

Ibsen on the Platteland: The first professional production of *The Doll's House* in Afrikaans goes on tour (1929)

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Summary

The first locally initiated professional production of an Ibsen play in South Africa was an Afrikaans version of A Doll's House (named Geleende Geld – i.e. Borrowed Money - as a sop to contemporary audiences in rural areas), by the Paul de Groot Company in 1929. The play had 200 performances on its six month tour through the country, playing mainly rural towns. What the article looks at is the place and the nature of this production amid, the remarkable lack of negative response by the conservative Afrikaans community, and - conversely - the significant cultural influence the production would have on shape and style of the future of South African theater.

Ibsen in South Africa

It is interesting to note that Ibsen appears not to have been very popular in South Africa (particularly in contrast to Chekhov). In a brief survey of the standard histories of theater in South Africa produced no more than 23 confirmed productions before 1990 (see the *Appendix*), and interestingly enough, with one exception, only of Ibsen's naturalist plays! We may have missed a few, and that the number may even be double that, if one added the many undocumented student productions and the occasional amateur ones. Nevertheless, 30-odd productions of such theatrical fare as *A Doll's House*, *Hedda Gabler*, *The Master Builder*, *Rosmersholm* and *The Wild Duck* over the course of about a century is not impressive. This really surprised us - for the name of Ibsen and the names of the key naturalist plays are very well known in academic circles, and have always been.

As far as can be ascertained from available documentation,¹ the first South African performances of Ibsen's works were by Stephanus Maré in Pretoria (his own Afrikaans translation of *Steunpilare*, (*Pillars of Society*), somewhere between 1912 and 1918, when he was the key figure in the influential Afrikaans-Hollandse Toneelvereniging. The first English performances on record appear to have been done by the Stellenbosch University Debating Society, led by the remarkable Dr C. G. S. (Con) de Villiers, an influential cultural figure in the small university town.² He did

The Doll's House (possibly the first production) round about 1925, with an education student named Helene Botha as Nora (we meet her again in this narrative). In 1926 followed *The Master Builder*, with Anna Neethling Pohl and other student performers. He also translated Ibsen and Pirandello into Afrikaans, doing *Boumeester Sollness* (*The Master Builder*) in 1932 for example, his translation being used a few times afterwards by other companies.

The first confirmed professional production of an Ibsen play was *Spoken* (*Ghosts*), done by Mignon Sorel and Louis de Vriendt, a touring company of Dutch performers.³ This was rather surprising, since the company was primarily known for its performances of popular Dutch fare and particularly what were known as 'transformation pieces', in which the husband and wife team played multiple roles. However, in a press release Sorel claimed to have been of Polish origin and that she had played Nora in *A Doll's House* in Europe. They arrived early in 1927 and *Spoken* was performed in March of that year. After that they returned to playing only light and melodramatic fare, touring the country till the late 1930s.

The first recorded professional production by a local theatrical company took place in 1929 and the play chosen was once more *A Doll's House* - but

performed in Afrikaans this time. It is this particular production that we shall largely focus on for the rest of this article.

It seems that, besides student work, there have actually only been a few formally recorded professional productions of *A Doll's House* in South Africa over the years. These include the one we will be studying, a semi-professional Afrikaans production by the Bloemfonteinse Teatergroep, possibly a production by one or more of the state-funded Performing Arts Councils in the 1970s or early 1980s, and an English production in 1990, directed by Clare Stopford upstairs at the Market Theatre in Johannesburg.

Again this is an amazing situation, particularly if one considers the key significance of this particular play in the history of theater and in the feminist movement.

An obvious explanation might be that most of the companies coming to - or even arising in - the country were in the business for the money. The 'unsophisticated' local audiences were obviously interested in froth and fun, not 'literature' or heavy drama (Shakespeare, as always, being the one exception, and in some venues the Greek plays). However, this does not explain why Chekhov has fared so much better, indeed that there is an almost obsessive interest in Chekhov among South Africans, especially

again in Afrikaans translation. Clearly it could not be because Ibsen was difficult or inaccessible, for Chekhov is surely far more dense and obscure, and unsophisticated rural audiences would find this particularly the case.

A second possible reason is that the theater system in South Africa largely derives from its British parent, where the themes of Ibsen's naturalist plays had been regarded as controversial till well into the twentieth century. Certainly the pervasiveness of local productions of Shaw's work in the early part of the century would support this argument, with the rather outspoken Ibsenite issues being filtered through Shaw's more acceptable format and style. Yet it is a strange circumstance that the majority of the Ibsen plays that were put on were done by Dutch or Afrikaans companies, precisely by and for that segment of the population (the Calvinist, rural, Afrikaans-speaking community), which one would assume would in fact object most to the themes and the issues raised.

A third possible reason could be that the themes of the plays do not appeal to the audiences in South Africa, or at least not the overt dramatisation of such issues. Yet the issue of woman's suffrage was being powerfully driven in the 1920s and indeed led to the vote for women by 1930. Again an anomaly.

Finally one may always argue that the theatrical style was not popular: too heavy-handed, somewhat ponderously melodramatic and serious. Yet, ironically, this was to be the fundamental style of theater adopted by the vast majority of South African playwrights to follow - most certainly the many playwrights writing in Afrikaans (a point we shall return to).

It is this apparent set of anomalies that we wish to explore in this essay by focusing on one specific production.

South African theater in the late 1920s

There had been a thriving English theater in the urban centers of South Africa since the late 1880s on through the turn of the century. It was based on British models and largely fed by touring companies from Britain and Australia, though supported locally by the urban theater-goers and the powerful Schlesinger financial empire through its theatrical affiliate African Consolidated Theatres, which built and owned most of the prominent theater venues in the country. Theater in the other languages (Afrikaans, Xhosa, Zulu, Sotho and so on), however, was basically served by schools, universities, amateur societies and clubs, with much less formal support. In the case of Afrikaans, however, there was growing support for the culture and language struggle, which had culminated in the formal proclamation of

Afrikaans as an official language in 1925 and the acceptance of its cultural products as valid and acceptable for school and university study.

The events of 1925 also wrought a major change in the Afrikaans theater. This was the year that the first two fully professional Afrikaans theater companies were formed: the one by a young rural couple named Hendrik and Mathilda Hanekom and the other by a visiting Dutch professional, Paul de Groot. In the mid-1930s Herbert Dhlomo and others would begin to do similar work for the black population, but the development would take much longer.

There was a vast difference between the two Afrikaans companies. The engaging Hanekoms were trained as teachers and therefore were enthusiastic but untrained amateur actors, who saw an opportunity to do something more permanent and took to the road with light comic fare, much of which they wrote themselves. In contrast, charismatic Belgian actor/manager Paul de Groot was an experienced professional, with formal training and a penchant for more serious, even literary, European work, despite a real interest in economic success as well.

The Paul de Groot Company

A Dutch elocutionist, singer, actor, director and entrepreneur, de Groot was born in Dutch East India. He originally trained at the Theater School Amsterdam, as an apprentice to Eduard Verkade's De Hagespelers Company. After touring internationally with various shows, he rejoined the company in 1921-2 and in 1923 joined Anton Verheyen on a tour to Dutch East India, where they found theater in a state of chaos, as 16 touring companies competed for custom. In November 1924 he came to Cape Town and gave his first recital in the Afrikaanse Koffiehuis in the same month. Having produced two Dutch plays (1924-5) and toured a few towns, he devised and publicized a plan for the first Afrikaans professional theater company. This was formally launched with a recital in Pretoria on 2 April 1925, followed by two plays in Dutch on 23 April 1925. From here on he was to concentrate on Afrikaans work, training and utilizing local performers.

De Groot's first South African company was of necessity made up of untrained amateurs. Like all the visiting celebrities and actor-managers, he had brought only himself and his talents, and scavenged and found the rest of his requirements - performers, costumes, sets, etc. - locally. Over the years the professionalism in his company would improve, as he managed to gather a large number of talented young people around him, trained them

and gave them practical experience. His work was so manifestly superior to that of his rivals that training with him was seen as highly desirable. When one reads the many autobiographies and biographical documents about the mid-century performers, it is noticeable that virtually everyone singled him out as the greatest of the early Afrikaans directors and indicate how much they had learnt from working with him as well as the the autobiographies of performers who worked with him over the years, including such luminaries as André Huguenet, Wena Naude, Anna Neethling Pohl, and Lydia Lindeque.⁴ This was true even of those (many), who had disagreements with the fiery Dutchman or had been his business rivals⁵

De Groot was to have an enormous artistic influence on the growth of Afrikaans theater, both in terms of technique and quality (an autocratic director of the Meiningen School, he insisted on effective texts and quality staging), and of theater administration. If nothing else, he discovered and trained numerous prominent theater personalities, among the most notable of them being André Huguenet, Lydia Lindeque, Siegfried Mynhardt and Wena Naude, and influenced most other practitioners of the time - who would in turn all have an enormous impact on the development of indigenous professional theater, particularly in Afrikaans.

This was one facet of his work; the other was his attempt to educate the Afrikaners of the rural areas by exposing them to the better works of the European theater canon. It was all part of his innate cultural imperative, his need to display his cultural superiority - while still making money out of the deal. The fact is, he was notoriously avaricious, a cause of many a fall-out with his cast members. His other weakness was women, particularly young actresses, a factor that was also to have an impact on the saga of *The Doll's House*.

His first attempts at full-scale production were in Pretoria in Dutch; then he began working in Afrikaans, starting with an original play by C. Louis Leipoldt - *Die Heks* (*The Witch*) in 1925. He followed this with Afrikaans versions of, among other plays, Südermann's *Heimat* (*Huistoe*); *Scampolo* by Dario Niccodemi (*Oorskotjie*); Jan van Ees's *Felix, Jij en Ik* (*Mans Huishou*, (If men kept house)); a costume drama based on Alexandre Dumas (Snr)'s *Un mariage de conveniance* (*Gerieflike Huwelik*) and Mirbeau's *Business is Business* (*Besigheid is Besigheid*). In 1928 he did a very successful production of the Dutch play *Levend Dood* (Living Dead) by A. den Hertog, which de Groot had renamed *Haar Tweede Man* (Her Second Husband).⁶ Ironically, in the light of events to follow, the ending of the play reminds one strongly of that of Ibsen's *A Dolls House*, for it deals with a wife who ultimately has to choose between her legitimate husband and a

bigamous second husband and who then chooses to leave her husband and family to follow the latter. Apparently, because of his fears of popular tastes at the time, de Groot at first rewrote the script so that the wife would rather choose to remain with the original husband. This second ending was - it appears - almost randomly performed alongside the original, depending on de Groot's reading of the public at any given time, a procedure which led to a great deal of uncertainty amongst the players.

In 1929 de Groot had a seasoned professional company, with relatively experienced performers on board and money in his pocket. And it was with this that he could start planning for his next production.

The choice of a play

The naturalistic movement had for a long time intrigued de Groot, and he reportedly discussed his interest in Ibsen frequently when speaking about future projects. He had originally planned something for the 100-year anniversary of Ibsen's birth (1928), but missed it because of the success of his 1928 tour with *Haar Tweede Man*, but the 1929 season loomed and he needed a play. The echoes of Ibsen in the den Hertzog play were most probably not lost on the opportunistic director either, reviving his dormant interest in the Ibsen project.

De Groot had had substantial exposure to Ibsen over the years before he made his appearance in Southern Africa. For example, in 1908 he had played Dr Rank in *Het Poppenhuis* with the L. H. Crispijn Company and this experience undoubtedly also influenced his decision to turn to *The Doll's House* as a way of introducing Ibsen to Afrikaans audiences. He would have known the intricacies of the text well. Indeed it has been shown that de Groot actually relied heavily on any previous experience as an actor when directing a play.⁷ For example, his direction of *Gerieflike Huwelik*, in 1927, was apparently a carbon copy of the Verkade productions of the same play, in which he had initially appeared as the “lackey” for the Nijmegen run in 1909, and in 1914 as Chevalier de Valclos.⁸

Having decided that the Ibsen project would be undertaken in 1929, de Groot - a confirmed self-publicist - began announcing his new project to audiences after the curtain during the tour of *Haar Tweede Man*. He spoke of Ibsen and gave the audiences a lecture on naturalism and its cultural impact on Europe. According to the ever-critical André Huguenet, the poor rural audiences did not really follow his arguments very well. However, the lectures had one important result - it brought them a leading lady, as we shall see.

The Text

As has been mentioned, this was the third play by Ibsen to be translated into Afrikaans, the first being Stephanus Maré's *Steunpilare (Pillars of Society)*, the second *Boumeester Skollness (The Master Builder)* by Con de Villiers. De Groot had asked an old associate, Mrs A. E. Carinus-Holzhausen, to do the translation of Ibsen's *The Doll's House*. She was a passionate supporter of theater, and became a literary advisor and prolific translator for the early Afrikaans theater, doing more than 30 translations over the years for the sheer pleasure of it.

While the manuscript of the text does not seem to be available anywhere, reports on the play suggest that the initial text was a translation of the original play (no doubt from a Dutch or English version), containing the original ending in which Nora leaves Torvald. However, it is also clear from notes made by Huguenet⁹ and Helene Botha¹⁰ that de Groot later switched to the later, revised and 'happy' ending reluctantly written by Ibsen for German audiences in 1880. More on this below.

Similarly, the choice of the rather one-dimensional and slightly inappropriate title *Geleende Geld* (borrowed money) for the more metaphoric original was an obvious attempt to once more cater to the perceived sensibilities of the largely rural audiences they would be facing.

The youthful prodigy, André Huguenet, actually takes credit for having suggested that particular title for the Afrikaans version. He claims that de Groot wanted to call the play either *Nora* or *Poppehuis* - both titles which had been in use in Europe for some time. The Dutch translation, for example, was simply *Poppenhuis* (Doll House). Huguenet, however, was convinced that neither name would not attract audiences, so it became *Geleende Geld* (borrowed money). It was thought that Afrikaner farmers and townspeople from the Platteland (rural areas) might balk at attending a play entitled *Doll House*, but would be intrigued by something that seemed to touch on the reality of their economic lives at the inception of the Great Depression.

Indeed this question of names was of great strategic importance at the time, as is demonstrated by many a play that had its name changed on tour, till the most commercially successful one was found. There may also have been another equally mercenary objective in some cases, of course, namely an attempt to avoid the payment of royalties and performing rights. However, this would hardly have applied in this case, since the name of the author was clearly stated and the play too well known to try to pass it off as a new Afrikaans play.

Casting the play

From the beginning a key problem for de Groot was the role of Nora. His regular company members at the time could fill all the other roles, despite their relative inexperience. For the male roles there were himself, Henri van Wyk - a loyal but ailing young actor who had joined him for the previous tour - and the hugely talented André Huguenet, whom de Groot had discovered a few years previously in Bloemfontein while still a schoolboy. They were in fact to rotate the roles on a number of occasions. De Groot also cast Andries Coetzee, the apparently illiterate driver of their truck, as the Servant. In the case of the women, however, he only had the experienced Rena la Roche, whom he had used before, to play Christine, but he had no one suitable to take on the key role of the childlike Nora.

In a rather bizarre incident - possibly as much the result of his desperation as it was of his notorious philandering - de Groot initially sought to cast a beautiful but totally inexperienced 16 year old schoolgirl in the role, but that came unstuck when her parents warned him off and forbade her participation in the play.¹¹

After this setback, fate finally smiled on him. After a performance of *Haar Tweede Man* in rural Jansenville, a young teacher, Helene Botha, a local teacher who had heard and been intrigued by his customary post-

performance talks on naturalism, Ibsen and his plays, approached de Groot. She told him that she had some experience as an actress in Stellenbosch and Pretoria, and had actually played Nora a few years before in the 1925 Stellenbosch English production (directed by Prof. C. G. S. de Villiers). On the strength of this experience and her appearance and enthusiasm, they cast her and she took a year's leave of absence to go on tour with the company.

Of the casting, Huguenet comments:

If ever there was a play in which Paul had, by good fortune, a great head start through 'type-casting', it was in "The Doll's House". Everyone was physically, and to an extent spiritually, just right for his or her role. The result was that, except in my case, we could use the absolute minimum of make-up.¹²

According to Huguenet, the initial company was thus as follows:

Helene Botha - Nora Helmer

Rena la Roche - Christine Linden

Henri van Wyk - Nils Krogstadt

André Huguenet - Dr Rank

Paul de Groot - Torvald Helmer

Andries Coetzee - Servant

The roles of the children were filled anew in each new town, where local children were auditioned by de Groot and hurriedly rehearsed by Helene Botha - whose experience as a teacher now came in most useful.

The cast was to fluctuate considerably over the next few months, as is evidenced by irregularities or discrepancies in documentation. It seems that Huguenet started out playing the role of Dr Rank, but later exchanged roles with de Groot. Frequent illnesses in the cast also caused some of the role changes, for example when van Wyk was taken ill, de Groot and Huguenet played his role alternately. On another occasion André Huguenet left the company for a while, because of artistic differences, and van Wyk had to double in the role of Dr Rank.

It was a small, lean touring company, therefore besides acting, all the members of the de Groot Company had additional duties on the production. De Groot as company manager looked after the finances, made the artistic decisions and directed the play. Huguenet was in charge of marketing and publicity, van Wyk - with the help of Coetzee - served as stage managers and stage hands, Helene Botha looked after and rehearsed the children, and Rena de la Roche looked after the other matters, such as costumes.

Rehearsing the play

Rehearsals started on Monday 7 January 1929 in Caledon and lasted for six weeks, during which time the company had to confront a range of challenges. These included a change in rehearsal venue, frequent fainting spells by the fragile Helene Botha and de Groot's demanding style of direction. On 19 January the company moved to the Caledon town hall to continue rehearsals. Here Botha was taught the tarantella, with Huguenet accompanying her on the piano.

On the tour rehearsals were necessarily repeated at each new venue, in order to incorporate the three children cast locally. Such rehearsals ran for about three hours before every opening night and the energy required to work in this way put an enormous amount of stress on the company. Helene Botha documents quite a number of cases where this led to arguments with de Groot. On some memorable occasions she actually had to perform without any children, as de Groot would send them away for some reason, often because they were too old to his liking.¹³ The strain of having to improvise under such circumstances was enormous.

In his chronicles Huguenet says that Helene Botha initially disappointed as an actress.¹⁴ This comment seemed directly linked to the fact that she found de Groot's directing methods abrasive and aggressive, as well as physically

exhausting. She also had her own ideas about the role of Nora, most probably drawn from her previous experience in Stellenbosch. For example, on a visit to Bloemfontein Helene discussed they play with a friend, Dr van Rhyn:

Doctor agrees with my opinion - it is on account of this that Paul de Groot and I fought in Caledon! He turns Nora into a weak figure whereas she should in reality be a monument of a woman ...¹⁵

Helene Botha also struggled to work with the temperamental Huguenet, finding him an unreliable accompanist for her tarantella scene, easily affected by his emotions. Once, angry at some previous encounter, he played so fast that she could not keep up; on another occasion he left the company unannounced and thus, for a short while, Helene had to dance without music, since no one in the company could replace him. Helene also reports that during the same period van Wyk was forced to play Huguenet's role as well, which meant that she had to improvise an entire scene with the children around the Christmas tree in order to give van Wyk time to change character.¹⁶

The Set and Costumes

As there are no production photographs, we can only deduce much of the *mise en scene* from the few descriptions available from our biographical sources.

The set of *Geleende Geld* was apparently one of the most expensive de Groot ever put together. According to Huguenet, it was done in what he called the “Scandinavian style,” with real carpets, lace and collapsible couches.¹⁷ The precocious Huguenet says that he had also insisted that for this production proper theatrical lighting equipment had to be used¹⁸. De Groot seems to have acquiesced and acquired a set of basic lighting equipment, simple enough to travel with and easy to set up in the different locations. The cumulative result of the set and lighting made this a very expensive production of the Ibsen play.

Huguenet also gives us an idea of his costume for the role of Dr Rank: “Sombre colours in a loose, hanging cut and a heavy coat with a fur collar, a valuable cane with a silver snuff box, in which he kept his painkillers.”¹⁹

No other references to costume are to be found, but a photograph featuring Helene Botha as Nora shows her wearing a simple, but filmy white dress with a string of pearls around her neck, with her hair was done in a typically

twenties style (see Figure 1). Clearly Huguenet's 'Scandinavian style' did not refer to Scandinavian dress, but rather to the realist nature of the set.

FIGURE 1 NEAR HERE

De Groot insisted that everyone be made up very lightly, so as to not disturb the naturalistic style for the audience. However, since Huguenet was a young man of 23, he had to be far more heavily made up for his role than any of the others in the cast. A photograph of him as Dr Rank shows a white, mask-like face with greying hair licked back (see Figure 2). Huguenet remarked about the make-up: "Tonight we quickly learnt to make up our faces. Paul de Groot made me up hopelessly and I look red with red eyes, like one who boozes."²⁰ He apparently took over his own make up after that.

FIGURE 2 NEAR HERE

De Groot's insistence on simple make-up and indeed his whole naturalist approach were in total in contrast to the more flamboyant and 'stagey' make-up favored by his amateur-bred rivals, such as the Hanekoms or the Wena Naude Company. It was to leave a strong impression on the young Huguenet and his other protégés.

The Opening Night

Geleende Geld had its first performance on Tuesday 5 February 1929 in the town hall in Caledon. Several journalists and critics were invited to the opening, but Huguenet states that this was the first and last time they received official press coverage. Later issues of influential Cape Town newspaper *Die Burger* mentioned performances in Riversdal, but these were readers' letters, not official reviews.

Clearly there was some tension involved, since doing a serious and controversial play of this kind was very much an experiment for everyone. Rumours also abounded that their arch-rivals, the Hanekom Company, would be attending, and nerves were strained. Particularly the relatively young and inexperienced cast members were nervous. As Helene Botha records, she and Rena (or Elise as she called her) were alternately hugging each other and crying.²¹

However, the normally hypercritical Huguenet as well as the relieved novice Helena Botha describe the opening night as an "enormous success"²². The quality of the performance was apparently praised by most people who saw it, while the critics had been well primed about Ibsen and Naturalism before the opening, so they too seemed content, though Huguenet does comment on their uninformed commentary at times.²³

The travel plan

However, this was not a play primarily put on for the critics, but for the Afrikaans-speaking public of rural South Africa. The play was eventually given approximately 200 performances on the South African Platteland, travelling over 2000 kilometers over dirt roads by motorized van, playing every day except Sundays. Huguenet called it “an artistic crusade”, in which the rural population was to be exposed to work of a much higher quality than they had ever been before²⁴.

One can imagine that spending so much time in a confined space with other company members on the road put a strain on their personal relationships and at times threatened the production. Furthermore, the mixed reception of the play made Paul de Groot want to close the production after just a month of touring. However, the continued loyalty of the audiences convinced him that he was in some way reaching some people with the play, and he agreed to proceed with the travel plans.

General reaction to the rural performances

Theater was a rarity on the Platteland and cultural activities in general had to compete for audiences with many other, often much cheaper, forms of

upliftment and entertainment. Audience members were much more comfortable attending church services, church fêtes, agricultural exhibitions featuring cattle and grain sales, and the latest implements for farm and home. The latter exhibitions often offered odd and titillating sideshows (e.g. appearances by ‘The Fattest Girl in the World’, magicians and so forth), the nearest thing they would have to theater. Big-screen movies were also beginning to have an effect. Shown in converted halls and custom-built ‘bioscopes’, they provided entertainment and for small towns this had great significance in linking them to the outside world. Unfortunately this also had negative influences, since the arrival of the ‘talkies’ in particular by the end of the second decade of the 20th century threatened to replace the live theatrical productions, which had proliferated before, with the offerings of the international film industry.²⁵

There was also strong competition from other travelling theater groups which also affected the success of the performances of Ibsen’s play. Louis de Vriendt and the Hanekoms were out travelling the same regions and competing for audiences, but playing far more entertaining light-hearted fare.

In this context the tour was not deemed especially successful. Retrospectively, of course, one can see the kind of change it affected in

theater history, but at the time its success was simply gauged by audience reactions and the box office takings - which weren't bad, but not so good as to urge de Groot to continue the experiment - or even to try another Ibsen. This was left to later generations, notably to his more impassioned and ultimately more celebrated understudy, André Huguenet.

The audiences themselves were not sophisticated city dwellers, used to the conventions of the theater, so their reactions were unpredictable in a sense - in some of the more remote areas they might even become somewhat rowdy. On more than one occasion there were actual disturbances in the audience, with Paul de Groot stepping out of character for a moment, threatening to throw the guilty parties out of the theatre. Inevitably this impacted on the quality of their experience of watching the play and even their understanding of it. It also markedly affected the performers in their working process and their interactions on stage of course.

Audience members unfamiliar with Ibsen were reportedly very unhappy with the original ending of *Geleende Geld*, clearly unwilling to countenance a portrayal of a woman who is prepared to leave her husband and children. This was rather ironic since the suffrage movement had been very active in the country for more than three decades and voting rights for women were finally to be introduced the following year. Since the box office speaks

loudest however, Helen Botha records that they altered the ending of the play, so that Nora is persuaded to stay, and Torvald crushes her to his breast. According to Binge,²⁶ they used the second version Ibsen had been prevailed upon to write for the German audiences in March 1880, in which Torvald forces Nora to look at her sleeping children, and, finding herself unable to leave them, falls to the ground. It would seem that de Groot had 'improved' even further on the sentiments of Ibsen's own adaptation.

This certainly did not please all the audience members, particularly not the more discerning theater critics. Trümpelmann for one comments on this ending with dismay - though also displaying a surprising ignorance about the fate of the play in Europe:

The longer the play went on, the more interested I became in what was going on in the scene, until the denouement. Here the play took an unfamiliar and unexpected turn that differs completely from the original drama by Ibsen. The end illustrated no conflict, but a reconciliation that is entirely contradictory to the meaning of Henrik Ibsen's dramatic art. Here I must ask the question: Can a person arbitrarily change the work of one or other poet?²⁷

He goes on to discuss possible reasons why de Groot made the decision - the obvious one being the need not to offend audiences.

Yet these negative critiques on the play did not affect attendances adversely, for they were not widely read. The good reputation Paul de Groot had built up and the lively expectations that people had of his work, based on his earlier, more sentimental plays, ensured that they always had large audiences. It was only once they were in the hall that the audience would find that the material was vastly different and far less accessible or palatable than they had come to expect.

Besides noting the radical adaptation of the ending, Helene Botha also mentions other forms of censorship, based on the director's reading of his potential audiences²⁸. For example, at certain venues she was told to cut the curse "verdomp" (a softened version of something approximating the English "damn it!") from the text, for fear of offending the audience. Certainly audiences varied in their responses to the work, but by and large there seemed more of a sense of apathy than of disgust - or even of interest. On 18 February the company visited Hopefield and Botha wrote in her diary: "The people here do not enjoy our show, it is too deep for them ... no one came to see me after the performance, it is an unfamiliar world. They only applauded the dance."²⁹

Conclusion: The impact of de Groot's experiment

The long tour ended in October and Huguenet writes: "Everyone was tired and a bit disillusioned Our piece was not popular and we had strife in the company. A long holiday was the remedy for everyone, and in this spirit the company broke up."³⁰

On 5 November, almost five years since his first arrival in South Africa, de Groot left the country for Europe and only returned some six months later, to begin a new tour with a new work. Helene Botha returned to her teaching and continued her studies. André Huguenet joined the Pretoria newspaper *Die Vaderland* (The Fatherland) as journalist for a while, before taking on his first major role as the title character in a dramatisation of the iconic Afrikaans novel *Ampie*. Henri van Wyk and Rena la Roche continued acting with other companies. All three were to work for de Groot again after his return.

The hypothesis with which we undertook this study was that this sensational play would most probably have had a marked response in its time. This hypothesis could not really be proven, for virtually no such active response has been found, beyond the initial positive reviews in Caledon and Dr Trumpelmann's thoughtful letter to *Die Burger*, though all the sources

refer to a measure of bewilderment and dissatisfaction with the ending from the first few audiences³¹. However, as has been shown, the reasons are obvious - firstly, the play used for most of the tour was the adapted one, and secondly, the play went on tour as a series of one-night stands, thus no critical response would have been published, for no reviews were actually written - or read. Nevertheless, de Groot seems to have become more cautious in his choice of play in later years, as André Huguenet points out, choosing more accessible and crowd-pleasing works. Indeed, as far as Huguenet was concerned, Ibsen's naturalist play was the only decent work done by Paul de Groot.

Though this particular production did not seem to have had a direct effect at the time, yet the experiment ended up having quite a substantial impact on South African theater in the longer term - despite not being a commercial or financial success. A number of crucial processes were set in motion by de Groot's ambitious attempt to bring the contentious European play to the rural Afrikaner communities.

The first impact was on the notion of professional excellence, among the performers themselves and the audiences they played for. The production was highly praised, particularly de Groot's notions of naturalism on stage. For example, mention is made of the audience applauding at the first sight

of the set, a response to quality in design which was almost unheard of before on rural tours.³² Thus a new standard was set for other theater companies, especially those performing on the Platteland, and all the actors and actresses who passed through his hands over the years had this kind of in-service training. It was an invaluable thing in a country where no formal training existed before the mid-1930s.

However, the most direct influence was perhaps the creation and nurturing of the legendary André Huguenet, who was not only to emulate, but eventually to surpass his master on all fronts. He was to do some of the most memorable productions of Ibsen over the years, notably an outstanding 1947 version of *Spoke (Ghosts)*, which not only played to packed audiences in Johannesburg, but (along with his *Hamlet* of the same year) led to the founding of the National Theatre Organisation (NTO), the first state-funded theater in the British Commonwealth.

The key to Huguenet's success was his keen missionary spirit, his desire to bring culture to the Afrikaans-speaking masses, his love of realism and naturalism, and his almost obsessive attention to detail in production - all legacies of his early exposure to de Groot and to Ibsen, and of his later visits to Europe and notably to Russia. It was an inspiring career that lasted almost 40 years, and dominated Afrikaans theater for at least 30 of those years.³³

This success and de Groot and Huguenet's penchant for realism on stage eventually led to a strong emphasis on social realist playwriting in Afrikaans and even in English. To this day some of the outstanding plays being produced by celebrated writers such as Athol Fugard, Paul Slabolepszy, P. G. du Plessis, Pieter Fourie, Reza de Wet, Deon Opperman and Charles Fourie show a clear indebtedness to the Ibsenite invasion of the early twentieth century, and to Nora's first flirtation with emancipation in Caledon in 1929.

¹ There is very little public record of the production, because a touring company - playing one-night stands - seldom gets public reviews in accessible newspapers. Unless of course there is some public disturbance or outcry - which, strangely enough, there did not appear to be concerning this production. The sources consulted are provided in the bibliography, though obviously these cannot be exhaustive, especially regarding those productions put on by universities and colleges. Fortunately, however, we do have the evidence provided by two performers, namely the extensive memoirs of André Huguenet from his 1950 book *Applous* (Applause) and the more personal and unpublished diary of Helene Botha, which is extensively quoted by Danie Botha in his 2005 book of anecdotes *Voetligte & Applous* (Footlights & Applause). Since both of the performers had originally written in Afrikaans, we will be quoting from these sources in our own English translation. We would also like to express a special word of thanks to the staff of the Special Documents Collection of the University of Stellenbosch's J. S. Gericke Library, who helped us to trace some of the rare documents and photographs from their collection.

² Prof Dr Con de Villiers is to this day still an iconic figure to most people of Stellenbosch, a popular author, mentor and immensely influential professor of zoology at the University of Stellenbosch in the first half of the century. Besides his famous stories about the Overberg region, he was also a director and translator of plays, notably the works of Ibsen and Pirandello. Sometime around 1925 he directed *The Doll's House* in English (with Helene Botha as Nora) and followed this with *The Master Builder* (12 August 1926) for the Unie-Debatsvereniging starring Anna Pohl and Neep van der Merwe, among others. He also did some Afrikaans translations of *Rosmersholm* and *Boumeester Solness* (an Afrikaans version of *The Master Builder*) for the society. The translations were performed by various groups over the years.

³ See D. Botha, *Voetligte en Applous!*, Pretoria: Protea Boekhuis, 2006.

⁴ See in this regard A. Huguenet, *Applous! Die Kronieke van 'n Toneelspeler*, Kaapstad: H.A.U.M., 1950. and Botha, op. cit.

⁵ See for example Binge, op.cit, pp. 143-168.

⁶ Theater historian Ludwig Binge has another version of this story, for he has the title as *Haar Twede Man*, using an older Dutch spelling for “second”, and ascribes the play to Paul Géraldy not Den Hertzog - but unfortunately with virtually no further details provided. See L. W. B. Binge, *Ontwikkelling van die Afrikaanse Toneel (1832-1950)*, Pretoria: J. L. van Schaik, 1969.

⁷ See for example Binge, op.cit. and Huguenet, op. cit.

⁸ Binge, op. cit., p. 145.

⁹ See Huguenet, op. cit.

¹⁰ See Botha, op. cit.

¹¹ Alida Lindeque - a beautiful but precocious young girl of 16 - had written to him from her boarding school in Ficksburg in the Free State Platteland, enclosing a small picture. While he initially ignored this, he later met her and her mother after a show and auditioned

her. However, when the expected 'contract' arrived, it contained not a contract but a proposal of marriage! (Botha, op. cit., pp. 312-13.) The girl's parents obviously returned the money and the contract unsigned, and Lindeque was forbidden to go anywhere near the stage. The correspondence between the two apparently continued for some time however, and he eventually did take her into his company - changing her name to Lydia, and she went on to become one of the great actresses of the Afrikaans stage.

¹² Huguenet, op. cit. p.58 (translation by De Lill)

¹³ See Botha, op. cit.

¹⁴ Huguenet, op. cit., p. 57

¹⁵ Ibid. (translation by De Lill)

¹⁶ See ibid.

¹⁷ Huguenet, op. cit., p. 58

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ See ibid. (translation by De Lill)

²⁰ Botha, op. cit. p. 58

²¹ See ibid.

²² Huguenet, op. cit. p. 59 and Botha, op.cit., p.189

²³ Huguenet, op. cit. pp. 59-60

²⁴ Huguenet, op. cit. pp. 60-61

²⁵ See for example Binge op.cit, Huguenet, op.cit as well as L. D. M. Stopforth, *Drama in South Africa, 1925-1955*, Potchefstroom: Potchefstroom University, 1955

²⁶ See Binge, op. cit.

²⁷ J. Trümpelmann, 'Geleende Geld op Riversdal', in the letter columns of *Die Burger*, 12 June 1929. Cited in Binge, op.cit. p. 148 (translation by De Lill)

²⁸ In Botha, op. cit., p. 190

²⁹ Botha, op. cit. p.191 (translation by De Lill)

³⁰ Huguenet, op. cit. p.64 (translation by De Lill)

³¹ Notably Huguenet, op. cit. pp. 59-60 and Binge, op.cit. pp. 147-148

³² This kind of response to the first view of the bare set itself has become a quaint South African custom, much promoted by the lavish sets built for the well endowed Performing Arts Councils between 1962 and 1990.

³³ A measure of his immense reputation and his uniquely eccentric personality is the fact that four plays have been written about (or featuring) him recently: *André Huguenet - Meneer!* by Jill Fletcher, *Mirakel* by Reza de Wet, *Elke duim 'n koning* (Every Inch a King) by Pieter Fourie, and *Exits and Entrances* by Athol Fugard.

Appendix:

Some key Ibsen performances in South Africa:

- 1915?? *Steunpilare van ons volk* (Lit, “Supporting Pillars of our Nation” An Afrikaans version of *Pillars of Society*) Tr. Into Afrikaans and directed by Stephanus Maré with Afrikaans Hollandse Toneelvereniging. (Binge, 1950:40)
- 1925?? *The Doll's House*. Dir by C.G.S. (“Con”) de Villiers with the Unie Debatsvereniging, University of Stellenbosch (Binge, 1950:147)
- 1926 *The Master builder (Bygmeester Solness)* Dir by C.G.S de Villiers, Unie Debatsvereniging, University of Stellenbosch (12 August) (Binge, 1950:190)
- 1927 *Spoken (Ghosts)* In Dutch. Performed by Mignon Sorel and Louis de Vriendt. (Botha, 2006:368)
- 1929 *Geleende Geld* (literally: “Borrowed Money”. Afrikaans version of *The Doll's House*). Tr by Mrs A.E. Carinus-Holzhausen. Dir Paul de Groot (both in the original version and later ‘happy’ ending). (Bosman, 1969; Binge, 1950)
- 1932 *Boumeester Solness (Bygmeester Solness, or The Master builder)* Tr and dir by C.G.S de Villiers, Unie Debatsvereniging, University of Stellenbosch (Botha, 2006:375)

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- 1934 *Rosmersholm* (in Afrikaans) Tr by C.G.S de Villiers, performed by Krugersdorp Municipal Society for Drama and Opera on 7th December. (Du Toit, 1988:63; Botha, 2006:379)
- 1935 *Boumeester Solness* (*Bygmeester Solness*, or *The Master builder*) Tr by C.G.S de Villiers. The first production by *Ons Teatertjie* theatre group in the Pretoria City Hall, on the 30th September, to a specially invited audience. (Botha, 2006:380)
- 1938 *Boumeester Solness* (*Bygmeester Solness*, or *The Master builder*) Tr by C.G.S de Villiers, directed by Thomas Blok. Die Handhawerstoneelgeselskap, Bloemfontein, 1938 (CENTAPS: COMSAT database: Plays II, entry #429)
- 1945 *Ghosts*. Dir by Joyce Burch with the Friends of Eoan, *Little Theatre*, Cape Town, in July. (Inskip, 1972:131)
- 1947 *Spoke* (*Ghosts*) Tr into Afrikaans by Olivier Burgers, Dir. by André Huguenet, A professional production by the *André Huguenet Company*. (Binge, 1950:245; Huguenet, 1950:228)
- 1948 *The Wild Duck*. Dir. By Rosalie van der Gucht with the students of the *Speech and Drama Department*, University of Cape Town in September. (Racster, 1951:153)
- 1950 *The Doll's House*. Dir. By Rosalie van der Gucht with the students of the *Speech and Drama Department*, University of Cape Town in October. (Racster, 1951:158)
- 1955 *Die Wit Perde van Rosmersholm* (*Rosmersholm*) Tr by C.G.S de Villiers, Dir André Huguenet for the National Theatre Organisation (Botha, 2006:412)
- 1957 *The Master Builder*. Dir by André Huguenet?/Leontine Sagan(??) for the National Theatre Organisation. (Stead in Hauptfleisch, 1985:71)
- 1963 *Hedda Gabler* (in Afrikaans). Staged by CAPAB (Cape Performing Arts Board), Hofmeyr Theatre Cape Town. (Van Eeden in Hauptfleisch, 1985:91)
- 1968 *Ghosts*. Dir. by Frank Shelley for Natal Performing Arts Board (NAPAC), Durban. (Lombard, in Hauptfleisch, 1985:)

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- 1968 *Peer Gynt*. Dir. by Mavis Taylor in the Little Theatre, Cape Town. (CENTAPS: COMSAT database: Plays II, entry #687)
- 1974 *Hedda Gabler* (in Afrikaans). Tr by André P. Brink. Dir by Francois Swart, PACT (Tucker, 1997:307)
- 1979 *Ibchek* by Donald Howarth, dir by Donald Howarth, *Market Theatre* (Tucker, 1997:369)
- 1990 *A Doll's House*. Dir by Clare Stopforth, Upstairs at the Market. (Schwartz, 1988:233 ; Tucker, 1997:486)
- 1990 *Spoke (Ghosts)*. Directed by Marthinus Basson(?), Cape Performing Arts Board (CAPAB), Arena Theatre, The Nico. (CENTAPS: COMSAT database: Plays II, entry #825)
- 2006 *Hedda Gabler* Tr into Afrikaans and dir by André Stoltz. *Klein Karoo Nasionale Kunstefees*. (Festival Programme: KKNK, 2006)

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