenching second half, in which the house of cards Icke and Ibsen have so exquisitely built up begins to topple. It is extremely moving, as these basically decent people's lives start imploding. But it is also gratifyingly and unabashedly cerebral, explicitly turning into a thesis on the nature of truth: the truth in theatre, the truth about Ibsen, and above all the emotional truth that can exist upon a foundation of lies.

Without ever quite spelling it out, Icke's 'Duck' also feels like it has something pointed to say about the contemporary outrage culture: Harvey's well-meaning but incredibly damaged Gregory feels like a very recognisable figure to anybody who spends much time on social media, a man who believes his take on the truth is so important that he's lost all sense of basic human empathy.

Toss in across-the-board great performances, a nifty soundtrack, a deceptively simple set from Bunny Christie with one tremendous surprise, and an actual live duck and Robert Icke has only gone and done it again – another classic not so much ‘updated’ as fully realised for our times.

THE OBSERVER

Susannah Clapp

★★★★

Ah, Robert Icke and his theatrical revelations! They are double-pronged. He brings to his staging of established plays such paraphernalia – ideological and physical. Video screens, explanatory commentaries, 21st-century psyches prowling around ancient or 19th-century dramas. Yet he dismantles linguistic clutter, irradiates the heart of a drama.

His production of *The Wild Duck*, Ibsen’s 1884 play about (well partly about) what it is to declare the truth, begins not with the action of the play but with statements about the action. Kevin Harvey as Gregory, an unreliable narrator, segues straight from an announcement about switching off mobile phones into the pronouncement via a microphone that there is no such thing as a “real version” of this play (that would be in Danish Norwegian), then sets the scene (fractured families, dark secrets), points to parallels between Ibsen’s life and his plot (he had a child with a servant) – and starts to unravel its themes.

Harvey delivers all this with such an intriguing combination of edginess and ease that I wanted to stay – while also wanting to yell: what about metaphor? What about letting me make my own mind up? But gradually the complicated mechanics – including the use of mics – fade away and the action takes over, shorn of candelabra and several minor parts, and the clarity of exposition pays off as it fuses with Ibsen’s ambiguous, twisting plot: Lyndsey Marshal gleams sinuously as the person who is the incarnation of a lie – and of a good life. Things turn in on themselves and undercut themselves: what is declared should not be believed.

This is, after all, a drama motored not only by speech but by sight. Two characters are going blind, and their blindness becomes a dreadful clue to a secret. Photography, the business of one family, becomes a way of thinking about how we frame our lives. It affords a beautiful passage in Icke’s adaptation – he is a writer worth reading as well as an essential director – which talks of the beauty of an image that “creeps” out of blackness (as you might think a character swims through lies), gradually gaining depth and focus, finally crystallising into a scene. It is a luminous account of what happens in the course of this arresting evening.

EVENING STANDARD

Fiona Mountford

★★★★

Robert Icke must rue the fact that theatre awards don’t follow the lead of the Oscars and include the category of Best Adapted (Screen)Play. This trailblazing director would have won it several times by now, and he’d win it again this year for his stripped-down, spruced-up take on Ibsen’s 1884 classic about the brutality of truth-telling.

We start very far from 19th-century Norway. The house lights are up, the stage is bare and the actors are in modern dress. There’s some initial toying with the idea of a “real version” of this work and when the drama gets going, the characters occasionally speak into a microphone to give us their interior monologues and comment on the veracity (or otherwise) of what they’ve just said in the dialogue.

The lights dim and the production slips gradually into naturalism, but what Icke does throughout is cut to the heart of the emotional matter. Long-buried secrets and lies fester within and between the Ekdal and Woods families, and Icke, with his concentration on a less hierarchical and therefore more delicately nuanced set of relationships than in Ibsen's original, hones in on the fragile domestic equilibrium between James (Edward Hogg) and Gina Ekdal (Lyndsey Marshal). Their 13-year-old daughter Hedwig (Clara Reed) dotes on the titular waterfowl they keep in the attic, a rather heavy-handed allegory for the general emotional murkiness.

There's particularly lovely work from Marshal; Gina's every emotion registers with a flinch, a shadow across Marshal's expressive face. Icke's triumphant march through the theatrical canon continues.

FINANCIAL TIMES

Matt Trueman

★★★★

The truth comes out and worlds fall apart in *The Wild Duck*. Henrik Ibsen's family drama shines a light on a sham marriage. James and Gina Ekdal's happy family home is gradually exposed as a construct; a convenient cover-up for another man's infidelities and an illegitimate child, Hedwig. Pulling the play into the present day, Robert Icke brilliantly retools its naturalism for our post-truth age.

It is a Plato's Cave of a play. Kevin Harvey's Gregory Woods (Gregers Werle in the original) returns from a self-imposed ascetic exile, rejecting his father's industrial wealth, as a determined truther. By contrast, his old schoolmate James (Edward Hogg) lives a fantasy life. A childish daydreamer in lopsided specs, he plays mime tennis with his daughter and puts his photography practice aside for some pipe-dream invention. It's his wife (Lyndsey Marshal) who holds their life together, fully aware that it's founded on a fiction — all arranged and paid for by her ex-lover, Charles Woods. "The truth will set them free," insists Gregory, like some enlightened, deranged doorstep evangelist. It doesn't.

Icke illuminates Ibsen's intentions with form. Starting on an altogether bare stage, exposed beneath unblinking floodlights and fluorescents, he slowly builds a fully-fleshed fictional setting. Actors who begin by directly addressing their audience, microphone in hand to narrate events, gradually slip into naturalistic pretence as Bunny Christie's design builds the Ekdal house around them and Elliot Griggs's lighting dims down to soft shadows.

It's super smart: a show that slides from Brechtian alienation to Stanislavskian suspension of disbelief. Mimed objects materialise as the play unfolds. A handbag stand-in borrowed from an audience member is replaced by a real duck. Theatre, Icke makes clear, exists on the edge of truth. The show skips between layers of reality — just like life. The microphone is key. Used to explain the truths of Ibsen's play, it too becomes subsumed into the story as characters wrestle it off one another, refusing to "end scene" on demand. Narration, subtext and commentary all blur into one.

Throughout, Icke peppers his own adaptation with species of lie, always probing the value of absolute truth. Are the family portraits on the Ekdals' walls lies, for instance? What about the stories they tell to teach their daughter about death? Is it lying to indulge the dementia illusions of James's drunkard dad (Nicholas Farrell), as he heads upstairs in hunting kit, taking an attic of old Christmas trees for a fully fledged forest?

This *Wild Duck* argues that we're all doing likewise; propping up a world order we know not to work. It's so well conceived that it can feel over-controlled, a theatrical thesis that pre-empts its conclusions, but its commitment to truth, and to theatre, never caves.

THE TIMES

Dominic Maxwell

★★★★★

Robert Icke, the 31-year-old adapter and director who made *Oresteia* feel like a newly written play, who took *Hamlet* and *Mary Stuart* and 1984 to the West End, has pulled it off again. I won't pretend that Ibsen's 1884 masterpiece doesn't put up a fight to the postmodern palaver that Icke brings to it. Yet I cannot remember an evening that starts out so irritating and ends up so riveting. He has his wild duck and eats it too.

So if our microphone-wielding narrator feels like an irksomely moralising presence — and hang on, since when did *The Wild Duck* have a narrator anyway, let alone one who offers sixth-form profundity about truth and hypocrisy? — rest assured that Icke is in on the joke. Gregory Woods, Icke's modernised, anglicised reinvention of Ibsen's Gregers Werle, is supposed to be a sententious berk. He also has some sharp, critical biographical points to make about the personal bias that underlays Ibsen's satirical attitude to 19th-century moralising. Nobody is all good or all bad, after all. Icke goes on to successfully manoeuvre Ibsen into satirising the soundbite certainties of social-media morality too.

So hang on in there as Kevin Harvey's still, sonorous Gregory and Edward Hogg's larky James Ekdal start talking through the story on a bare set, house lights up. They borrow a handbag from the stalls to stand in for the wild duck that lives in the attic of the Ekdals' house. This self-commentating approach makes it harder than usual to get a grip at first on the relationship between Gregory's pre-eminent businessman father, Charles (Nicholas Day), James's broken father, Francis (Nicholas Farrell), and James's wife, Gina (Lyndsey Marshal).

The second half changes everything. His halfway house between the modern and the Victorian duly established, Icke tightens the noose. He frees Ibsen's remarkable story, lets the plot do its job and soon the emotional costs of living with a lie and with unwanted truths are horribly tangible. Marshal, always a strong presence, is simply extraordinary. The way she fights to keep her family together is hugely powerful and utterly unsentimental.

Hogg goes from happy-daddy bluster to confused vitriol to something vulnerable. As their daughter, Hedwig, who is turning 13 as her world collapses, Clara Read (one of two girls alternating the role) is unaffected and extraordinary. Rick Warden impresses as the abrasive, drunken doctor downstairs: "People who don't feel liked tend to try to be right."

So after a clever-clever start Icke's reality games work wonders towards minimising the gap between actor and character, between audience and stage. And by the time Bunny Christie's design goes all the way from bare-brick beginning to leafy, smoky ending the evening completes its exhilarating journey to something resonant, ingenious, involving and moving.

THE STAGE

Natasha Tripney

★★★★★

He's done it again. Having made *Hamlet* feel freshly hatched, Almeida associate Robert Icke does the same for Ibsen's 1884 play.

The production more closely resembles his *Uncle Vanya* than his *Oresteia*. There are no CCTV monitors or sliding glass doors. It's a slow-burner. But, though three hours in length, it feels drum-tight. Every moment is considered and carefully weighted as it gradually casts a spell on the

audience. Icke has a way of pinkening the cheeks of canonical plays and making them breathe, as much a defibrillator as a director.

The Wild Duck opens with Kevin Harvey's Gregory Woods standing on a bare stage, a microphone in his hand, addressing the audience directly and explaining that all stories are essentially lies. To emphasise this point, Icke has his actors occasionally break out of character to explain to the audience how the play echoes events in Ibsen's own life – he fathered an illegitimate daughter – or to discourse on the nature of truth.

In Icke's update, James Ekdal (Edward Hogg) and his wife Gina (Lyndsey Marshal) run a photography studio. He had bigger ambitions, but they haven't quite panned out. The family have money troubles, but they're essentially happy, though their daughter Hedwig (played on press night by the extraordinarily assured Clara Read) has a degenerative condition that means she will one day lose her sight. James' dipsomaniac dad (Nicholas Farrell) keeps animals in a forest he has built in the attic – including a recuperating wild duck.

The Ekdals' lives are entangled with those of the Woods. Gregory is James' school friend, and his wealthy widower father Charles (Nicholas Day) was Gina's former employer. When it's revealed that their relationship was more than platonic, the inevitable question hangs over how consensual this could have been given his wealth and status.

Icke draws some exceptional performances from his cast. Hogg is a revelation as James – proud, vulnerable, his emotions running close to the surface. Marshal gives the production its solidity. Farrell is gruff, kindly and poignantly lost as Francis.

The precision of the staging is dazzling. Icke gradually builds the world of the play. The lights, bright at the beginning, slowly dim and the bare stage is subtly populated with furniture – you barely notice it happening. A black cloth masks the top half of the stage, so the Ekdals' attic must be imagined. While Icke reuses some familiar techniques, for example a song from the 1960s to underscore a scene of tragedy, and occasionally overcooks the play's themes, reiterating the idea that everyone has truths they submerge beneath the surface, the production is so assured and so suffused with humanity it doesn't matter.

The combination of the nuanced performances from the whole cast, Bunny Christie's design, a couple of moments of genuine shivers-down-your-spine theatrical magic and a real-life actual duck make this another exceptional production from a director (and adaptor) of incredible skill and insight.

THE ARTS DESK

Matt Wolf

★★★★★

Beware the smile that Edward Hogg wears like a shield in the opening scenes of *The Wild Duck*, the Ibsen play refashioned into the most scalding production in many a year by Robert Icke, here in career-surpassing form. Playing James Ekdal, the photographer previously known as Hjalmar, Hogg disarms you from the outset with a bonhomie just waiting to snap. By the play's end, there's precious little evidence of mirth given the cumulative wreckage on view: building upon his forays into Shakespeare, Schiller, Chekhov, and the Greeks, Icke propels Ibsen's 1884 text straight into the heart of darkness, and I defy anyone to emerge from the Almeida unscathed.

Not that the adapter-director doesn't exhibit a characteristic playfulness along the way; Icke here more than ever seems to be in conversation with the aesthetic of the American director Sam Gold, whose recent and divisive Broadway revival of *The Glass Menagerie* is suggested more than once. Playing with the raising and lowering of the houselights, apparent incursions into the audience, and historical intonations into the microphone (Ibsen, we're helpfully informed, is dead), Icke

embraces familiar "meta" touchstones only to move towards a sort of searing naturalism. Embedded in Icke's free-wheeling but deeply faithful take on the play are various debates of sorts on fake news that extend as far as putting Ibsen's own life on trial as a kind of torch-paper to his art: everyone here functions at some level as a literary critic, starting with a youngest character who voices a direct knowledge of subtext.

Small wonder, given the pervasive mercilessness, that someone may announce the end of a scene only for another to shout out in anguish, "No!" There's none of the safety net allowed by art in this vision of Ibsen's play, which connects up so fully to the malignancy of life that the cast aren't the only ones who appear moist-eyed by the time we reach the curtain call.

Those pondering the ad hoc repertory company that Icke has gathered to him in recent years may be delighted to note some new recruits to his way of working, all to entirely fruitful results. One can only begin to imagine what it costs these actors to go to so raw a place at every performance, whether or not that character raises his or her voice. Yes, it's shocking when "the young prince" (note the Hamlet imagery) that is the would-be inventor James smashes a microphone in frustration, but it's no less disturbing to hear the uber-cynical Relling (Rick Warden, terrific) talk matter-of-factly of people taking to megaphones so as "to scream their rightness to the world". (Hello, Mr Trump.)

These contemporary connections always exist in the service of the dual family dramas that overlap to ruinous effect on the way to an ending that poses grievous questions about how much truth one can bear. On the one hand, James and Gina (Lyndsey Marshal), his wife of twelve years, are consumed by love for their young, ailing daughter Hedwig (Clara Read, an astonishing newcomer and part of a role-share with Grace Doherty), who happens to be the person most devoted to that eponymous duck. But in a play where, as per the Ibsen norm, the past threatens at every turn to overwhelm the present, the weight of accusation hangs heavily over Gina, who cracks under the assault. Marshal magnificently rises to the challenge of the monologue late-on where Gina is seen wishing for a new start against near-impossible odds. (Divorce, she announces, isn't ideal, since she doesn't want her barely pubescent daughter getting two sets of Christmas presents.)

Hedwig, in turn, has the misfortune to fall under the sway of Gregory Woods (Gregers Werle in the original), whom Kevin Harvey (pictured above) plays with a caustic insistence on the hidden meaning of things that allows him to see the truth but also to use it to terrible and destructive ends. (Not for nothing does he get spat at.) Beset with serious father issues – his own, hugely wealthy father (played by a coolly stentorian Nicholas Day) is first seen holding forth on Chambertin wine from an aisle seat in the stalls – Gregory is the vagabond son returned home to avenge the past who in turn can't help but sully the present. For once, Ibsen's symbol-making sits easily within a landscape where James, for instance, substitutes "blooming" for the too-brazen "bloody" – which presumably is no bad thing given the bloodletting that will arrive in time.

And Icke as ever charts astonishing shifts in mood, whether the characters are seen breaking into an impromptu dance or giving themselves over to a Sandy Denny song ("By the Time it Gets Dark"): a lull before the calamitous storm. Yes, someone produces a laptop, but modern appliances exist only to elide the distance between Ibsen's time and ours. Bunny Christie's startling set, too, builds from the Peter Brook-style empty space cited in the published text to reveal hidden multitudes that attest to a dream world hovering on the verge of nightmare. Between this and *Company across town*, Christie is having quite a season.

Every single artist here is following their fearless director's lead in revitalising probably the only Ibsen play that has done me in each time I have seen it, which may also have something to do with the infrequency with which *The Wild Duck* gets staged. (Michael Grandage's 2005 production at the Donmar was pretty mighty, too.) But its cascading sadness is the take-away affect here, as rendered synoptic in James's description of his soon-to-be-sightless daughter "dancing into darkness". Plunging is more like it, not just for Hedwig but for a collective that comes to include an audience unlikely to be released easily from this production's doomy and altogether dazzling spell.

THE TELEGRAPH

Serena Davies

★★★★

In Robert Icke's sometimes irritating, certainly radical deconstruction – or should that be reconstruction – of what is arguably Henrik Ibsen's finest play, we are never allowed to forget we are watching theatre. Actors wander on to a bare stage as if to a rehearsal, one tells us to turn our mobile phones off, another borrows a jacket from a lady in the front row. Only in the second act does some furniture accrue (the gradual appearance of the set is meant to remind us of a developing photograph). Frequent asides, on a microphone, inform us what characters really think, of the autobiographical elements in the play, that its narrative may even have acted as a way of covering up Ibsen's poor treatment of his illegitimate child.

Icke's form with reinventing the classics as an adaptor/director, most notably Aeschylus's *Oresteia* and Schiller's *Mary Stuart*, has made him one of the most feted talents in modern theatre. And despite the self-consciousness, the whiff of a lecture, here again the evening builds to a climax of immense emotional power. Icke makes our own absorption in the "pretence" of theatre – that we care so darn much for the characters – make tangible the great theme of the play: that a man's "life lie" is crucial to his survival. Tear down our willingness to be deceived, and we are left empty.

The *Wild Duck* tells of a small family unit. In this modernised version they are the ineffectual James Ekdal (Edward Hogg), his kind, broken father Francis (Nicholas Farrell), his competent wife Gina (Lyndsey Marshal), and their loving daughter Hedwig (Clara Read), who keeps a wounded wild duck as a pet. Into this group comes an old friend, Gregory Woods (Kevin Harvey) who, knowing of his father's past affair with Gina and believing "the truth will set you free", tells James of it, with catastrophic consequences. There are other secrets too, as with all Ibsen, and none pretty.

As Icke gradually introduces the mechanics of his craft, so we succumb to his stage lie. With sleight of hand, the duck, which we had assumed was still being "played" by a handbag, is replaced by a real mallard. The scene when the Ekdals boogie together is utterly disarming. And when, just as we reach the most awful scene in the play, an enchantingly beautiful part of the set is revealed in a spot where we had thought only bare air hung, it's a bravura touch of magic. Let me stop your heart with this piece of artifice, Icke seems to be saying.

Superb performances assist. Harvey as Gregory may be infuriatingly "right on, or is that left on", but he is seductive and at times humane, abetted by the fact Icke has made him the audience's chief confidant and added a twist to the end. We aren't always sure whose side to be on. Hogg nails his sympathetic twist of a character and no one can stand and emote quite like Marshal. Touching support is provided by Farrell in particular, but perhaps the laurels of the show I saw go to the acutely vulnerable performance of 13-year-old Read (she is one of two children performing the role). "You won't go up and hurt her when I'm gone?" she says, in fear for the safety of her duck, in the text's most plangent line. The impulse of the narrative will claim a different victim.

Perhaps the message here is that what is most real is subjective experience rather than objective truth. "I don't know if I love you but it's my best guess that I do," says Gina. From the dark depths of pain at the play's end, the house lights jerk on. Ouch, I felt, don't do that. But Icke was only bringing us back to truth's cold light.

THE SUNDAY TIMES

David Jays

★★★★

Everything seems open and clear as can be at the start of Robert Icke's transfixing production of Ibsen's tragedy. The stage is stripped back to the Almeida's cracked wall; the lights are bright; the actors even explain the subtext to us. Gradually, though, truth gets messy. It's an immense evening.

We begin with friends reunited, each dragging a damaged childhood into not-quite-functioning adulthood. Gregory (Kevin Harvey) rejects his rich father, while James (Edward Hogg) lives in the shadow of his own dad's disgrace. Gregory moves in with James's family — including his semi-demented father (Nicholas Farrell, beautiful) and frail daughter, with their fantasy forest in the attic — and begins to tear the wool from their eyes.

A crucial change in Icke's incisive adaptation is to give Gina, James's put-upon wife, an eloquent inner life. Lyndsey Marshal makes her a compelling, tragic figure. Icke gives actors a chance to show their full selves. In particular, Harvey, a veteran character actor with a unique growling tuba of a voice, is outstanding as the play's buckling centre. He lets Gregory's virtue-signalling hurt unfold over three hours; what seems initially an amiable, calm surface reveals murky, turbulent depths. Even his breakout biographical asides to the audience are both an argument and an act of revenge on Ibsen himself. "The truth will set you free," he proclaims, but as the play progresses, we feel sick with the dread of his reckoning.

Amid antisocial media and fake news, this apparently domestic drama resonates hugely. What are the lies we need to help us live? And the duck? Oh, the duck's real. For what that's worth.

DAILY EXPRESS

Neil Norman

★★★★★

Back in the 1970s I was lucky enough to see Swedish director Ingmar Bergman's stage production of *The Wild Duck* starring Max von Sydow. So it was with some trepidation that I approached Robert Icke's new adaptation of Henrik Ibsen's rarely performed play.

When Gregory Woods (Kevin Harvey), the prodigal son of wealthy industrialist Charles Woods (Nicholas Day), enters clutching a microphone and launches into a Chorus-like explanation of the events we are about to witness, my heart sinks. He throws in questions about truth as well as uncomfortable facts about Ibsen's illicit love life. So far, so meta-theatre. But as the narrative takes hold, it is clear that we are being lured into a domestic drama of magnificent complexity.

It is set largely in the house and photographic studio of Gregory's old school friend James Ekdal (Edward Hogg). He lives with his wife Gina (Lyndsey Marshal), young daughter Hedwig (Clara Read, alternating with Grace Doherty) and James' father Francis (Nicholas Farrell). But beneath the forced domestic gaiety they are living hand to mouth.

James is a neurotic dreamer whose over-bright demeanor hides seething resentment. Gina handles the family finances and Hedwig keeps a DIY forest in the attic complete with rabbits and a wild duck, rescued after being wounded. During a 15-year absence, sanctimonious Gregory seems to have undergone some kind of conversion into an archaeologist of truth. As he excavates the secrets of the past, the family begins to unravel. This is a house the closets of which contain more skeletons than clothes.

Gregory's brutal father is the missing link between Gina, whose past association with him throws up distressing secrets, Hedwig's early-onset macular degeneration and old Ekdal's secret pension. And Ibsen questions whether it is better to live a contented life based on lies rather than risk exposing truths that might prove catastrophic.

The cast is superb, particularly Farrell's Ekdal, hiding his bottles of booze like a guilty child, and his story of the rescue of the wounded duck is mesmerizing. Writer/director Icke delivers a contemporary adaptation that is neither anachronistic nor self-consciously modern. And when the attic is finally revealed in a stunning coup-de-theatre, it is the prelude to a tragedy that is as shocking as it is inevitable.

Nothing could equal Bergman's traditional production. But this can stand alongside it with its head held high.

THE NEW STATESMAN

Helen Lewis

The Wild Duck is a lie
Ibsen and #MeToo: Robert Icke's rewriting of the classic tragedy suggests a way to reckon with the art of monstrous men.

"Are we to go back throughout history now and anyone who has misbehaved in any way, or has broken the law, or has committed some kind of offence, are they always going to be cut out?"
—Judi Dench on Kevin Spacey

"Anyway, it's all lies."
—Gregory, The Wild Duck

There is a sentence near the start of Robert Icke's version of The Wild Duck that is both a factual statement and a provocation. Speaking directly to the audience through a handheld microphone, the actor playing Gregory—who is about to destroy a whole family in his demented quest for "honesty"—tells us that this is a "true story". Henrik Ibsen wrote The Wild Duck in 1884, the actor-Gregory says, when he was 56. He had a sister called Hedwig. His father was declared bankrupt. He fathered an illegitimate child. All of these biographical facts have echoes in The Wild Duck. Its plot is this: a man whose father was declared bankrupt begins to suspect that his daughter Hedwig is, in truth, the illegitimate child of another man.

Nestled among the recital is this observation, of Ibsen: "He was a white man."

If an alien came to earth and its first stop was a British theatre, then—well, the odds are we'd probably all be killed in a cleansing fire. But if it happened to alight on the Almeida, how would you explain the clenched fist poised within that sentence? It is so far from being a neutral description. It means: powerful. It means: default. It means: a member of the class which has traditionally defined reality. And now, to progressive theatre audiences, the kind who loved the Almeida's overtly feminist play The Writer, it means some or all of the following things: over-represented, boring, staid, blinkered, narrow.

It's 2018, for god's sake. What does a white man—worse, a Norwegian who is "dead now"—have to say about anything?

It's been a year since the Me Too hashtag detonated, showering the internet in grimly repressed memories and new grievances. The last 12 months, I find myself hoping, was the first phase. The consciousness-raising. From a greater awareness of injustice, we can build new structures. In

theatre, changes are already apparent: the Royal Court's code of conduct, the Old Vic's Guardians scheme, the unlikelihood of Kevin Spacey gracing a charity gala any time soon.

The new season's must-have accessory is a female playwright, or a female director, or preferably a couple of each. The canon is being scoured for any of the few women's plays which received a professional production before the late twentieth century: *Rutherford and Son* in the new National Theatre season follows *Machinal* in the last Almeida one. Someone out there might be thinking of reviving Marie Stopes's play, *Our Ostriches*. I implore you: do not do this.

It's a strange moment when the structural response has happened more quickly than the artistic one. (I'm excluding Kevin Spacey being cauterised from the final series of *House of Cards*, and recast in *All The Money in the World*, because those feel more like commercial decisions than a principled moral stand.) But plays take time; movies even longer. At Edinburgh this year, I began to see the first shows in which the phrase "in the #MeToo era" would dominate the reviews. *It's True, It's True, It's True*, about the rape of the painter Artemisia Gentileschi, is an obvious example; it's about to transfer to the New Diorama in London. At the Donmar, there is currently a production of *Measure to Measure*, the most #MeToo Shakespeare there is. ("Who will believe thee, Isabel?")

As I said on *Front Row* on 15 October, I hope that this cultural moment provokes more art, from more viewpoints: not a razing of the canon but a reappraisal and a rejuvenation. I'm happy that David Mamet's *Oleanna* and Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* and Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* exist, but I also want to see art where the fundamental question is not over the truth of the accusation, but of the response to it. "Did it happen" is not the only conflict out there.

One of my favourite essays from the #MeToo era is by Claire Dederer, in the *Paris Review*. "What do we do with the art of monstrous men?" she asks. "Can I love the art but hate the artist? Can you? When I say we, I mean I. I mean you." Dederer draws a distinction which I have found increasingly important and increasingly uncomfortable. There is art where the monstrosity of its creator is incidental; although this is perhaps rarer than it appears. And there is art which is an implicit endorsement of a particular worldview. Watch *Manhattan* again, Dederer suggests, and notice how its lead character is dating a 17-year-old, and the film considers that to be worthy of no comment at all. "Woody Allen's character Isaac is fucking that high schooler with what my mother would call a hey-nonny-nonny," she writes.

Or look at the art of Paul Gauguin, depicting teenage Tahitian girls dressed in "exotic" fabrics he had imported from France. His unspoiled Tahiti existed primarily in his imagination. We are looking at an artistic manifesto—his own sexual tastes, blended with what he wanted to be true, and what he wanted others to think was true.

This is why I have no time for the kind of criticism that gets up on its hind legs about how people are now "politicising art" or "ramming their agenda down our throats". My dude, the canon is already full of politics. It's just that when those politics align with the existing grain of society, they lie flat against it, snug and barely visible.

My favourite idea in Ibsen's original version of *The Wild Duck* is the "life-lie". These are the stories we tell ourselves to make our existence bearable, and it is their destruction which leads to the play's tragic ending. For Hjalmar (James in the Almeida production), his life-lie is his mysterious "invention", whatever it is that he's working on which means he can't knuckle down to running a business or doing the boring bits of childcare.

There's a question over where James thinks the money is coming from to fund his family's upkeep: does he really think his photography business is profitable enough to sustain them all?

Why does he think his father has been creeping around the estate of Charles Woods, the former business partner who supposedly screwed him over? James either lies to himself, or makes every effort not to find out the truth—until the catastrophic moment his old friend Gregory turns up after 15 years away and encourages him to question his wife's fidelity, his daughter's paternity and the true financial state of his family.

But everyone in this world is a liar. Gina lets the implication stand that Charles Woods coerced her into sex, when their later conversation — not in the original Ibsen — reveals it was consensual; she doesn't want to feel like an adulterer, and she refuses to let herself wonder if she should have picked Charles over man-child James. Gregory Woods tells himself that wants his friend to know the truth about his wife, when he's really seeking revenge on his father by turning James against him. A personal vendetta is reframed as moral righteousness. (I bet he's a big fan of Twitter.) James's daughter Hedwig and his father Francis create a whole make-believe world in the attic, with ragged old Christmas trees standing in for the forests which are disappearing outside.

Robert Icke's staging, though, suggests Ibsen was the most successful liar of them all. (Full disclosure: I read and commented on a rehearsal draft of the script.) In *The Wild Duck*, Charles Woods is a benevolent bankroller of Francis, James, and by extension, Gina and Hedwig. Charles, as the father of an illegitimate child, is thoughtful and generous: he wants to endow Hedwig with enough money to see her comfortably to adulthood.

Ibsen, in the same situation, did not. As the actor-Gregory tells us direct into the microphone, he paid the minimum enforceable by law, then never saw the child or its mother again. Robert Ferguson's 1996 biography noted that Ibsen was nearly sentenced to hard labour for failing to keep up with the payments. "I cannot with any certainty deny the charge that I am the father," he wrote, "since I have unfortunately had intercourse with her, encouraged as I was by her flirtatious ways." (David Edgar's LRB review notes that "her response, reported somewhat later in life, was: 'Well, you know, that Henrik, it wasn't easy to stop him.'" The woman was a maid.)

And so the original *Wild Duck* also feels uncomfortably like a manifesto—advancing the idea of the benevolent old white patriarch, the bedrock of society, when its creator fell short of that ideal. Patriarchy is our collective life-lie, making life more pleasant for the patriarchs; look, this is just the natural order of things, and it works. Charles Woods doesn't need the law to force him to pay, or take an interest.

Imagine being the woman Ibsen impregnated and abandoned, watching *The Wild Duck*. Imagine being the child. Imagine watching the authorial stand-in Charles lord it over everyone on stage, kindly and paternalistic, while the real version didn't care if you starved. As the actor playing Gregory, railing against patriarchy in general and his father in particular, spits later into the microphone: "The *Wild Duck* is a LIE."

This version of *The Wild Duck* made me feel that story-telling can be a form of violence. Stories exert force. Gregory tells us his shoes are "jet black"; we can see they are brown. Stories provide well-trodden paths; it's easy for our thoughts to walk down them. They create archetypes—the precocious temptress, the nervy but lovable Jewish comedian, the difficult director who "pushes actors to the limit", the loving father who "suddenly snaps", the untrustworthy addict, the "tart with a heart"—and the temptation is to stretch out and distort the complexity of real people to fit those stock images. These archetypes suit some groups far more than others. (Just ask any Asian actor, tired of going to auditions to play a terrorist or a Muslim son coming out as gay.) At a national level, stories create myths: without World War Two, would we have Brexit? Stories tell us who we are.

It's not coincidence that for the majority of our history, our storytellers have been white men.

One of the strands, then, of this version of *The Wild Duck* feels like a challenge to artists: how responsibly are you using the dangerous power you have been given? Stories don't just twist the truth; they smooth it, turning an untidy skein into a single, unbroken thread. Even this rewriting of *The Wild Duck* does it. Ibsen paid for his child until the "end of its thirteenth year", we are told. Hedwig, the echo of that child in the play, is about to have her thirteenth birthday. Did you notice the sleight of hand? Ibsen paid for his child until the age of fourteen. This Hedwig starts off at twelve. And yet the play hovers around that unlucky number, 13, instead. That small smudge makes the echo much more resonant.

Stories have gravity; they demand that the truth bends towards them. Stories are neat. Lies are neat. Life is not.

The other question we should ask of any story is: whose story? After I saw Robert Icke's last play, *Oedipus*, in Amsterdam earlier this year, my heart belonged to the fact it was just as interested in Jocasta as the title character. The original Greek tragedy is misogynist in the way that really matters in art: it has no interest in women, treating them not even as supporting characters; more like moving scenery.

At the end of the Greek poem, Jocasta hangs herself off-stage, triggering *Oedipus* to blind himself. There is no interest in her motivation or any conflict she experiences about her actions. Yet she is not just mother to *Oedipus*, but to their children Polyneices, Eteocles and Antigone. She doesn't know what her husband, or Thebes, has in store for the three of them. This is an Ancient Greek tragedy: *Oedipus* might kill them. They might kill themselves. They might (as the boys do) kill each other. For a mother to abandon her children to any of that is a horrific decision to make. It should highlight how unbearable she feels it would be to stay alive.

But the original text doesn't care, at least not enough to dramatise that choice. I'm off, here's a leaflet on guide dogs, I've left some dinner in the oven. Icke's *Oedipus* does: we learn that Jocasta was groomed by the old tyrant (here a political leader rather than a king), who raped her while she was still legally a child, and stole away her own baby. She worked hard to put his control and cruelty behind her as an adult, after he died in a car crash at the crossroads. She is happy with *Oedipus* in the way that people who have had to fight for happiness are happy. And then the awful discovery comes as the time on the clock runs out. Before she goes to the bathroom and shoots herself, she tells her husband/son: "I can't lose you twice."

This is how much feminism I want in my art, no more and no less: to find women's lives as interesting as men's. To see them as people.

That poor duck. It gets its name in the title, but in metaphorical terms, it takes second billing to the photographs. As Susan Sontag wrote in 1977, photography has become a way of refusing experience – we can record a moment instead of living in it, turning it into "an image, a souvenir". Social media does this too. There's a sense of drowning not just in everyone else's furious certainties, but their frantic constructions of themselves. I looked back recently at my Instagram feed from a time when I was ill — anxious and burned out in a way that felt like being skinless. And it was all toothless smiles and artfully caught moments of achievement. Social media companies have made millions of dollars by digitising our life-lies.

What does a dead white man have to say in 2018? This, among other things. Icke's *Wild Duck* feels far less like a play about injury and sacrifice than the gulf between appearance and reality. The metaphor creeps into the staging in every conceivable way. The microphone interjections provide alienating distance from the original text, suggesting that Ibsen wove his own life-lie throughout his play. The house lights start fully up, removing the familiar (and comforting) barrier between audience and actors. Francis Ekdal wanders onstage at his first appearance, drunk and

disoriented, asking if it's started yet – whether he means Charles Woods's fancy dinner or the performance is ambiguous. This production is, in Terry Pratchett's phrase, clearly a "made thing". You are encouraged to notice the fingerprints in the clay, which is its own kind of honesty. Yet the tragedy of Hedwig's sacrifice is still indisputably the bloodied heart of it, bursting free of the clever-clever framing. (Wear waterproof mascara, is what I'm saying.)

Ibsen told his life–life not just as a "white man", a full citizen when others were not (women could not vote in Norway at the time *The Wild Duck* was written). He did it as the country's national playwright. Every straightforward performance since then has endorsed his life–lie. How many people know the story of his child? How many Ibsen scholars even know the boy's name? It's a footnote to his illustrious life, at best. Whereas his choices, his lack of financial support and refusal to take responsibility, must have defined that woman's whole existence.

"Cutting him out" of the canon, to use Judi Dench's phrase, feels inappropriate; it is a bitter irony that Ibsen generally writes women well, particularly for a man of his period. Equally, endorsing his power to shape reality, to excuse himself, feels . . . gross. This isn't a case where biography is incidental to the art; it feels more comparable to Gauguin's paintings. Biography becomes argument, and I wouldn't hang a Gauguin print in my hallway. I'll watch *Annie Hall* again, but it's no longer on my list of "guilty pleasures". Burning down the house seems over the top. But still, what do we do with art that is not just made by bastards, but acts as a manifesto for bastardry?

This production of *The Wild Duck* feels like the most compelling attempt yet to grapple with that question. Show the art; show the problem. Don't excise the darkness from the canon, don't cover it up; illuminate it, engage with it. Every time I've been asked to talk about the cultural response to #MeToo in the last few weeks, I've thought about this version of this play.

But . . . that's not allowed, is it? No one wants the most interesting artistic exploration of 2018's feminist awakening to come from "a white man". Worse, a white man rewriting another white man (a dead one, too). It's not allowed, somehow. It should have been a woman. Not least when so few women see their plays staged. It feels unjust.

So much for the artists. What about the critics? We do exactly the same thing: imposing our stories on complicated reality. I'm a minnow, relatively, writing long essays for a specialist magazine; but as a woman and a feminist critic, I still have the authority to declare a show "sexist" (less so racist, transphobic or homophobic, although I could certainly create a cloud of suspicion that would demand to be acknowledged). Gavel banged. Take him down.

There's a fashion now for posing as an underdog—all the moral high-ground, none of the responsibility—but critics have power, too, particularly in a world as small and self-obsessed as theatre. We can shape the story of a play which has been worked on by dozens of people, by applying a brutal label to it or its creator, with no prospect of appeal. (Imagine the response if a male playwright or director tried to contest my judgement that a work was sexist? Tap-dancing through a minefield would be less fraught.) This guy "can't write women". This director "uses gay stereotypes". A stupid character who happens to be black or Asian is clearly a calculated insult to an entire community.

Again, it's biography as argument. You can't argue with a woman about sexism. (OK, my entire online experience suggests you can, but still. Even people who do this constantly would probably sign up to the principle.) It can feel as though facts now only exist in relation to the speaker, and the speaker's identity, flashed like an entry card to the public debate.

This makes me uneasy—I want to be taken seriously on feminism because I've done the reading, not because I happened to be born with a vagina. And then I think about how partisan the

application of these labels is—Jeremy Corbyn cannot have a blind spot on anti-semitism, because he's a Good Guy. I think of the infinite good faith we extend to people on "our side", and the harsh rules we apply to the others. But then how hard it is to untangle experience and authority: how many well-thumbed feminist books equals one day of being cat-called and talked over in meetings? I want biography to be part of the conversation, but it cannot be the start and end of it.

"He was a white man." That matters, and it doesn't matter. One day, I hope, it will matter even less, when being a white man is just one flavour of humanity among equals, and there are as many plays by women and minorities on stage as you can eat. And when there is as much art from the perspective of rape survivors, from the sexually harassed, from abandoned children, as there is from rapists and harassers and men who never had to take responsibility for their actions. When the ownership of stories is democratic. When Twitter has been burned to the ground, probably, and its fields sowed with salt.

Then, it won't matter so much that it's all lies.

WHAT'S ON STAGE

Fergus Morgan

★★★★

He's done it again. He really, really has. This isn't the flashy, video-streaming, coin-flipping, Ivo-impersonating Rob Icke of *Oresteia*, *Hamlet* and *Mary Stuart*, more the restrained Rob Icke of *Uncle Vanya*, but it's no less radical, no less revelatory for that. The Almeida's prodigal son has turned his fierce gaze onto Ibsen and produced a version of *The Wild Duck* that's both harrowing and heart-breaking in equal measure. Undoubtedly one of the shows of the year.

Icke's gift is to take a classic text and make it utterly, thrillingly accessible to a present-day audience. He sees straight to the heart of a play and exposes its deep, human truths. With *Hamlet*, it was the inescapability of grief. With *Mary Stuart*, it was the ironic duality of fate. Here with *The Wild Duck*, it's the conflict between fact and fiction.

Ibsen's narrative remains present and correct, but Icke has retold it in contemporary dialogue. Greg, the errant, idealistic son of a wealthy businessman, returns home to wreak havoc upon his former friends and family with his truth-telling honesty. He determinedly reveals his father's past lecheries, his own buried guilt, and the frail fiction within which his best mate happily lives. Long-buried secrets rebound around Bunny Christie's bare stage like great, galloping horses.

The elemental question Ibsen originated, refined with such emotional articulacy here by Icke, is whether it is better to live your life as a lie or face up to reality, no matter how harsh. Whether we should embrace the stories we tell ourselves to survive, or shun them in search of deeper truth, deeper meaning.

But that's not all Icke's done: he's also reframed the play – the performers routinely break out of character, seize a microphone, and soliloquise their feelings, their backstories, and the history of the play itself to the audience. Kevin Harvey's Greg gets the bulk of it, monologuing freely in his warm Liverpudlian tones about ethics, morals and the deceit he sees all around him.

It's not entirely perfect – the first half hour is kind of exposition-heavy, and the meta-theatrical conceit with the microphone feels clunky at times – but as Icke's thoroughly thought-through adaptation progresses, as it reaches such exquisite peaks of drama in the phenomenal second half, none of that matters. The final forty minutes is just superb theatre: excruciatingly tense, heart-stoppingly gorgeous (with a wonderful coup de theatre from Christie), and emotionally traumatic, all at the same time.

The cast are uniformly excellent. Harvey as the irritatingly earnest, sensually-voiced Greg. Edward Hogg as his anxious, incessantly grimacing photographer friend James, whose fragile life gets torn to pieces. Lyndsey Marshal as James' loyal, loving wife Gina. And especially young Clara Read, who exudes a chilling power as James and Gina's teenage daughter Hedwig.

But this is Icke's show, through and through. His extraordinary string of critical and commercial hits have already proved that there is no-one else like him working in British theatre today. *The Wild Duck* simply asserts that further. It's brutal, beautiful, and borderline brilliant.